

ORIGINAL SKIN: MELANCHOLY RETURNS, POSTCOLONIAL MOURNING

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## ORIGINAL SKIN: MELANCHOLY RETURNS, POSTCOLONIAL MOURNING

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This dissertation takes issue with recent injunctions against mourning in contemporary trauma studies. The critical turn to melancholic or “resistant mourning” is based on the idea that one normalizes and assimilates loss in ethically dubious ways, either denying the loss or denying the alterity of the lost other; as a result, this criticism positions melancholia as the only viable response against a totalizing mourning. In tracing the parallels between this trend and a related valorization of anti-elegiac tendencies in twentieth and twenty-first century writing, I argue that the resurgent discourse of melancholia is based on a perceived breakdown of mourning which paradoxically conceals a desire for a time of perfect, totalizing mourning that this trend ostensibly refutes. This thesis, which most centrally addresses recent trends in trauma studies, opens up to postcolonial studies by examining how contemporary Anglophone writers, shaped by a common traumatic history of English colonialism, attempt to articulate new modes of grief work rather than simply returning to old wounds. Focusing on representations of individual loss and historical trauma in the work of Kamau Brathwaite, J. M. Coetzee, Zakes Mda, and Derek Walcott, I explore acts of literature as ways of working-through that do not actually foreclose a dialogic relationship with the past. While all four writers initially seem to participate in a valorization of melancholia, they are actually attempting to work through loss in ways that challenge a reductive binary opposition between mourning as closure and melancholia as openness.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Senk holds a B.A. in Literature from Yale University, an M.St. in English from the University of Oxford, and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Cornell University. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Hartford in Connecticut.

To the B. T. and B

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## PREFACE

This dissertation addresses the application of trauma studies to postcolonial literary and cultural contexts, a trend which in the past decade has become increasingly self-conscious about the risks of both effacing non-western modes of addressing loss and forcing into place a universalizing understanding of traumatic experience. Of course, this intersection of trauma studies and postcolonial studies is not in itself a recent critical development; Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi first brought attention to the damaging psychology of colonization in the late 1950s and 1960s, establishing the foundations for current work that asks how those psychological effects might be explored or perhaps mitigated. Since decolonization, scholars have turned to trauma studies as a comparative framework that might inform historical apprehension of various instances of collective violence, asking, for instance, how work on historical trauma that came out of academic attention to the Holocaust might inform work on the Indian Partition or the transatlantic slave trade, or how insights into how social and legal institutions might initiate a process of collective reconciliation and forgiveness, as in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. It is only recently, however, that concerns have been raised about the ways that trauma theory – a field based primarily in European and American analyses of historical events like the Holocaust or the Vietnam War – might elide cultural difference by promoting a universalizing understanding of psychological trauma. Historicizing the discipline of trauma studies itself, recent work has focused on the field’s participation in “a discourse of memory that emerged at a specific time – in the late nineteenth century – and that is embedded in and inseparable from the particular concerns of western culture.”<sup>1</sup> Substantiating or qualifying this assertion

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Whitehead, “Journeying Through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria,” *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (Spring & Summer 2008): 13.

would require extensive historical and comparative work. Still, looking at the post-colonial as post-traumatic must involve an awareness of the dangers of effacing non-western texts and methodologies and forcing on them a paradigm of memory that may not be universally applicable.

This is not to say that the intersection of these two fields is not productive. Indeed, thinking about colonialism in terms of trauma is especially crucial because the postcolonial world continues to register its violence as ongoing. One salient difference is that colonial violence does not simply reappear in the nightmares of its traumatized survivors as it does in Freud's archetypal example of the train crash survivor who walks away, only to compulsively repeat the traumatic experience in his dreams and visions; rather, the "aftershocks" of colonialism are still present today, manifesting themselves in very real socio-political conditions, as well as in the lived experience of descendants of colonized people who deal with lingering discrimination and injustice. Anne Whitehead has emphasized this point, arguing that "[p]ostcolonial texts invite readings in terms of trauma because they are concerned with articulating the ongoing after-effects of colonial domination and violence in contemporary society."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as Susan Najita writes in her book on trauma in Pacific Island literature, "[r]ather than appearing as foreclosed, the traumatic colonial past resurfaces in fragments precisely because they continue to constitute not only lived reality but also genealogical (dis)continuity."<sup>3</sup> In other words, colonial trauma does not just return in memories of violence, but is repeated in contemporary neocolonial practice that needs to be addressed with real social and political changes.

Inasmuch as trauma theory has always been concerned with the articulation of traumatic experience and the restorative, communicative potential of that articulation,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Y. Najita, *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific: Reading History and Trauma in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

I would suggest that it still has much to offer in non-western contexts. In one sense, thinking about colonialism in terms of the western discourse of trauma might also prompt the west to continually acknowledge its complicity in these “ongoing after-effects.” This is one way in which it would be productive to highlight points of equivalence between colonial violence and important western reference points like the Holocaust. By tracing these links, trauma studies can offer a potential comparative framework that might lead to a non-instrumental, relational understanding of different events, experiences, and identities. Intimating this potentiality in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth suggests that “in a catastrophic age... trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures.” As a form of theoretical or thematic “area” studies (in which we study “sites” of trauma), trauma as a critical framework invites us to think of incommensurable experience as the unlikely basis for commensurability between cultures. But the question still remains as to how we might more fully reconcile the application of trauma studies, which as a field is deeply rooted in European intellectual history and events, to non-western contexts. If trauma studies purports to theorize individual and collective trauma, does it do so in ways that sufficiently account for cultural difference? Or does its inflection with universalizing scientific accounts of psychological stress make it incompatible with accounts of cultural difference?

These questions reiterate the same concern with trauma studies’ potential limits that Whitehead outlines when she argues that its theorists make the mistake of assuming that “the forms of mental disorder that are described by western psychiatry map unproblematically onto those found elsewhere.” She argues that the discourse of trauma is problematically rooted in the west’s privileging of individualism, “with a marked emphasis on the disengaged self and in intrapsychic conflicts.” This becomes problematic for Whitehead inasmuch as “this notion of the self may not be valid in

many non-western cultures which are predicated on alternative notions of the self and its relationship to others.”<sup>4</sup> Taking these kinds of discrepancies into account, my project attempts to intersect the two fields productively while acknowledging the pitfalls of a thoughtless application of Eurocentric theory to the postcolonial. I take as a starting point Whitehead’s inquiry in the same essay, in which she neatly outlines the kinds of questions one might ask of postcolonial literary representations of trauma – questions I will address in the following chapters:

first, do postcolonial texts articulate the effects of trauma in terms of the individualist self, or do they emphasize alternative notions of the self and its relation to the wider community? Secondly, does the category of trauma map straightforwardly onto the postcolonial text, or does something in that text itself remain resistant to it? Finally, can we see the postcolonial text as a site for articulating local, non-western concepts of suffering, loss, and bereavement or alternatively of recovery and healing?<sup>5</sup>

Focusing on four postcolonial authors – Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Zakes Mda, and J. M. Coetzee – I hope to demonstrate the way that these kinds of alternatives to contemporary scholarship’s assumptions about trauma are deployed. Significantly, all four writers prompt and problematize this type of inquiry because they span and trouble the divide between west and non-west in various ways: biographically, generically, and stylistically. Biographically, they have all spent large portions of their careers as part of the western academy and, as part of a global literary elite, have enjoyed a cosmopolitan mobility that separates them from the people they write about (something Walcott in particular dramatizes throughout his work). Generically and stylistically they rely on western canonical forms, even while all of

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<sup>4</sup> Whitehead, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

them (with the exception of Coetzee) invoke nonwestern tropes and techniques. As a result, they participate in a western dialogue about mourning and melancholia, demonstrating how the application of trauma studies to postcolonial studies can reframe understandings of local contexts, but also force us to ask how representations of violence and loss in non-western texts might challenge our institutionalized understandings of trauma.

Stef Craps and Gert Buelens raise these types of questions more generally in their introduction to a special journal issue of *Studies in the Novel* (of which Whitehead's essay is a part) which attempts to address ways that postcolonial "trauma novels" have challenged certain assumptions in trauma studies:

Instead of promoting solidarity between different cultures, trauma studies risks producing the very opposite effect as a result of this one-sided focus: by ignoring or marginalizing non-Western traumatic events and histories and non-Western theoretical work, trauma studies may actually assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup>

In response to the impediment of a "one-sided" theoretical emphasis that Craps and Buelens delineate here, this dissertation sets out to ask how attention to non-western responses to traumatic events (including mourning rituals) might challenge the Eurocentrism of trauma theory, ultimately compensating for this one-sidedness by bringing theory into dialogue with as yet disregarded modes of responding to violence and loss. I look at literature as one type of "mourning ritual" in which this one-sided view might be disputed, channeling Sam Durrant's understanding of literary texts as instances of working through loss. In his book, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work*

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<sup>6</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (Spring & Summer 2008): 2.

of *Mourning*, Durrant justifies this correlation by explaining that “[p]ostcolonial narrative, structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future, is necessarily involved in a work of mourning.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he suggests, an understanding of “postcolonial literature as a work of mourning” is already grounded in the work of eminent postcolonial theorists who have previously framed the work of postcolonial theory and criticism as a “memorializing project.”<sup>8</sup> My project maintains this understanding of postcolonial literature, but narrows the scope to elegiac fiction and poetry in order to focus more intensively on texts that overtly take on loss as their central theme.

Reading postcolonial elegiac writing in its relationship to the specific traumatic histories in the Caribbean and South Africa, this project considers elegy as a problem both in and out of texts inasmuch as elegy is simultaneously a work of art and a work of mourning. Elegy provides an especially rich area of investigation in this context because, rather than being vaguely based on a “memorializing project” as Durrant says of all postcolonial literature, elegy by definition has a performative element; it actually enacts a work of mourning. Elegies are “about” loss, but they also iterate the very acts of lamentation and consolation that they describe. Even elegies based entirely on fictional loss iterate a work of mourning which can be central in thinking about real ways of working through. Furthermore, when we read elegies, we are often put directly in the position of the mourner addressing the dead; in some productive sense, the reader then re-iterates that work of mourning, effectively transferring the whole process of responding to loss and enacting grief from one speaker to another. This

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<sup>7</sup> Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Durrant cites Leela Gandhi as his primary example, referring to “her description of postcolonialism in her *Postcolonial Theory: a critical introduction* as a ‘therapeutic retrieval of the colonial past.’”

element of temporary participation is crucial for rethinking concepts like empathy and identification, enacting what Dominick LaCapra has called “a kind of virtual experience” in which one relates to the other without assuming his or her position. As LaCapra explains:

Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathetic unsettlement does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the kind of elegiac participation to which I am referring, the fact that this potential for relating to another’s loss takes place in a controlled literary space means that the reader who temporarily participates in the work of mourning does so at a distance, never fully conflating self and other or secondary witness and victim. It might, therefore, provide a way of relating to loss that preserves the specificity of individual experience but provides a stage for understanding between individuals and across cultures.

In thinking about the ways that readers might temporarily become “speakers,” as they arguably do when reciting a poem, I do not wish to overemphasize the poetry/prose divide because this project also looks at elegiac fiction, following in the wake of criticism which has reconceived elegy as a mode rather than a form.<sup>10</sup> In

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<sup>9</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001), 78.

<sup>10</sup> See John B. Vickery, *The Modern Elegiac Temper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006) and Karen E. Smythe, *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992). See my introduction for a further explication of this distinction.

conceiving of elegiac postcolonial literature as something that addresses a history of colonial violence and performs the same act of engaging with the past it describes, I argue that we might be able to better reevaluate the kinds of assumptions that recent trauma theory has made about historical trauma in a postcolonial context. One of those assumptions is prevalent in both the study of the elegy and recent trauma theory and thus provides a perfect starting point from which to explore this larger problem. In the past decade, scholars in both fields have argued that a melancholic attachment to loss is non-pathological, even desirable, and that a deliberately melancholic stance is central to an ethically and politically viable work of mourning. *Original Skin: Melancholy Returns, Postcolonial Mourning* shows how the work of these four postcolonial authors challenges this argument, forcing readers to reformulate ideas about the process of mourning loss and working through trauma.

I have already briefly emphasized the importance of bringing trauma studies into conversation with postcolonial studies, particularly with regard to the necessity of working through loss as both a way of addressing the past and a way to confront very real repetitions of colonial trauma today. But the central concern of this project is to examine how a look at these non-western contexts might also speak to problems and contradictions *within* trauma studies regarding the idea of working through. Through this critique of the recent valorization of melancholia, the problem of working through provides the very entry point into the question of how to avoid a Eurocentric approach to postcolonial negotiations of trauma, while at the same time imagining new and productive ways to address traumatic losses. I am interested in the ways that these four authors propose models of temporality and community that are not commensurable with the model of healing that some scholars have seen as the goal of working through, that is, an ill-conceived notion of “closure” based on a fantasy of what I call “original skin.” The wound, or trauma, in this model, once “worked

through” leaves no mark, returning the subject to a sort of prelapsarian state in which there is no memory of the wound. The idea of the reformation of original, unmarked skin invokes the figure and fantasy of the perfectly, impossibly healed body in contradistinction to a model in which working through is considerably more provisional. While the play on original sin situates the myth of closure or complete healing as an iteration of a prelapsarian myth, I do *not* wish to invoke a universalizing sense of foundational violence or fall into woundedness as some psychoanalytic thought has figured the infant’s move from the semiotic into the symbolic.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, I want to suggest that with regard to specific losses, the valorization of a melancholic attachment to the past (in which the inability to heal is recast as a deliberate refusal of a totalizing closure that forgets loss) problematically situates as its opposition a fantasy of healing that could never come to fruition.

I come to these questions through literature, examining how the return of melancholia in theory might lead us to rethink its staging in postcolonial fiction and poetry, which simultaneously registers a kind of etiologic obsession with the wounds of history while posing new ways of working through them that have yet to be articulated in much western trauma scholarship. Accordingly, the ultimate aim of this project is not simply to ask how the application of trauma studies to postcolonial studies can reframe literary, historical, and geopolitical understandings of the colonial violence, but also how representations of memory and catastrophe in non-western texts challenge our codified understandings of trauma. In asking these questions I hope to instigate a dialogic relationship between trauma theory’s insights and local contexts onto which those insights might not be perfectly mapped.

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<sup>11</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989)

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

“[T]raumatic memory opens a certain epistemological crisis in the discursive regime of archival commemoration. As wound, disaster, catastrophe, and so on, trauma breaches discursive representation and eclipses thought itself. Just as trauma’s pathology poses limits to critical reason and disciplinary inquiry, it also ruptures archival memory.”<sup>12</sup>

-Walter Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism*

“While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia’s continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects.”<sup>13</sup>

-David Eng and David Kazanjian,  
*Loss: The Politics of Mourning*

This project reads contemporary Anglophone literature across national boundaries, through its engagement with the traumatic historical and psychological ruptures occasioned by English colonialism. In particular, it is concerned with the ways that recent work on historical trauma, particularly in a postcolonial context, has produced an injunction against mourning these losses, channeling Adorno’s suggestion that “coming to terms with the past” might involve “wishing to turn the

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism: American Poetry and the Traumatic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>13</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains” in Eng and Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 4.

page and, if possible, wiping it from memory.”<sup>14</sup> This model of remembering-to-forget is especially objectionable from the point of view of the burgeoning sub-field of postcolonial trauma studies<sup>15</sup> because colonialism’s traumatic histories are more often than not already elided by the dominating narratives of imperial, economic, and civilizational progress. If postcolonial literature bears witness to the traumas of colonialism – including, but not limited to, the centuries-long histories of violence perpetuated by the transatlantic slave trade, the erasure of indigenous ways of life, the desecration of land inscribed indelibly in each locale, and the general psychological damage caused by racism, dispossession, exclusion, exile – the central problem involves first recognizing and recuperating these losses *as* losses, and writing into global public memory a story which has been effaced. Furthermore, the imperative to ‘never forget’ becomes especially pressing as colonial losses are perpetuated in contemporary neocolonial political, economic, and touristic practice; the existence of these practices today lends a sense of urgency to the project of keeping the originary wounds of colonialism open, refusing to ‘turn the page’ of history and instead opting to participate in a melancholic relationship with the past in which a traumatic history is never put to rest.

Despite the appeal and potential necessity of this approach, the central concern of this dissertation is to interrogate this recent trend of valorizing a melancholic

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<sup>14</sup> Theodor Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, edited by Geoffrey Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 115.

<sup>15</sup> See Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels,” *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (Spring & Summer 2008). In this special journal issue on postcolonial novels and trauma studies, Craps and Buelens refer to a group of scholars, including Kamran Aghaie, Jill Bennett, Victoria Burrows, Sam Durrant, Leela Ganhdhi, Linda Hutcheon, Rosanne Kennedy, David Lloyd, and Rebecca Saunders, who have in recent years figured the postcolonial as posttraumatic by “theorizing colonization in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualizing postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation”(2).

attachment to the past, and to critique the way in which endless grieving has been recently recast as a community-building force, an ethical imperative, and a site of creative potential. The critics who adopt this stance borrow Freud's early distinction in "Mourning and Melancholia" between "normal mourning" – a finite process of recollection culminating in an act of substitution, in which the mourner eventually comes to sever his/her attachments to the lost other and redirect libidinal ties to new others and objects – and melancholia, in which the process of redirection and reattachment misfires, and fixes on the ego itself.<sup>16</sup> The melancholic internalizes the loss, misidentifying his/her very self with the lost other, which in turn leads to the self-criticism and self-berating that accompany melancholia and endlessly perpetuates the process of grieving.<sup>17</sup> However, in these recent recuperations of melancholia, Freud's initial pathological designation has been undercut by a critical tendency either to resuscitate melancholia as normative or to valorize its pathological aspects as such. In

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<sup>16</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1914-1916), pp. 243-258. While Freud implies in this essay that mourning is the normative reaction to loss and melancholia the pathological, the distinction is made murky by Freud's claim that one of the few things really delineating mourning from melancholia is the prescribed length of time the subject spends grieving. While critics have fixated on the apparently clear distinction between "healthy" and "unhealthy" attachment to loss, Freud implies in this essay that melancholic attachment actually precedes the process of "normal" mourning, rendering the distinction even more open-ended.

<sup>17</sup> In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud rethinks the distinction he makes in his earlier essay. In this later text, Freud suggests that in all cases loss irreparably changes the ego, not simply in melancholic identification. Contrary to the distinction he draws in "Mourning and Melancholia," the psyche does not heal by forming new libidinal investments; rather, identification occurs in all cases of loss. The ego, in this model, is "constituted" by the loss of its objects of desire which re-form *inside* the ego and become crucial to the very formation of subjectivity. Most importantly, in this model, any possibility of complete psychic healing is rescinded. However, since the critics who reject a "pathologized" version of melancholy borrow predominantly from "Mourning and Melancholia," I will focus on Freud's earlier understanding of these concepts.

the latter case in particular, critics affirm the pathological on the grounds that it has the capacity to produce new and inventive – even experimental – modes of expression, to produce legitimate and rare opportunities for an ethical interaction with the other (an aspect which has an obvious import for postcolonial studies), and, finally, to become a condition for contemporary existence, necessary because it delineates the communities with which we identify ourselves. For diasporic groups with no cogent sense of national belonging, for instance, a common sense of identity might emerge from a common experience of loss or trauma – a bond that might dissipate were that community ever to sever attachments to that common loss; as Judith Butler claims, “[loss] becomes the condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as a community.”<sup>18</sup> Ethically speaking, depathologizing a melancholic attachment to the past might create a space in which “the seemingly pathological and unrealistic response of the mourner who refuses to accept the other’s death” might, as R. Clifton Spargo suggests, “stand for an ethical protest against a dominant cultural pathology that trivializes death.”<sup>19</sup> Taking these kinds of argument into account, I want to question whether an open relationship with loss or trauma is really productive or ethically desirable. Rather than privileging an

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, “Afterword: After Loss, What Then?” in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, 468.

<sup>19</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2004), 21. Spargo’s book deals with the relationship between mourning, ethics, and politics, showing how (Western) elegiac literature has continuously pitted a refusal to mourn against a “status quo of cultural memory”(6). Using Antigone and Hamlet as archetypal characters who rebel against a sovereign decree to stop mourning, Spargo argues that “it is precisely because our cultural modes of memory so often neglect the other whom they would remember that unsolved mourning becomes a dissenting act, a sign of an irremissible ethical meaning”(6).

unqualified openness to past wounds, I am interested in investigating what modes of language we might imagine that could allow both individuals and communities to move beyond trauma and loss without foreclosing it. If literature is one mode of such a language, how does it offer options for remembering the past in ways that don't lead to dead end perpetuations of grief, the inability to move into the future, and the endless repetition of traumatization?

Throughout this dissertation, I will be referring to both trauma and melancholia; without wishing to conflate them, I want to point out how the trend of valorizing a melancholic attachment to the past relates to a fetishization of ordinary loss or traumatic experience. I would suggest that thinking about a melancholic attachment to the past is particularly useful for thinking about collective or intergenerational trauma, in which the victims might not have experienced a specific traumatic event but still feel as if they are living in the aftermath of something that haunts their present. Melancholia, while conceptually and experientially different from the state of being traumatized, has similar components: like the trauma victim, the melancholic, who experiences a perceived past loss as central to contemporary existence, is similarly unable to engage with present life. This is just one pitfall of the turn to melancholia as a productive possibility for political agency; if the melancholic incorporates the lost other, the melancholic consumption of loss, and the identification/conflation of the ego with lost object may result in a complete effacement of agency and, subsequently, a complete withdrawal from history. Surely, this withdrawal is categorically futile in terms of a move into the future, both for individuals and for groups "coming to terms" with historical trauma.

Despite this obvious drawback, critics have seen a certain potential in valorizing a melancholic attachment to a traumatic past, or even traumatic memory itself, as Walter Kalaidjian does in the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter.

Recasting trauma as something positive, even politically progressive in its potential to “rupture archival memory,” Kalaidjian implies that just as trauma represents for the victim a breach in knowledge and experience, its symptoms (which are manifested predominantly in belated repetition) might also belatedly and repeatedly breach monologic historical accounts of the past in which the victors’ histories dominate. Privileging trauma for its alleged capacity to rupture narratives in which the wounds of history have been “wiped from memory” might, according to this viewpoint, allow memory to surface even in the face of repression and denial – a claim which has obvious appeal to postcolonial writers interested in broader public recognition of unacknowledged losses. While Kalaidjian’s book focuses exclusively on American poetry, particularly work by Armenian, diasporic Jewish, and African American writers, the way he recasts an ethics of memory in favor of an anti-reparative refusal to work through trauma and loss echoes much recent work on historical memory. Indeed, it forms part of the same trend in literary and cultural studies of re-coding a melancholic attachment to the past as productive rather than pathological.<sup>20</sup>

By reframing melancholia as “a deliberate decision about how not to respond to loss”<sup>21</sup> these critics claim to be concerned with developing new ways of relating to and engaging with past events. This trend is exemplified in David Eng and David Kazanjian’s collection of essays, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, in which a melancholic attachment to the past is refigured as ultimately dynamic and productive

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<sup>20</sup> See Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); David Eng & David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2003); Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents* (2003); Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (2004); R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning* (2004); Walter Kalaidjian, *The Edge of Modernism* (2006); Patricia Rae, ed., *Modernism and Mourning* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007); Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping* (2008); Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Rae, “Introduction: Modernist Mourning” in *Modernism and Mourning*, 16.

inasmuch as it is affiliated with Benjamin's historical materialism.<sup>22</sup> Where historicism misappropriates loss, looking at it from the victor's point of view only, historical materialism "establishes a continuing dialogue with loss and its remains" and resists the historicist's "desire to 'grasp' and to 'hold' on to the fleeting images of the past – to create fixed and totalizing narratives," partaking instead in a continuous engagement with loss and its remains. Taking a cue from the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Eng and Kazanjian claim to take up "the precarious struggle of a hopeful historical materialism against a hopeless historicism, of an active mourning against a reactive acedia,"<sup>23</sup> rejecting a pathological understanding of melancholia in favor of a valorized version of endless grieving that ostensibly does not allow the past to be closed down. Rather, they are concerned with the ways in which mourning, which they link to "the historicist propensity to relive the past as intolerable fixity," might staunch the creative, ethical and political potentialities in our understanding of the past. In this Benjaminian formulation, where "[h]istoricism rightly culminates in universal history,"<sup>24</sup> the language of mourning domesticates loss just as the language of historicism domesticates the past. For Eng and Kazanjian, "Benjamin's historical materialism establishes a continuing dialogue with loss and its remains – a flash of emergence, an instant of emergency, and most important a moment of production"<sup>25</sup> that might perpetuate a continuous dialogic relationship with a past that, for the sake of politics or power, would otherwise be forgotten. In a

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<sup>22</sup> Eng and Kazanjian's collection turns its focus on traumatic histories away from Holocaust studies and towards other fields, especially postcolonial and queer studies.

<sup>23</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 262. Also see Paget Henry's *Caliban's Reason* for an analysis of the way Caribbean writer, Sylvia Wynter, intimates Benjamin's view of history not as ordered progress but "a maelstrom in which we struggle with our backs to the future"(Henry, 124).

<sup>25</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 1.

similar vein, Ranjana Khanna validates not only melancholia, but trauma as such, for its potential to disrupt “totalizing” master narratives. Melancholia in this instance becomes a kind of interpretive framework for a “critique of postcoloniality and neocolonialism;”<sup>26</sup> trauma is figured as “a spectral presence interrupting the fiction of mastery and questioning the transparency of the prose that informs it.”<sup>27</sup>

At stake here is the critical negotiation of *writing back*. If literature produced in the former colonies over the past decades has “written back” against colonization, it has done so in a way that risks re-inscribing colonial difference.<sup>28</sup> Not unlike Kalaidjian’s move to privilege traumatic breaches to thought (and the archive), Eng and Kazanjian’s collection represents a critical attempt to remember colonial atrocities outside the cultural bounds of Eurocentric thought. Faced with what Douglas Crimp figures as the “incommensurability of experiences,”<sup>29</sup> advocates of the move to

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<sup>26</sup> Khanna, x. Khanna coins this framework “critical melancholia.”

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>28</sup> I refer here, of course, to the influential book, *The Emperor Writes Back*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Originally published in 1989 and now in its second edition, the book argues for the importance of continued engagement with the experience of imperialism on the part of post-colonial societies. Addressing the “question of why the empire needs to write back to a centre once the imperial structure has been dismantled in political terms”(6), the authors argue that the literary canon has perpetuated imperial hegemony, even after Britain has historically and politically been “relegated to a relatively minor place in international affairs”(6). The English canon, taught around the English-speaking world and accepted “as a touchstone of taste and value” perpetuates colonialist assumptions about the world inasmuch as it “asserts the English of south-east England as a universal norm”(7), among other things. Despite the political independence of countries formerly colonized by the British Empire, post-colonial literatures are to this day identified as “national off-shoots of English literature, and which therefore relegate them to marginal and subordinate positions”(7). See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Cathy Caruth and Thomas Keenan, “‘The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over’: A Conversation with Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp, and Laura Pinsky” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 256-272. Crimp refers to the ways in which “certain people are

“depathologize” melancholia are in search of a revolutionary mode of acknowledging trauma against the weight of neocolonial forces that do not register the losses of colonialism as “mournable” lives.<sup>30</sup>

As appealing as this potentiality might be, my project questions the validity of this anti-reparative ethics of memory, asking whether or not it truly represents an ethically and politically viable option for engaging with alternative histories of loss. As I will argue, those who privilege a refusal to mourn problematically misunderstand mourning or “working through” trauma as a closing down of the past (and by extension, a closing down of future possibilities). Ultimately, I too am interested in this potential for resistance in continuous recognition, but I am reticent to adopt the overly simplistic understanding of mourning as “closure” which prompts trauma theorists to valorize melancholic attachment to loss without taking into account the potential pitfalls of such a position.

One such pitfall, as Dominick LaCapra has pointed out, is the conflation of loss with absence and the failure to address the specificity of a particular experience of loss when endless melancholy renders it “enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence.”<sup>31</sup> Fixating on a specific loss, even recasting it as foundational might, as Eng and Kazanjian suggest, lead to new forms of creativity, politics, and community. Alternatively, however, it might also result in an inability to break out of cycles of violence and traumatization and an eschewal of truly future-oriented thinking in favor of an impossible fantasy of what LaCapra calls a “new totality:”

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experiencing the AIDS crisis while the society as a whole doesn’t appear to be experiencing it at all”(256); there is a discrepancy between what people regard as mournable and what they experience as traumatic.

<sup>30</sup> See Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) for an analysis of “grievable” versus “ungrievable” lives, particularly Chapter 2, “Violence, Mourning, Politics.”

<sup>31</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 45-6.

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.<sup>32</sup>

Further, the conflation of absence and loss, particularly the transposition of a specific, historical loss into structural lack can lead to what LaCapra calls a “melancholic paralysis or manic agitation” in which “the significance or force of particular historical losses (for example, those of apartheid or the Shoah) may be obfuscated or rashly generalized”<sup>33</sup>

Rather than focus on an overly generalized sense of lack (disguised as a specific loss), in which a melancholic fixation on a traumatic past shuts down possibilities for mitigating the effects of both traumatization and depression, I want to look at the ways in which mourning, not melancholia, might lead to the same kinds of creative, ethical and politically viable engagements with the past. Despite the way that postcolonial criticism has been quick to participate in this valorization of melancholy, the elegiac postcolonial fiction and poetry I examine in the following chapters provides a challenge to this same critical posture. Recent elegiac postcolonial literature’s multivalent approaches to the aftermath of colonialism has revealed how, in LaCapra’s words, “processes of working through may counteract the force of acting out and the repetition compulsion.”<sup>34</sup>

In an effort to better articulate these processes, this dissertation, which most

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 22.

centrally addresses a recent trend in trauma studies, opens up to questions of the postcolonial by examining how contemporary Anglophone writers, who are at least superficially bound by the common traumatic history of English colonialism, attempt to articulate new modes of grief-work rather than simply returning to old wounds. Focusing on representations of individual loss and historical trauma in the work of Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Zakes Mda, and J. M. Coetzee, I examine how acts of literature enact processes of “working through” in ways that don’t actually foreclose a dialogic relationship with the past. As I will show, while all four writers initially seem to participate in a privileging of melancholy, they are actually attempting to work through loss in ways that are not prescribed by theory. Instead they focus on a new ethics of relational mourning which establishes lines of connectivity between individuals and cultures without slipping into what LaCapra has criticized as a decontextualized “discourse of absence” in which loss is misconstrued as lack and the possibility of working through specific historical losses is closed down.

I turn to contemporary postcolonial elegiac literature because of the ways it constellates historical questions about individual and collective trauma with psychologically oriented questions about ways that loss might be worked through. As I mentioned in the preface, my reading is informed by an understanding of elegiac literature as something that enacts a work of mourning as much as it describes a response to loss. While an anthropological analysis of mourning rituals is beyond the scope of this project, I will be considering elegy as one such cultural iteration of mourning practice. As such, I will also be asking how these literary enactments of the process of working through stage a tension between a sense of mourning as provisional, and a mode of mourning that is politically or socially regulated.

It is worth mentioning that a central concern of postcolonial nation-building has been not only how to remember the trauma of the past, but also how to transition

from a state of woundedness to one of reconciliation, something which the critics mentioned above claim to resist through their embrace of melancholia. The case of post-apartheid South Africa best exemplifies this concern for commemorating past losses in a way that would enable the country to instantiate a new, functional government and avoid any retributive violence that might pose a threat to national unity. This nationally stated aim is precisely what critics of mourning as closure fear. Despite the Commission's acknowledgement that reconciliation "is not about forgetting" but is instead "about seeking to forego bitterness, renouncing resentment, moving past old hurt, and becoming a survivor rather than a passive victim,"<sup>35</sup> there still exists a skepticism in both literature and criticism toward the idea of nationally prescribed mourning because it does seem to set up limits to what constitutes acceptable grieving and resists the fact that working through a desire for retribution might form part of that very process of grieving. In terms of Spargo's argument, national projects of mourning are precisely what literary figures like Hamlet and Antigone protest against with their refusal to address their grief in a sanctioned way. Echoing the parallel arguments in trauma theory, Jahan Ramazani, Patricia Rae, and Tammy Clewell link a refusal of "rationalizing consolations" to an ethics and politics, particularly a progressive politics that resists a historicizing "[preservation of] the *status quo*."<sup>36</sup> Clewell in particular reiterates claims made by those theorists when she valorizes a kind of modernist anti-elegiac writing that "spurns consolation and the conventional aim of closure" and consequently "establishe[s] a politically progressive politics of mourning for the culture of modernity."<sup>37</sup>

This resistance to closure, which permeates the studies of cultural trauma and collective mourning mentioned earlier, has a not unexpected overlap with literary

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<sup>35</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Vol 1, 116.

<sup>36</sup> Rae, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Clewell, 2.

criticism on the elegy, which in recent studies has also advocated an injunction against mourning. Since Sacks's psychoanalytically inflected understanding of the genre recast elegy as a performative work of mourning,<sup>38</sup> it has invited critics to think of elegies that appear to resist consolation, rather than promote and enact it, as melancholic. Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning* represents the first major study of "melancholic mourning" as "protracted grief" in the modern elegy in English.<sup>39</sup> Historicizing the turn to a melancholy poetics by situating the resistance to mourning as a response to the escalation of death and loss during the early twentieth century, Ramazani argues that the modern poet "reanimates" the elegy as a form by making it anti-elegiac and attacking the conventional elegiac tendency to find consolation in loss and grief. This argument amplifies the resistance to "closure" by suggesting that the recuperative gestures of conventional elegy amount to anachronistic attempts at emotional and psychological comfort that do not fit with the trauma of death after the experience of new, modern horrors; as Ramazani claims, "modern elegy is not a refuge for outworn nostalgias and consolations. The characteristic elegy of our time evinces the astringency of modern death and bereavement."<sup>40</sup> According to this view, which has recently informed Clewell's book, *Mourning, Modernism, and Postmodernism*, and the essays in Rae's *Mourning and Modernism*, the gross violence of "our time," exemplified by the scale of modern warfare and the severity of modern

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<sup>38</sup> Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)

<sup>39</sup> See also Spargo's *The Ethics of Mourning* and Kalaidjian's *The Edge of Modernism*, along with Susan Gubar's *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), which discusses modern post-Holocaust poetry's resistance to "narrative closure"(11); while Gubar does not appeal to the logic of mourning vs. melancholia, she parallels Ramazani by advocating "a resistance to closure with respect to consideration or judgment of the events that transpired during the Shoah"(20).

<sup>40</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. ix.

ways of dying, renders the very genre of elegy suspect because it risks “redeeming loss as poetic gain.”<sup>41</sup>

Central to this type of critique is an understanding of the anti-elegiac or the melancholic as that which “refuse[s] a facile poetic therapy.”<sup>42</sup> For Ramazani, the modern elegy undermines “the psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation” while the modern elegist changes the elegy’s “psychic basis from the rationalizing consolations of normative grief to the more intense self-criticisms and vexations of melancholic mourning”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, for Rae, whose edited volume traces anti-elegiac trends in modern fiction, melancholy connotes “a resistance to reconciliation, full stop: a refusal to accept the acceptance of loss, whether through the severing and transference of libidinal ties or through the successful expansion of identity through introjection, or through any other kind of compensatory process.”<sup>44</sup>

Rae’s phrasing – her description of melancholia as “a refusal to accept the acceptance

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 7. Also see Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Clewell echoes both Ramazani’s understanding of melancholic mourning as a refusal of elegiac consolation and Eng and Kazanjian’s equation of the concept of “closure” with historicism’s imposition of fixity when she suggests that “the ability of mourning to forge new constellations for psychic and social life has been best served over the course of the twentieth century by the adamant refusal of consolation, as well as the resolve to confront the loss without the expectation of closure or the imposition of fixed meanings”(10).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5. It is important to note here that while Ramazani turns against “traditional” elegiac conventions, he locates some sense of resolution in the anti-elegiac, inasmuch as the modern elegy’s form reflects the brokenness and oppositional nature of the modern experience. In other words, he suggests that from the modern period onward, we lack the colloquial language to convey grief. He goes on to argue, however, that even as it conveys that lack of a grieving vocabulary, modern elegy gives us a new language with which to mourn. In this sense, Ramazani can’t be described as completely anti-elegiac. If he valorizes melancholia it is because he affiliates the so-called anti-elegiac form of modern elegy with a pathological resistance to normative or “compensatory mourning.” However some form of consolation is still the end product.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Rae, *Modernism and Mourning*, 16-7.

of loss” – resonates with an idea of mourning not simply as a process of grieving in which one comes to accept the lost other as lost (or, with regard to traumatic experience, a process which works through trauma in a way that counteracts compulsions to repeat it); rather, it figures mourning as a capitulation to the idea that loss can and should be accepted. It is this assumption that I would like to challenge.

At the heart of the injunctions against mourning is the notion that mourning assimilates, normalizes and makes normative our relationships with lost others. According to this model, melancholia becomes the only ethical response to loss inasmuch as mourning has been tainted by a historicist impulse to fix and totalize. Similarly, the valorization of the modernist anti-elegy stems from a refusal of “compensatory mourning” or “normative explanations of the genre as psychic remedy.”<sup>45</sup> In both cases, melancholia becomes the critical framework which replaces a politically, ethically, or even spiritually defunct work of mourning.

Critics who have noted melancholic shifts toward the modern anti-elegiac, in particular, suggest that the modern poet experiences a crisis with regard to mourning when faced with the “abbreviation, objectification, and bureaucratic regulation of mortuary rites”<sup>46</sup> one begins to witness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. World War I initiates a further breakdown in conventional elegy; as Ramazani claims, “slaughter and suffering on such a scale was not readily amenable to traditional mortuary codes or recuperative mourning, which were permanently altered”(288). Finally, as Sandra Gilbert suggests, throughout the twentieth century, “the crises bred by the disappearance of a traditional God, the traumas of global

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<sup>45</sup> Ramazani, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Ramazani, “Afterword: When There Are So Many We Shall Have To Mourn” in *Modernism and Mourning*, ed. Patricia Rae (Lewisburg: Buckness University Press, 2007), 291.

warfare, the privatization of death, the medicalization of dying”<sup>47</sup> ultimately contribute to the seeming inadequacy of available modes of mourning.<sup>48</sup>

In contradistinction to this argument I suggest the following: the recent discourse on melancholia is ultimately implicated in a fantasy of a lost plenitude of mourning, a nostalgia for a time when mourning somehow succeeded. All of these claims presuppose some break that occurs in the twentieth century and, more importantly, unwittingly opposes modern “impossible” mourning with a pre-modern instance in which now exhausted modes of mourning *worked*. If we look at the ways in which these critics have interpreted Freud’s work on mourning (which actually provides a much more nuanced and provisional differentiation between mourning and melancholia), we can see that the tendency to extricate a binary opposition between mourning-as-closure and melancholia-as-openness problematically presupposes that mourning actually ever accomplishes something like “closure.” The point of this project, then, is not to recuperate a mode of mourning that “worked” but to show how current writing about loss is actually interested in articulating new modes of grief work that contest the presumed opposition between mourning and melancholia.

Rather than vainly attempting to recuperate rites that once worked through loss in a way that is now seen as undesirable, I am interested in the ways in which contemporary postcolonial writing – faced with the problem of loss inasmuch as it has

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<sup>47</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York: Norton, 2006), xx.

<sup>48</sup> Also see Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*. Focusing on the modern British and American novel, Clewell makes many similar points, arguing that writers like Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner “recognized the need to mourn a range of cataclysmic social events, including the slaughter of war, modernization of culture, and the disappearance of God and tradition. They also understood, however, the impossibility of this mourning, finding its terms utterly outmoded”(1).

been theorized as a “memorializing project”<sup>49</sup> – has imagined modes of mourning that challenge the stereotypical understanding of mourning as closure and, as such, has problematized the recent critical advocacy of a melancholic relationship to the past. Most importantly, I want to suggest that a simple theoretical reversal of the pathological into the productive cannot account for the ways in which recent postcolonial writing contends with the wounds of colonial history. All four authors I analyze in this project concentrate on intense personal and collective traumas in their writing, lingering on past loss in such a way that might suggest a melancholic propensity. But a close examination of their work reveals that they never simply render the pathological productive when they “linger” on the wounds of the past; rather, their writing points to the potential for imagining or improvising new ways to conceive of the process of working through loss.

I proceed by examining what we might call four different “facets” of the critical move to recuperate melancholia that I examine separately in each of the four following chapters. The first is the assumption of a clichéd idea of mourning-as-closure which fully recuperates an assumed pre-loss wholeness. I address this notion by examining Derek Walcott’s shift from a refusal of melancholia in texts like “The Muse of History” to an apparent embrace of unhealable woundedness in *Omeros*. I argue that *Omeros* fundamentally questions the curative efficacy of a return to pre-colonial Africa for the West Indian subject “wounded” by his colonial history when its characters, who have ostensibly been cured by a figurative return to African roots, are still overcome by anguish at the end of the poem. Tracing the ways in which the poem’s wounds are simultaneously attenuated and perpetuated, I suggest that Walcott’s poetics undermine a simplistic framework of mourning-as-closure by producing a new model of mourning based on a fusion of influences. Centrally

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<sup>49</sup> Durrant, 8.

concerned with the trope, act, and problem of “return,” I focus on two figures of repetition in the poem – the circle and the spiral. These figures are integrally related to what Paget Henry has described as the poet-critic response to history in the Caribbean, represented by writers like Walcott, Wilson Harris, and Sylvia Wynter, who “make the recovery of the postcolonial self an important precondition for institutional recovery.”<sup>50</sup> My analysis of Walcott draws on Henry’s response to the poet-critic historiography of Wilson Harris, for whom “recovery through the creative affirmation of colonial trauma and its existential deviations”<sup>51</sup> is a necessary step to the self-regeneration that must precede historical or institutional recovery.

Critics have commented at length about Walcott’s embrace of a circular model of history as a replacement for the teleological; however, I argue that the trope of the snail-shell in *Omeros* serves as both a model for the natural world as a catalyst for buried memory and a visual marker of repetition with a difference, employing the same circular movement while marking the impossibility of complete return. While *Omeros*’s ultimate failure to heal might be construed as a melancholic lingering on the wounds of the past, the poem’s model of time problematizes a conception of successful mourning as totalizing in the first place, revealing the ways that recent criticism has been caught up in a flawed opposition between mourning and melancholia. Ultimately, I suggest that Walcott proposes a model of return that is incompatible with the stereotypical notion of closure and thus opens up new ways of thinking about non-totalizing mourning practice.

The second facet of the valorization of melancholia that I address is the conflation of absence and loss that tends to accompany this trend, with a focus on the related problem of an unassimilable, undifferentiated transhistorical “lack” that

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<sup>50</sup> Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason* (London: Routledge, 2000), 93.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

precludes working through. Reading Kamau Brathwaite as an anti-elegist, I focus on his transition from a regionally oriented interest in ‘nation-language’ to his recent ‘transboundary’ aesthetic – officially inaugurated in his collection, *Born to Slow Horses* (2005) – which depicts a globalized, transhistorical sense of atrocity and loss as the basis for contemporary life.<sup>52</sup> Brathwaite’s refusal to mourn comes across in this new focus on a world where all wounds are generalized, transhistorical, and unhealed; as a result, specific losses become disembodied, and risk appearing like a foundational absence. However, it is precisely by toying with the conflation of absence and loss that Brathwaite opens up a space for reading outside of the boundaries of an essentializing identity politics, and ultimately posits cross-cultural Relation as a new possibility for working through. Picking up on Édouard Glissant’s concept of a poetics of relation as a suggestive model of cross-cultural interaction – a model which Durrant has already referred to as “an anti-foundational foundation for cross-cultural community”<sup>53</sup> – I relate the question of mourning to the problem of identity formation. Because Brathwaite portrays the Caribbean as a synchdoche for a sense of global community, when the “wounds” of his poetry become all-encompassing and not readily attributable to one individual, nation, or race, they don’t merely become a universalized condition of existence. It is not that the wound is disembodied and becomes an absence; rather, it becomes something marked on the region because the model of community is rhizomatic and connected instead of definitively rooted. Rather than being melancholic, this rhizomatic extension of the wound is precisely the mechanism by which individuals and cultures can heal, while at

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<sup>52</sup> By claiming that Brathwaite’s “transboundary” aesthetic is officially inaugurated in *Born to Slow Horses*, I am referring to his footnote at the end of the collection that claims it is part of a new phase. Arguably, the formal innovations of this collection are identical to those in his earlier work, particularly his “Sycorax Video Style” poems. See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this point.

<sup>53</sup> Durrant, 12.

the same time resisting the tendency to classify everyone as a victim, including perpetrators. Importantly, Brathwaite's poetry still registers models of differentiation that are necessary, both in relation to the past and in relation to present ways of engaging it, but gestures to new relations between individuals and communities that require continual streams of acknowledgement and engagement.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore how grief might become relational by turning to Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995), a novel that attempts to articulate rites of mourning in a world where all modes of coping with loss have been cut off. This chapter examines a third facet of the critical move to privilege melancholia – the troubling transformation of melancholic “acting out” into the basis for a type of rite or ritualistic honoring of the dead. By focusing on the way the novel imagines mourning rites, this chapter implicitly asks: what are the stakes of valorizing melancholia for actual mourning practice? The fact that mourning, not melancholia, is tied to rites means it is implicitly dedicated to formulating a present-oriented response to loss in a way that a past-oriented melancholia is not. Accordingly, this chapter continues to question the assumption that mourning rites are now exhausted and can only result in either a totalizing, superficial closure, or a radically open, melancholic refusal to mourn. In response to this perceived opposition, I argue that the novel problematizes an idea of superficial closure while at the same time revealing the dangers of valorizing a refusal or inability to mourn. My reading reveals that the novel's two protagonists, Toloki and Noria, ultimately break out of a melancholic cycle of violence when they forge a community bond based on the shared improvisation and performance of mortuary rites rather than simply a common experience of loss. By focusing on the way the novel attempts to articulate new modes of grief work, rather than recuperate old ones, I show how its suggestion of improvised modes of working through might open up a space for a more mutable sense of collective consciousness.

In all three of these chapters, the notion of foundational trauma figures prominently in my critique of the turn to melancholia, particularly the way in which it has become central to certain understandings of what we might call “post-traumatic” collective identity. A secondary concern of these chapters involves the argument that collective melancholy might serve as the basis for a new community, united by the traumatizing experience of foundational violence, which I have already briefly mentioned. While I acknowledge the appeal such a model might offer as a unifying force for diasporic populations who may have been violently stripped of other categories of connectivity, the pragmatic question of what this type of community would actually look like is of equal importance. In valorizing a community that cannot mourn loss, does one valorize trauma itself, or privilege acting out as a politically productive way of engaging with the world? In addition to these questions, I am also interested in the way that this ostensibly mutable basis for community might end up establishing rigidly exclusionary categories of belonging. LaCapra has already pointed out this potential pitfall, describing “founding traumas” as “traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity.”<sup>54</sup> Charles Maier poses a similar counterargument to those who would privilege a melancholic fixation on loss, suggesting that an excess of memory in the social domain is a symptom of a “new focus on narrow ethnicity” instead of inclusive modes of community. Maier claims that a “surfeit of memory is a sign not of historical confidence but of a retreat from transformative politics. It testifies to the loss of a future orientation, of progress toward civic enfranchisement and growing equality.”<sup>55</sup> Group melancholia may be a community-building force, but in Maier’s

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<sup>54</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Charles S. Maier, ‘A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholia and Denial’, *History and Memory* 5.2 (Fall/Winter 1993), 150.

formation it is a fundamentally exclusive one that closes down all other categories of citizenship. For this reason, the stakes are high for theorizing collective processes of mourning, particularly regarding the need to rethink mourning rituals as events that produce community, but in a way that counteracts use of “a founding trauma that may attempt to establish identity rather than to pose the question of identity problematically.”<sup>56</sup>

Michael Rothberg’s recent comparative study of Holocaust memory and its relation to memories of the colonial legacy in North Africa, North America, and the Caribbean has already performed a useful critique of the problematic ways in which memory has been aligned with identity. Rejecting the assumptions “that a straight line runs from memory to identity and that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality,”<sup>57</sup> Rothberg proposes an “intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory” to account for the ways in which the “boundaries of memory” often spill over, break through, or make permeable the “boundaries of group identity.”<sup>58</sup> Rothberg’s project insinuates the possibility of a comparative memory studies, or comparative trauma studies, that attempts to understand, firstly, how different memories of traumatic events inflect one another, and secondly, how a focus on memory’s portability, flow, and relationality might allow theory to conceive of the public sphere differently. As he suggests,

pursuing memory’s multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being

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<sup>56</sup> LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 15. fn 8.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4-5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction.<sup>59</sup>

Rothberg's model serves as a challenge to thinkers who believe in a rigid causal relationship between memory of an event and the individual or group's self perception – an assumption which has also led, in Rothberg's view, to a misleading “zero-sum” understanding of memory's place in the public sphere in which there exists a constant “struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers, a struggle that is thus closely allied with the potential for deadly violence.”<sup>60</sup> Against this “zero-sum” model of memory, Rothberg posits the concept of multidirectionality to account for the way that memories often exist in a metaphoric relationship where one might elucidate but also displace the other. For Rothberg, however, an acknowledgement of the way remembrance often unavoidably involves processes of “displacement and substitution” emphasizes “the need both to acknowledge the conflicts that subtend memory and work toward a rearticulation of historical relatedness beyond paradigms of uniqueness.”<sup>61</sup> This is not to deny the specificity of individual events or contexts

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. A related aspect of Rothberg's argument is the reconceptualization of Freudian “screen memory” not as something which obscures and supplants other events, but something that “approximates the multidirectional model” because “the displacement that takes place in screen memory (indeed, in all memory) functions as much to open up lines of communication with the past as to close them off”(12). Furthermore, inasmuch as screen memory “both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed”(13), it is in line with the argument that in memory everything is preserved and might be resuscitated at any time. This understanding of memory would directly contradict the idea that even a screen memory could ever fully displace its antecedent. The formation of screen memories, Rothberg argues, also clues us in to the ways in which meaning is produced and links between memories are formed. Ultimately, Rothberg uses this renewed understanding of screen memory, which he represents as something that operates “at the level of the individual,” to elucidate the concept of multidirectional memory, which operates in much the same way “at the level of the collective”(14).

but, rather, constitutes an attempt to make the inevitable processes of displacement that accompany comparison more visible. As such, it becomes one way to negotiate the links and envision a space between what Rothberg elsewhere calls a “homogenizing universalism and nominalist particularism”<sup>62</sup> – an overly zealous focus on specificity that, in an attempt to declare an event totally “unique” makes it totally incomparable and unrelatable.

In focusing on just two regional frameworks, I am potentially undermining my own interest in a “multidirectional memory.” However, I chose to structure the project this way (which might risk reaffirming the national or regional boundaries that this type of project would potentially contest) in order to focus on two different “sites” of collective memory which differ fundamentally in their spacing in time. The first – which is best exemplified by the Middle Passage, but also the more general accompanying context of New World slavery in the Caribbean – is an extended event with no living witnesses. The second – the recent history of Apartheid in South Africa – is a history that includes living witnesses who can and have testified to first hand experience. In the case of the Caribbean, I am interested in understanding collective trauma as it has both attenuated and reverberated over time, particularly how the “memory” of distant events works to influence the ways in which present and future generations relate to the past. In the case of South Africa, I am concerned with tracing the links between collective memory as it has unfolded in the present day, including the consciousness of the vast majority of people who *do* have a memory of these events, and the way that the state has made the management of traumatic memory a central concern to its wellbeing. In both cases, scholars have read the presence of resistant mourning as a repudiation of the familiarizing processes of memorialization

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<sup>62</sup> Rothberg, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: a response,” *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (Spring & Summer 2008): 230.

that take place in and around “memorializing projects,” whether those projects are the production of a monument, or the representation of events in historical or literary texts. My primary concern involves the ways in which anxiety over these familiarizing processes of mourning converts into advocacy of a melancholic attachment to loss which ostensibly makes its wounds impossible to forget or to appropriate for national purposes. If, as Spargo has suggested, “[t]he death registered by the anti-elegiac mourner has provided insight into the injustice on which the world is founded, initiating the reader into the rigors of absence by which we are constituted,”<sup>63</sup> at what point does a fixation on the resistance to mourning slip into a generalized discourse of absence which elides the specificity of actual historical injustices and focuses instead on a universalizing condition of woundedness or foundational lack? Thinking of memory in terms of its “multidirectionality” or relationality might involve an appeal to the general over the specific inasmuch as it traces the similarities between specific memories and memory practices, but significantly, it does *not* involve this kind of generalization that renders it just another echo of a vague human condition.

In the final chapter, I turn back to these and other theoretical questions, taking issue with the way that a generalized “ethics of otherness” has seemed to motivate the turn toward melancholia. This concern marks the fourth and final facet of the valorization of melancholia that I will address in this project – a pseudo-deconstructive emphasis on the alterity of loss and lost others. In addition to analyzing the work of mourning as it is staged in J. M. Coetzee’s later novels, *Disgrace* and *Summertime*, this chapter focuses predominantly on readings of Coetzee’s representation of “unreadable” sites of trauma and loss. In particular, I take

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<sup>63</sup> Spargo, “The Contemporary Anti-Elegy” in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 428.

issue with Sam Durrant's adoption of a "deconstructive ethics of remembrance" which reads Coetzee's work in the context of a Derridean notion "impossible mourning" that preserves the alterity of the other. Rather than lingering on the undecidability of Coetzee's characters who, Durrant argues, bear witness to a history that defies understanding, I argue that Coetzee stages moments of potential empathy which always slip into identification as a way to problematize a certain way of relating to otherness. At the same time, I am interested in a shift that I see from Coetzee's early work to his most recent novels, in which the objects of mourning become more and more disembodied and abstracted. This move, I argue, is central to Coetzee's interrogation of what constitutes a mournable life, particularly to his attempts to identify and negotiate the conceptual limits that govern the mourner's ability to recognize both the lost object and another's loss. It is also central to the way in which Coetzee's work problematizes a rigid binary opposition between melancholia as radical openness and mourning as total closure. Coetzee dismantles this perceived opposition, I suggest, through his novels' acts of care, acts that ultimately enable a suspension of mourning that offers new ways of theorizing trauma theory's archetypal trope of belatedness.

In addition to a multi-regional focus, this dissertation also crosses generic boundaries between poetry and prose by positing "the elegiac" as a category that unifies the vastly different genres I discuss. Walcott's *Omeros* is a long, predominantly narrative poem entirely in verse with elements of dialogue; Brathwaite's *Born to Slow Horses* is an experimental intermingling of verse and prose; Mda's *Ways of Dying* is a novel that gestures to the author's origins in theatre; finally, Coetzee's *Summertime* is a compilation of diary entries and interviews that loosely contribute to his fictionalized autobiography. Each of these texts, I will argue, constitutes a work of mourning and, as such, employs elements traditionally associated

with elegies in the way they stage or play upon the movement from lament to consolation. While the shifting definition of elegy has come to include both “mode” and “motive,”<sup>64</sup> one relatively consistent trend has been the poetic attempt to at least temporarily recuperate the lost object the elegy describes. Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” represents an archetypal example of this, not just in its attempt to achieve a poetic substitution for the lost object, but in the poem’s own acknowledgement that language generally fails in this task and, ultimately, doesn’t replace anything. In a similar vein, all of the texts I discuss frame this dilemma – the desire to recuperate loss coupled with the awareness of the futility of complete recovery – in similar ways.

This project could have just as easily been a genre-based study of mourning-poems, but I chose to look at both “elegiac” poetry and prose fiction in order to emphasize a more expansive understanding of elegy as a literary response to loss; in focusing on the “elegiac” I am also implicitly framing elegy as an intellectual and affective category rather than a formal one. Rather than understanding it as a poetic form, I use it to describe a literary formation of different modes of mourning or the articulation of mourning processes. Although Sacks’s well known book on the English elegy employs a blatant generic classification by only focusing on poetry, he also thinks of the elegy in terms of affect and the initiation of a work of mourning.<sup>65</sup> Focusing on the modern period, John Vickery picks up on this expansion out of genre

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<sup>64</sup> See *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 322.

<sup>65</sup> Also see John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). While Sacks makes explicit the psychological element based on Freudian insights, the distinction between form versus mood or process goes back much further; as John Hollander has pointed out, since the late eighteenth century there has been a focus within poetry on “the elegiac tone as a mood rather than as a formal mode,” (200) a move which expands in the nineteenth century as elegy is framed as a locus of “meditation” which “typically leads to recognition (*anagnorosis*) of feeling, to revelations and illuminations” (207).

in *The Modern Elegiac Temper*, which charts the way that “elegiac attitudes” permeate the work of both novelists and poets who figure the personal, cultural, and philosophical senses of loss,<sup>66</sup> while Karen Smythe coins “the fictional sub-genre” of “fiction-elegy” in order to make a distinction between “fiction written in an elegiac form” and “the broader thematic category of ‘elegiac fiction.’”<sup>67</sup> Most recently, Patricia Rae’s *Modernism and Mourning*, which I have already mentioned, expands the scope of “elegy” by focusing on a shared anti-elegiac impulse in which the predominantly modernist refusal of mourning is a unifying factor. Rae describes the collection of essays as a follow-up to Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* inasmuch as it addresses the modern “anti-elegy,” but explains that it also attempts to “dissolve the boundaries” between the elegy and other formal manifestations of the *elegiac* such as fictional and nonfictional prose, visual art, and so on.

In this vein, my critical framework is based on the transnational quality of what Ramazani refers to as “structures of feeling” which are not limited to the poetic genre of elegy as much as to a broader literary space in which mourning is both depicted and performed. These spaces, as Ramazani implies here, might make possible a collective remembrance that would, in LaCapra’s formulation, “pose the

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<sup>66</sup> John B. Vickery, *The Modern Elegiac Temper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> Karen E. Smythe, *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 5. Smythe understands this sub-genre as something which *depicts* mourning. When she advocates the fiction-elegy as “fiction written in an elegiac form” she refers to the ways in which processes of working through must always involve finding forms in which to speak. Smythe employs Julia Kristeva’s understanding of literary representation as a therapeutic “staging of affects” as an accurate description of the *genre* of elegy, suggesting that “elegy is a verbal presentation or staging of emotion, wherein the detached speaker engages the audience with the intent of achieving some form of cathartic consolation”(3). Also see Edward Engelberg, *Elegiac Fictions: The Motif of the Unlived Life* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989) for a focus on elegiac prose fiction.

question of identity problematically”:

Constructing transnational cultural spaces of mourning, spilling grief across boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation, they build structures of feeling that represent alternatives to modern nationalist efforts to bind mourning with the imagined communities of compatriots.<sup>68</sup>

Most importantly, a process of looking at texts transnationally might constitute part of the very fabric of a “non-isolation” remembrance. It permits a movement against a mourning that solidifies exclusionary bonds, and towards one that is relatable, relational, and which ultimately leaves the borders of community more permeable.

In closing, I offer a note on the title of this dissertation. The notion of *Original Skin* derives most directly from the figure of the scar that features so prominently in Walcott’s *Omeros*, a figure that first awakened my interest in memory studies. In Walcott’s poem, of course, there are two significantly different versions of non-healing. The first is Philoctete’s open wound, which is constantly demanding memory. The second is scratched into the poem as an overarching metaphor for the passage of time, the progression of history, and the syncretic permutations of culture and religion; it surfaces as smoke-writing, or writing in the sand of a beach that is constantly pummeled by surf. This type of ephemeral inscription cannot heal because it is the figure of forgetting, erased moments after it is marked. This dissertation interrogates those links between forgetting and healing; time and wounding; disembodied, transhistorical wounds and stories of individual suffering and remembrance. It attempts to do so by reformulating ideas about mourning processes that have become unjustifiably codified. The figure of the scar – as opposed to the

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<sup>68</sup> Ramazani, “Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 612.

original, undamaged skin – registers the imperfect, incompletable nature of the healing process and therefore serves as an embodied critique of the fantasy of perfect closure, repudiating what I referred to earlier as the myth of the impossibly healed body. I chose this title because of its resonance with my claim that recent theories of melancholia unwittingly construct a myth of “successful” mourning’s plentitude in which melancholia stands opposed to a fantasy of healing that could never possibly come to pass. The relation between the “skin” of this metaphor and race, however, adds another resonance, but one that is beyond the scope of this current project.<sup>69</sup> Given the integral role of racism as a dimension of historical trauma, an examination of the way race is vital to fully understanding postcolonial trauma studies is an important next step in demonstrating the potential of trauma studies for postcolonial texts and contexts. This will undoubtedly be the subject of future inquiry, but for now I will merely draw attention to Ann Anlin Cheng’s caveat regarding obsession over “the ‘melancholia’ of racialized peoples” that “seems to reinscribe a white history of affliction or run the risk of neutralizing that pain.”<sup>70</sup> Central to Cheng’s work on melancholia, as well as my own, is the question of how to talk about loss, pain, or traumatic experience without reiterating the institutional structures that caused it in the

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Gilroy, Radhika Mohanram, Ranjana Khanna, and Anne Anlin Cheng have already explored the connections between race and mourning/melancholia. See Khanna, as well as Radkika Mohanram, *Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Cheng’s book is especially relevant as she takes Butler’s application of melancholia to gender and applies it to race, arguing that institutional processes in contemporary American culture produce “a dominant, t, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others”(Cheng, 10). She also identifies a pressing paradox in American racial melancholia because the nation is simultaneously “*founded* on the very ideals of freedom and liberty whose betrayals have been repeatedly covered over”(Cheng, 10).

<sup>70</sup> Cheng, 14.

first place, and without codifying it into an easily digestible narrative that renders loss completely forgettable. These concerns regarding how to talk about melancholia without affirming or nullifying loss motivate my own desire to destabilize an opposition between mourning as radical closure and melancholia as radical openness.

## CHAPTER 2

### **‘THE CURE THAT PRECEDES EVERY WOUND’: DEREK WALCOTT’S *OMEROS***

As Derek Walcott has memorably described in his Nobel lecture, the history of the Caribbean is plagued by the memories of a traumatic passage from native land to New World, and a decimation of both local and transplanted populations – memories that are continually registered in the very noise of ocean waves that evokes a catastrophic genocide at the heart of the Caribbean present: “The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory.”<sup>71</sup> Not unlike Jahan Ramazani’s archetypal modern elegist, Walcott portrays the Caribbean here as a disjointed “shipwreck of fragments,” “shattered histories,” and “shards of vocabulary,”<sup>72</sup> a vision which extends to the world of his long poem, *Omeros* (1990), and its portrayal of the damaging psychological and historical legacies constituting the aftermath of the various stages of European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, *Omeros* is a poem obsessed with wounding. There are few characters in the poem, in fact, who do not bear the mark of some ancestral violence; indicative of Walcott’s comment on New World literature in his essay, “The Muse of History,” that “in the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse

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<sup>71</sup> Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” in *What the Twilight Says: essays* (New York: Farrar Straus and Girroux, 1998), 81.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>73</sup> See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* and Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* for an analysis of the sea as a space of history.

written by the descendants of masters.”<sup>74</sup> The world of *Omeros* appears stained on all sides with the trauma of colonization. Marked, injured, and scarred, its characters are engulfed in past atrocities; whether they are descended from colonizers or slaves, the physical pains inflicted by or upon their ancestors materializes in physical and psychological wounds. The white Englishman Plunkett’s second generational guilt, for example, becomes tangible in the form of a wound he received fighting in North Africa during World War II; the black fisherman Philoctete’s “tribal sorrow”<sup>75</sup> is embodied by the unhealing lesion on his shin; the Antillean Achille’s obsession with the trauma inflicted upon his ancestors as they are uprooted from Africa and brought in slave ships to the Caribbean manifests itself in his own mental anguish. This chapter examines Walcott’s shift from a refusal of despair-driven politics in texts like “The Muse of History” to an apparent embrace of woundedness in *Omeros*, evinced by the ubiquity of the poem’s unhealable traumas. In the former, Walcott is outwardly hostile towards representations of the Caribbean preoccupied with such suffering and victimization. Yet his declaration in *Omeros* that “affliction is one theme / of this work” (*O*, 28) is at odds with his own plea to the West Indian poet to abandon Caliban, the suffering victim of colonial domination, as a metaphor for self-realization in literature. The question remains as to why, after denouncing literatures of recrimination and despair, Walcott adopts the trope of the wound as a signifier for the trauma of the colonial experience and upholds in *Omeros* the same authorial fixation on the past that he reprimands in his critical work.

From early in his career, Walcott has resisted essentialist ideas about looking to Africa to articulate black West Indian identity on the grounds that, firstly, this

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<sup>74</sup> Walcott, “The Muse of History” in *What The Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998), 37.

<sup>75</sup> Walcott, *Omeros* (New York, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1990), 129. Hereafter referred to in text as *O*.

history is already latent in Caribbean identity and does not need to be actively sought out, and secondly, that such a turn is part of a nostalgic “longing, even a slave longing, for another master”<sup>76</sup> which leads to the neglect of contemporary, local realities. While violence of forced migration means that cultural identity in the Caribbean contains a history of splitting from its “originary” sources, Walcott has consistently suggested that an obsession with those origins amounts to a potentially dangerous escapist fantasy which precludes a focus on a Caribbean future. As he explains in an interview, “[t]he fact is that every West Indian has been severed from a continent, whether he is Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, or black. To have the population induced into mass nostalgia to be somewhere else seemed to me to be about as ennobling as wishing that the whole population was in Brooklyn, or Brickston [*sic*].”<sup>77</sup>

In what seems like a break from earlier work, like *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, in which Walcott mocks the trope of the restorative return to pre-colonial Africa as nostalgic and unproductive, *Omeros* appears to stage two instances of such return. The first occurs when Ma Kilman, the poem’s Obeah-woman, brews a healing broth from a West African plant which finally heals the continuously open wound on Philoctete’s shin, a wound which comes to represent the trauma of colonialism’s violent iterations. The second occurs when Achille experiences something like a flashback (‘something like’ because it is not his actual memory) to a slave ship bound for the Caribbean from Africa. Through the flashback, “a light inside him wakes, / skipping centuries, ocean and river, and Time itself”(O, 134); a hallucination transports him back in time to Africa where he meets his ancestors, learns about their culture, and eventually comes to witness the raid that turned them into slaves, seeing first hand the radical break from his ancestral past that has haunted him in the present.

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<sup>76</sup> Edward Hirsch, “An Interview with Derek Walcott (1977)” in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 56.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

In both this symbolic return, and the overdramatized recuperation of African “roots” that takes place during the ritual that heals Philoctete, Walcott’s poem resonates with the concept that a return to origins is necessary to assuage the trauma of dispossession. It seems, as Paul Breslin had noted, that “Philoctete has been severed from his past, and his cure requires Ma Kilman to recover its African component.”<sup>78</sup> For Achille, too, Africa is positioned as the site of symbolic wounding, the location in which the first atrocities of colonialism committed against his ancestors take place; consequently, only a symbolic return to that site can heal the wound of its legacy.

As this chapter will argue, however, close attention to the poem’s ending reveals that this symbolic return fails to heal those wounds, and ultimately, *Omeros* never fulfills the promise of return and the resolution of complete healing. While this failure of symbolic return stays in line with Walcott’s critical position regarding the need to focus on a Caribbean present and future rather than manifest nostalgia for an African past, the fact that his characters remain wounded throughout the poem still seems to position *Omeros* firmly in the realm of the “literature of despair.” Even as the poem repudiates a nostalgic longing for Africa, it risks remaining stuck repeating the wound of separation that it seems unable to mourn and move on from. The poem’s ostensible perpetuation of a melancholic attachment to past wounds will be the predominant focus of this chapter. It is possible to argue that by rejecting the promise of a curative return to African origins, Walcott is merely launching another critique of nostalgia, consistent with one of his well known critical positions. However, if this is the case, and the poem provides no alternative cure for the wounds at its heart, what can we make of the fact that it must then continuously wallow in an unhealable grief for irrecoverable past losses? Using this question as a departure point, this chapter

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<sup>78</sup> Paul Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 253.

will examine whether or not the poem is ultimately melancholic in its refusal of consolation, suggesting that, in the end, it problematizes the very distinction between closure and openness, finitely mourning or endlessly grieving old wounds.

I argue against readings of the poem that have attempted to recuperate its contradictions into a conventional elegiac narrative in which a lament for the losses of colonialism is followed by a consolatory gesture that somehow heals the wound of loss. Critics have made claims that “[t]he cure of Philoctete’s wound figuratively reverses the Middle Passage,”<sup>79</sup> or that Ma Kilman’s healing ritual “suggests an easing of the wounds caused by imperialism” and “asks us to read *Omeros* as an optimistic poem, as a chronicle of the passing away of a dark period of history for the island”<sup>80</sup> despite the fact that, in the end, these wounds ultimately remain very much open and painful. I will begin this chapter by refuting these kinds of claims, examining closely the nature of Achille’s and Philoctete’s wounds and showing how, though they at first seem to heal very much in accordance with a psychoanalytically-influenced notion that one must psychically return to the site of wounding to recover from a traumatic experience, the return to Africa in the end fails to cure the traumatic legacy of colonialism which haunts both characters.

The chapter will then go on to examine the reasons why this potentially curative return *must* fail, linking that failure both to Walcott’s critique of a nostalgic and essentializing story of origins, his understanding of cultural hybridity and creativity in the Caribbean, and finally, to his advocacy of a non-linear narrative model where there is no origin and no ultimate aim or endpoint. Throughout his work, Walcott has consistently criticized a linear, sequential understanding of time on the grounds that it perpetuates a world view in which the history of the Caribbean is seen

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>80</sup> Joe Moffett, *The Search for Origins in the Twentieth-Century Long Poem* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007), 74.

as a product of and supplement to the history of European colonialism; for Walcott, “[t]he vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time, of a dominated future”<sup>81</sup> in which a narrative of historical progress renders former colonies endlessly subordinate. In order to break out of this subordinating model of temporality, Walcott has often employed non-linear models. Many critics have pointed to the way that Walcott continues this trend in *Omeros*, suggesting that a circular model of history is a mode of resistance against a linear progress narrative that produced (and was produced by) colonial discourse. In *Epic of the Dispossessed*, for instance, Robert D. Hamner makes a similar claim that the poem’s nonlinear structure testifies to Walcott’s lack of “faith in the rigidly logical dictates of historians:”

Reacting against the inhibitions of linear interpretation, [Walcott] offers an open pattern of variations on underlying themes (such as the relationships between fathers and sons) and interconnected imagery (such as birds and nests) so that meanings build incrementally without immediate closure.<sup>82</sup>

This critique of linearity is deeply engrained in Caribbean criticism, notably in Brathwaite’s adoption of the term “tidalectics” as a model of creative interaction that repudiates the linear model of the Hegelian dialectic. Indeed, Walcott’s concern with disrupting what Hamner calls the “logical dictates of historians” has been central to his own formulation of the continually cycling sea as a nonlinear figure for history, a trope that Walcott employs in the last lines of *Omeros*.

This refusal of immediate closure is the focus of this chapter’s conclusion, which investigates how a different model of time might challenge assumptions about the possibility of working-through-as-closure which so many critics see as inherent to

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<sup>81</sup> Walcott, “The Muse of History,” 41.

<sup>82</sup> Robert D. Hamner, *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott’s Omeros* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 103-4.

the psychoanalytic model of mourning. Walcott invites understandings of the poem's time and history as circular when the speaker of *Omeros* claims that Ma Kilman "aimed to carry the cure / that precedes every wound; the reversible Bight of Benin was her bow, her target the ringed haze / of a circling horizon." (*O*, 239). Though they toy with a linear model of the forced departure from the Bight of Benin as reversible, these lines end up positing a cyclic model where a cure might precede the wound, and where the past that one targets is also always a future circling around. As Breslin suggests:

If the cure precedes the wound, then it is always latently available once the wound has been given. To history's timeline, drawn by a determinism of cause and effect, Walcott answers with a vision of an oceanic eternal present to which temporal movement always returns, cyclical rather than linear.<sup>83</sup>

Understanding the poem in terms of a circular model of time and history (which Walcott constantly figures as the churning movements of the ocean), in which a return to Africa is not a nostalgic return to the past but a move forward, it becomes clear that all wounds must in some regard remain open because they do not exist within a linear model which registers the possibilities of rupture and closure.

As a medium of lament, *Omeros* forces its readers to problematize a stereotypical notion of mourning as closure. Packed with grief and open wounds, the poem ultimately deviates from elegiac convention as it fails to offer consolation.

Ultimately, however, this chapter asks whether or not Walcott's poem is fundamentally melancholic in this final refusal to console. In the end, it suggests that the poem's model of time and history, which is not figured in terms of a teleological model, opens up space for a non-pathological melancholia in which ceaseless return

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<sup>83</sup> Breslin, 269-70.

isn't simply a symptom of failed working through or static acedia, but a movement that permits a different kind of working through – one that is not reducible to a simple, therapeutic model of closure.

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Walcott's use of the wound as a marker of inherited loss in *Omeros* surfaces most prominently in the form of the physical wound Philoctete bears on his shin, the continuously open wound he gets by scraping his leg against an anchor while wading in the sea. Rather than gradually healing on its own, Philoctete's wound remains open and untreatable; it festers, gives off an intolerable odor, and is apparently incurable for much of the action of the poem. The persistence of the wound is a phenomenon that Philoctete attributes to unresolved ancestral violence: "He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles / of his grandfathers. Or else why was there no cure?" (*O*, 19). While it is the physicality of the anchor in the sea that has inflicted the wound on his shin, Walcott insinuates that it is Philoctete's endless grief for his enslaved ancestors that scars him mentally, creating an open wound of the psyche allegorized by the physical lesion. For Jahan Ramazani, who has also explored the duality of Philoctete's wound as both physical and psychological trauma, the unhealing wound not only embodies his lament over the tribulations of his ancestors, but is the result of the physical sensation of their actual pain, passed on to subsequent generations as part of "the inherited wound of European colonialism."<sup>84</sup> He writes: "Early on in *Omeros*, Walcott uses one of Philoctete's seizures to suggest that the inexpressible physical suffering of enslaved Africans is retained in the bodies of their descendants and that the pain still presses urgently for an impossible verbal release."<sup>85</sup>

Picking up on the psychological woundedness of the poem's other characters,

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<sup>84</sup> "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction," *PMLA* (Volume 112, No. 3, May 1997), 412.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

Philoctete's double wound – that of the actual injury inflicted on his body and the metaphorical trauma of bearing the wounds of a colonial past – testifies to a pain universally experienced by victims of the Middle Passage and their descendants; its uncontainable hurt is transmitted through generational lines as collective trauma where, as *Omeros* implies, “The son's grief was the father's, the father's his son's” (*O*, 146). These physical and psychological wounds are related to the trauma of dispossession, a trauma that Philoctete acts out in the beginning of the poem when he viciously hacks away at the roots of yams in his garden. For Philoctete, whose own body is figured as a prison restraining a grief-induced rage (*O*, 21), the history of transatlantic slavery is encapsulated by the sugar plantation ruins in which he grows his yams. When a thorn pricks the wound on his shin, exacerbating the physical pain, the sting triggers a violent outburst in which Philoctete reproduces his own sense of figurative rootlessness:

He stretched out the foot. He edged the razor-sharp steel  
through pleading finger and thumb. The yam leaves recoiled  
in a cold sweat. He hacked every root at the heel.

He hacked them at the heel, noticing how they curled,  
head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams:

“*Salope!*”

You all see what it's like without roots in this world?”

Then sobbed, his face down in the slaughtered leaves. A sap  
trickled from their gaping stems like his own sorrow. (*O*, 21)

Here, the wilted “curled, head-down” yams echo what is later called the “homesick shame” of the poem's characters of African descent. For Philoctete, who here acts out his own trauma of being severed at the figurative root of his ancestral culture, the collective memory of dislocation represents the predominant source of his woundedness.

If Philoctete's unhealed shin embodies the mental wounding of a universal black West Indian consciousness, then Achille, the poem's other prominent traumatized West Indian character, is undoubtedly a victim of that affliction. However, Achille's mental anguish also derives from the fact that his knowledge of the history of his ancestors is limited to the point that they exist for him only as an absence. What he does know comes predominantly from information provided by others:

There were others  
whom Achille had heard of, mainly through Philoctete,  
and, of course, the nameless bones of all his brothers  
  
drowned in the crossing (O, 128)

Notably, Philoctete functions here as a story-teller who *informs* Achille of their shared heritage. The past does not exist intrinsically for Achille as it seems to for Philoctete, and although they descend from the same history, Achille is a figure who, while he may have been taught the facts of his past, is not aware yet that he is subject to its haunting. In this particular stanza, Achille's estrangement from that ancestral past is heightened by Walcott's rhyme which phonetically links the word "others" to "brothers" in an gesture that establishes Achille's ancestors as "brothers" – related and therefore inexorably linked to him through heritage. But at the same time, these "brothers" remain unknown or Other in that Achille has not been made completely aware of his history, or rather, it has not made itself known to him.

The past eventually makes itself known, however, as Achille handles a bundled sail made from an empty flour sack on his fishing boat, and is shocked into the recollection of an event that is not of his own experience, but comes to the foreground of his consciousness as such:

The tied bundle

huddles like a corpse. *Oui, Bon Dieu!* I go hurl  
it overside. Out of the depths of his ritual  
baptism something was rising, some white memory

of a midshipman coming up close to the hull,  
a white turning body, and this water go fill  
with them, turning tied canvases, not sharks, but all

corpses wrapped like the sail, and ice-sweating Achille  
in the stasis of his sunstroke looked as each swell  
disgorged them, in tens, in hundreds, and his soul

sickened and was ill. His jaw slackened. A gull  
screeched whirling backwards, and it was the tribal  
sorrow that Philoctete could not drown in alcohol.

It was not forgetful as the sea-mist or the crash  
of breakers on the crisp beaches of Senegal  
or the Guinea coast.

(*O*, 129)

When Achille lifts the boat's folded sail – a “bundle” which “huddles like a corpse”(O, 129) – on his fishing boat, he experiences a flashback to a slave ship bound for the Caribbean from Africa, on which the not unusual act of discarding the dead bodies of prisoners into the Atlantic is taking place. Achille's role in all of this is muddled by the shift from his point of view (“*Oui Bon Dieu!* I go hurl / it overside”) to the speaker's description of a ritual baptism that religiously figures Achille's submersion in memory and somewhat perversely refers to the bundle/corpse plunging into the ocean water, figuring death and dismemberment as the corpse's baptismal naming. We might recall Édouard Glissant's description of the open boat in *Poetics of Relation*, in which the hull of the slave ship is figured as a “womb abyss... pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death.”<sup>86</sup> Here, the memory-inducing sea, which paradoxically forgets those bodies in its mist and “crash / of

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<sup>86</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6.

breakers,” becomes a conduit through which the horrors of the past return.

So the atrocities of the Middle Passage materialize for Achille and are distinguished as the causes of an incurable “tribal sorrow.” Yet it is not the memory of atrocities done against the living that forces Achille into an “ice-sweating” state of hysteria. In fact, of all scenes of suffering portrayed in the poem, only a scattered few are concerned with either the initial imprisonment or the abjection of forced labor in the Caribbean plantations. Although the absence of such characteristic acts of violence could perhaps be thought of as an indication of the *unspeakability* of those events, the most obsessively referenced trauma appears to lie in the horrific desertion of the dead bodies of individuals torn from their native land. In this passage, it is the trauma of dislocation, figured in the abandonment of their corpses into an ocean that disgorges them, swallows and empties them of individuality only to cast them into a permanent state of collectivity that returns to traumatize Achille.

Both Achille and Philoctete are traumatized in a way that resembles the victims of what Freud characterizes as traumatic neuroses. Reading Walcott’s portrayal of trauma in *Omeros* in the context of psychoanalysis, it becomes apparent that the method by which Walcott portrays the persistence of the figure of the wound shares a common ground with Freud’s demonstration of the ways in which appalling occurrences are repeated in the minds of the victim. Freud provides a literary example in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of what he defines as the compulsion to repeat, a tendency of the psyche to defy what Freud calls the pleasure principle and continually linger on memories of characteristically *unpleasurable* events:

The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this is given by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the

Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.<sup>87</sup>

Tancred, for Freud, is a subject who has a passive experience rather than an active one; that is to say, Tancred does not deliberately set out to repeat his first mistake but it comes to him as if by accident. The voice of Clorinda functions in the metaphor as the involuntary reemergence of the memory of the trauma, a memory whose surfacing is beyond Tancred's control.

Cathy Caruth emphasizes this analysis of the paradigm of Tancred and Clorinda as she explores the ways in which "the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will."<sup>88</sup> According to Caruth, it is possible "to understand that other voice, the voice of Clorinda, within the parable of the example, to represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the 'unwitting' traumatic events of one's past."<sup>89</sup> So

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<sup>87</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1990), 24.

<sup>88</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Amy Novak takes issue with this parable, especially the way that Freud (and later, Caruth) fail to acknowledge that "Tancred does not experience the trauma; Clorinda does." While I will not expand on this point in this chapter, aside from mentioning here the ambivalence of Tancred's position as a victim and perpetrator who wounds Clorinda, Novak's overall argument is worth mentioning because it also addresses problems with the application of trauma theory to postcolonial contexts. For Novak, these problems are central from the beginning, latent in these western theories about traumatization which are born out of an analysis of Tasso's story. As she points out, Clorinda (who is born to African parents) has already been "whitened and Christianized" in Tasso's narrative; but these psychoanalytic readings have perpetuated this disavowal, effacing the fact that Clorinda's is the "female voice of black Africa." In Novak's reading, then, this central trope of trauma theory is problematically founded upon the "erasure of the voice of the Colonial Other." See "Who Speaks? Who Listens? The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (2008): 32.

while the figure of Tancred comes to embody the unaware victim of the trauma, the figure of Clorinda takes on the role of the unconscious where the experience of that trauma is retained and repressed. For Caruth, the experience of a trauma proves so devastating to the psyche because it is not fully integrated at the time of its infliction. Accordingly, Freud's parable exemplifies the ways in which the force of the trauma is not known at the moment of its occurrence but returns to haunt the victim in dreams, visions, or the unwitting compulsion of the survivor to repeat the incident. Not fully understood as it occurs, trauma can only be wholly realized in its association with another experience or place or time. Furthermore, it cannot be approached directly but must be mediated through another language. In the early stages of psychoanalysis, that other medium was a form of narrative, what Freud and Breuer's patient, Anna O. deemed "the talking cure" as she was cured from her hysteria by returning to the past in recollection and putting her trauma into words.

When viewed in the context of psychoanalysis, Achille's metaphorical wound of the psyche may be interpreted as the result of a trauma inflicted upon him. Like Freud's trauma victim, Achille is unaware of the force of the event at the moment of its infliction and the fact that the trauma is not fully integrated at the time of its occurrence is what leads to his psychosis. However, Walcott takes Freud's paradigm one step further into the realm of collective memory as he transforms the figure of Clorinda into the voice of a communal and absent Other within Achille. If the voice of Clorinda in Freud's parable represents the unconscious Other within the self, then in *Omeros* it is made into the voice of a universal ancestry. Like Clorinda, Achille's ancestors are witnesses to the traumatic event of the past; like Clorinda, they come to represent the part of the self that is incapable of ever letting go of that event. However, Walcott's voice of otherness within the self is a model for a second, third, and forth generational trauma. The Other who witnesses and unknowingly represses

the experience of a trauma is not a product of Achille's own consciousness, but of the implied collective consciousness of the descendants of African slaves. While Achille himself may not witness the trauma, the fact that these images return to him suggests that he is indeed the heir to the psychoses of his ancestors. In effect, he inherits the psychological ramifications of an unspoken past horror.<sup>90</sup>

The visceral experience of tribal sorrow on the fishing boat invokes within Achille a vision in which he is compelled to feel "the homesick shame / and pain of his Africa"(*O*, 134); immediately after the insurrection of tribal memory, Achille finds himself *in* Africa, three hundred years in the past, a hallucination that Walcott – before he evokes too great a tone of magic realism – credits to sunstroke. As Achille slips into his vision, "a light inside him wakes, / skipping centuries, ocean and river, and Time itself"(*O*, 134). He is transported back into his ancestral past where he meets "himself in his father"(*O*, 136), the West African native, Afolabe – Achille's namesake before his name was changed by slavers. It is here that Achille begins to live the past of his ancestors, partaking in their rituals, comprehending their language, relating to their culture.

The interaction that takes place between Achille and his ancestral tribe highlights the nature of the dislocation that proves to be the root of Achille's pain. Africa is set up, not merely as the site of an inherited trauma, but Achille's originary home. This raises the question of why Africa is still perceived as the place of origin for Achille, whose lineage has been a product of the Caribbean for three hundred years. At the onset of his vision, Achille hears the voice of God telling him, "Look, I

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<sup>90</sup> In *Caliban's Reason*, Paget Henry theorizes the concept of inherited trauma in the Caribbean context. His analysis of Wilson Harris's engagement with a "poeticist tradition of thought"(90) sheds light on the ways that Walcott is similarly concerned with composing a "particular type of symbolic world that can be created out of the imploded worldviews of the Caribbean colonial experience"(90).

giving you permission / to come home”(O, 134); once again, a statement that constructs Africa as Achille’s *home* and confirms the fact that it is not merely the ensuing displacement of his ancestors from that locale that constitutes his own trauma, but his own displacement and forced alienation from Africa. Achille’s trauma is that of a dislocation portrayed in the poem as “one pain that is inconsolable, the loss of one’s shore”(O, 151) against one’s will, a loss that comes to a climax during Achille’s interaction with Afolabe as he shares the pronunciation of his name with his ancestral “father.” When Afolabe asks Achille, “What does that name mean? I have forgotten / the one that I gave you”(O, 137), Achille links his own personal forgetfulness with a process of universalizing erasure:

Well, I too have forgotten.

Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know.  
The deaf sea has changed around every name that you gave us;  
trees, men, we yearn for a sound that is missing. (O, 137)

Here, Achille establishes the descendants of slaves in the Caribbean as a collective “us” that shares a universal craving for the sounds of the *other* African world; yet simultaneously have become victims of a collective forgetting of what those sounds are and what they signify. They are the victims of the diaspora that is relived in Achille’s vision after he witnesses the raid that turned his ancestors into slaves:

So there went the Ashanti one way, the Mandingo another,  
the Ibo another, the Guinea. Now each man was a nation  
in himself, without mother, father, brother. (O, 150)

Achille’s vision may be characterized as a parable of the return to the homeland in order to heal the trauma of dislocation. The raid that Achille witnesses constitutes the radical break from his ancestral past that has haunted him in the present. It is in this symbolic return that Walcott’s poem resonates the simple and foundational mode of

the therapeutic power of psychoanalysis's cure. Africa is positioned as the site of symbolic wounding, the location in which the first atrocities of colonialism committed against Achille's ancestors take place. Consequently, it is set up as a site of healing on the same pretext of the talking cure – that a return to the trauma in the psyche can alleviate the suffering of the victim.

Similarly, Philoctete undergoes a version of such a return during the climactic healing of his lesion. The perpetuation of Philoctete's wound dwindles finally as the obeah-woman Ma Kilman turns to Africa only to discover that it is not really forgotten; rather, it is waiting to be invoked:

so the deities swarmed in the thicket  
  
of the grove, waiting to be known by name; but she  
never learned them, though their sounds were within her,  
subdued in the rivers of her blood (O, 242)

Conjuring up the spirits of her African past and a seemingly implicit knowledge of herbs and remedies literally transplanted in the Caribbean from African soil, Ma Kilman mixes a broth to bathe the wound in and utters incantations in a language she has never been taught. As in the case of Achille, there is the suggestion that her ancestral language is lost and forgotten, but at the same time contained in her blood, transmitting through generations both the wound and its cure. The deities of the west African artistic tradition, lost through generations of forced forgetting appear latent within Ma Kilman, simply because she is the descendent of an African obeah-woman. However, as indicated by the following passage, the presence of this Yoruban tradition exists in an *external* force, the flower transplanted from Africa that possesses the antidote for the lesion on Philoctete's shin:

Erzulie,  
  
Shango, and Ogun; their outlines fading, thinner

as belief in them thinned, so that all their power,  
their roots, and their rituals were concentrated

in the whorled corolla of that stinking flower.  
All the unburied gods, for three deep centuries dead,  
but from whose lineage, as if her veins were their roots,

her arms ululated, uplifting the branches  
of a tree carried across the Atlantic that shoots  
fresh leaves as its dead trunk wallows on our beaches (O, 243)

Though the presence of African deities fades continually with each generation consumed by forgetting, they seem to exist paradoxically for Ma Kilman, latent within her very blood, once again reaffirming the persistence of collective memory. Yet it is the external force which, like what psychoanalysis would call a retrieval cue, acts *upon* Ma Kilman, triggering the surfacing of a tribal memory.

In the cases of both Philoctete and Achille, it is the return to Africa that appears necessary to heal wounds. Consequently it is possible to deduce that if the wound of Walcott's West Indian characters is that of dislocation, then it is possible to view Africa as both the wound itself and a site of wounding, and therefore, to perceive the return to Africa as necessary for the healing of the trauma. The occurrences in *Omeros* would seem to suggest that this is the case as Achille is ushered by a vision back to his ancestors' African past and the pain of Philoctete's wound is assuaged by Ma Kilman's invocation of the African deities who have themselves remained latent in her consciousness. Upon being possessed by this tribal memory, Ma Kilman gains the power to heal and "Philoctete shook himself up from the bed of his grave, / and felt the pain draining, as surf-flowers sink through sand"(O, 245).

However, the poem ultimately questions the curative efficacy of the return to the homeland and its traditions. During a Boxing Day celebration after this healing ritual, Philoctete cuts up yams for the party and is overcome with anguish that undermines his, and the poem's, faith in this cure:

## All the pain

re-entered Philoctete, of the hacked yams, the hold  
closing over their heads, the blot-closing iron,  
over eyes that never saw the light of this world,

their memory still there although all the pain was gone (O, 277)

Although the physical wound on his shin has been healed, the injury Philoctete inflicts upon the yams somehow becomes a cue, summoning him back to his memory, and the ancient trauma previously embodied in the open wound ultimately remains *incurable*. Although Philoctete's pain drains away temporarily with the advent of the cure, he is still pained after Ma Kilman heals him. Similarly, Achille still suffers from "that obvious wound / made from loving the sea over their own country"(O, 302). He still partakes in "the laugh of a wounded race"(O, 299). The prototypical return to the site of wounding appears not to have worked for either character; though both have been made aware of their reasons for suffering, even a re-visitation to that site of wounding can not seem to halt the ceaseless appearance of those traumatic images associated with imprisonment and dislocation.

One solution to this contradiction lies in the consideration of Africa as home. Ultimately, the poem leaves it unclear whether or not Africa can still be a homeland for a people who have existed for three hundred years away from that land of origin. Africa is not the soil of Achille's birth, but the birth of his ancestors. It is in this sense that the Africa to which Achille returns in his vision is the Africa of Afolabe. It is not after all, Achille's continent to return to. Walcott subtly inscribes this difference into his poem during Ma Kilman's invocation of Shango, Ogún, Erzulie, and Damballah as the gods she turns to are not entirely derived from the African tradition, but represent a combination of New World and West African beliefs ruptured, corrupted, and reformed by the mass migrations of the slave trade. While Shango and Ogún feature

prominently in pre-colonial Yoruban religious and cultural history, Erzulie and Damballah only emerged in the Caribbean as a result of the mixing of multiple religions and cultures. Walcott's references are almost exclusively examples of sub-Saharan African art and culture which found their way to the Americas on slave ships, but were distorted and syncretized during the journey. The invocation to Shango, the Yoruban thunder god associated with moral action is therefore not an invocation of the original deity but of the many transformations of Shango/Xangô/Changó that appeared in the Caribbean and South America with the mixing of tribes and their slow adaptation of Christianity over time.<sup>91</sup> Even Ogun, the Yoruban "deity of war and iron"<sup>92</sup> who nominally survives the journey across the Middle Passage, seems out of place in *Omeros*, transplanted to the paradoxical idleness of former St. Lucian battlefields where lizards crouch on inactive cannon. Finally, the references to Erzulie, the "Dahomean-derived goddess of lovers"<sup>93</sup> further embodies the effects of diaspora of religion as the goddess, as art historian Robert Farris Thompson points out, is not actually an African deity at all, but is derived from a hybridization of African tradition with the New World.

Walcott's effort to enrich and enliven the text of *Omeros* with references to the black Atlantic origins is, then, significantly complicated by the fact that he draws largely on an African tradition not as it appears in Africa, but as it surfaces in the Caribbean. The deities, traditions, and fragments of culture that one becomes privy to in *Omeros* are the already hybridized versions of the sources as they existed in Africa prior to the slave trade. It is only through the persistent use of references to African art that we become subject to the *illusion* that the continent lost to the descendents of

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<sup>91</sup> See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 17.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

slaves resurfaces in artifice. Though the names may have survived, the meanings of particular deities inevitably shifted as a result of their relocation across the Atlantic.

Notably, the West African tradition bears the mark of transplantation from the very beginning of the poem in Walcott's depiction of a hurricane in an early scene that brings about the ostensibly incompatible fraternization of African deities with Greek gods:

all the village could do was listen to the gods in session,

playing any instruments that came into their craniums,  
the harp-sighing ripple of a hither-and-zithering sea,  
the knucklebone pebbles, the abrupt Shango drums

made Neptune rock in the caves. Fête start! Erzulie  
rattling her ra-ra; Ogun, the blacksmith, feeling  
No Pain; Damballa winding like a zandoli  
lizard

(O, 52)

This juxtaposition of deities from Greek and African tradition in a scene “where Ogun can fire one with his partner Zeus,”(O, 53) serves as a gesture in which Walcott as writer pays homage to both his sources – African and Greek – while simultaneously bringing to the foreground the hybridization of African religions as they encountered the religions of the west.

A similar juxtaposition of deities occurs when Achille returns home to Africa in his vision and listens to the tales told by the council of elders:

But he learned to chew  
in the ritual of the kola nut, drain gourds of palm-wine,  
to listen to the moan of the tribe's triumphal sorrow

in a white-eyed storyteller to a balaphon's whine  
who perished in what batter, who was swift with the arrow,  
who mated with a crocodile, who entered a river-horse

and lived in its belly, who was the thunder's favourite,  
who the serpent-god conducted miles off his course

for some blasphemous offence and how he would pay for it  
by forgetting his parents, his tribe, and his own spirit  
for an albino god (O, 140)

In this passage, one can again recognize the concurrence of myths of Greek and African culture, as well as key references to both the Classical and African literary canon. The white-eyed storyteller appears to be telling a hybrid variation of *The Odyssey* in which the role of thunder god can be either Shango or Zeus, and the serpent-god Damballah of the Afro-Caribbean tradition is mirrored in Poseidon interrupting Odysseus's voyage home. Most importantly, Walcott appears to be imagining a Caribbean Odysseus, doomed to the perpetual curse of a lotus eater who pays a horrible price for forgetting the ways of the past and adopting the divinity of the West. Walcott picks up this train of thought at a later point in the poem as he implies that the link between Greek and African deities is that they have both been forsaken by the descendents of their following. In this particular scene, as the narrator follows Omeros/Seven Seas into the volcanic part of the island, he hears "the deep indignation / of Hephaestus or Ogun grumbling at the sins / of souls who had sold out their race"(O, 289), a castigation by the gods of all nations who are engulfed by the act of forgetting.<sup>94</sup>

To read Walcott's text in the context of psychoanalysis is to understand his use of the wound as a trope that intimates the fact that, like psychoanalysis's talking cure, the vocalization of pain in narrative both brings the past into the foreground of the present and simultaneously facilitates healing. Of course, the return to the place of wounding does not succeed in ridding either Philoctete or Achille of their shared

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<sup>94</sup> Inasmuch as the tropes in this passage are central to West African literature, one might suggest that Walcott is reference the literature of West Africa as much as the actual place. Acknowledging this would further problematize the concept of "return," filtering these references through West African literary representation.

affliction. In a sense, the intention of a “curative plot of return to a precolonial Africa”<sup>95</sup> does not work. Why then, portray an ineffectual healing? Why does a writer who criticizes the stereotypical reduction of West Indian writing to “phonetic pain, the groan of suffering”<sup>96</sup> linger on the incurability of his West Indian characters? One answer lies in Walcott’s fundamental critique of a myth of origin, exemplified by its hybrid deities mistaken for original sources. For Walcott as the self-proclaimed figure of Crusoe, the wounds of the West Indian characters in *Omeros* become hybrid wounds. The fact that the West Indian derives only part of his image from Africa and the other part from his English colonial education complicates the matter of locating a source to return to. In this sense, Africa becomes only a portion of that place of origin. Herein the poem registers the difficulty in formulating a cohesive definition of Caribbean trauma.<sup>97</sup> Descended from both colonizers and colonized, Walcott’s West Indian characters are subsequently denied a definitive location where the trauma of dislocation was inflicted.

In his poems and critical work, Walcott often dramatizes his own personal subject position as a descendent of both colonizer and slave. Much of his work thematizes the act of coming to terms with the ambivalence of such a position, be it how to reconcile his relation to two seemingly distinct and opposing heritages or to resolve his forced (but not unloved) appropriation of standard English as his ancestral language. Walcott stages this dynamic in the last few lines of his most canonized

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<sup>95</sup> Ramazani, “Wound of History,” 410.

<sup>96</sup> Walcott, “The Muse of History,” 39.

<sup>97</sup> Paget Henry has discussed a similar concept of the “distorted consciousness” of colonized people, drawing from Fanon’s work on the centrality of an institutionalized imago as central to the psychological split occasioned by cultural colonization. See Henry, “Decolonization and Cultural Underdevelopment in the Commonwealth Caribbean,” in *The Newer Caribbean: Decolonization, Democracy and Development*, ed. Paget Henry and Carl Stone (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1983), 281.

poem, “Far Cry from Africa”:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live?<sup>98</sup>

These lines highlight, again, Walcott’s ambivalence towards his linguistic and cultural inheritance. Bringing to mind Caliban’s infamous repudiation of Prospero – “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse” – the poem’s anxiety rests somewhere between the West Indian poet’s acceptance and refusal. In other words, his stated conflict of *being caught* between an English and an African tradition manifests itself in the linguistic tension. While the speaker of the poem is “divided to the vein” – a statement that functions doubly as a reference to his mixed blood and as an idiomatic phrase that figures the extent to which this character is divided – the fact that he expresses this anxiety in English indicates that, in a sense, the choice has already been made. As the poem dramatizes the anxiety of writing in the colonizer’s tongue, it also portrays the resolution: this poet has chosen to express himself in standard English (a move that implies his irrevocable severance from Africa). The fact that the final three questions are posed in unmistakable pentameter troubles their line of inquiry from the start. If the speaker is posing a genuine question – “How can I turn from Africa and live?” – it is telling that he does so by adopting a traditional English metrical scheme, answering his rhetorical question in the same instant he poses it.

I highlight this poem here because it subtly registers the same trauma as

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<sup>98</sup> *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 18.

*Omeros*. Inasmuch as the use of English in the Caribbean connotes and re-inscribes an originary trauma of linguistic colonization, Walcott's poem comes face to face with the guilt of assimilating standard English – language which has been revealed as a means of enslavement and, paradoxically, one available tool for resistance. But if the more recently adopted language itself is a wound that always betrays the trace of dislocation from the original, the very language that one uses to cure is one that simultaneously re-wounds. At the same time, as Fred D'Aguiar has argued, "adaptation of the language is akin to a possession of it. Where language 'is the empire' the subjects of that empire can strike back by making that language their own."<sup>99</sup> That "A Far Cry from Africa" dramatizes an impossible choice between Africa and England is further evidence of a perceived split (divided *to* the vein? divided *in* the vein?) that positions African on one end of the spectrum and England on the other. In this sense, Africa and England are erected as two separate cultural monoliths. The choice Walcott figures in the poem is rhetorically reduced to *either/or*. Ultimately, as *Omeros* shows with its adaptation of multiple sources, *either/or* is an impossible choice because those two ostensibly "pure" origins are already creatively adapted and altered.

Walcott's interest in inherited language also begs the question of the inherited verse forms he employs in *Omeros*. In addition to the language of English colonization, Walcott's use of hexametric meter evokes the Latin and Greek literature from which it also draws its tropes, while terza rima evokes Dante's *Divine Comedy*. While *Omeros* draws heavily from the Homeric epic in almost every way, Walcott himself is hesitant to see the poem as part of the genre due to the large role the narrator plays. The poem's use of elements lyric elements like apostrophe, as well as passages of dialogue

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<sup>99</sup> Fred D'Aguiar, "Ambiguity without a Crisis? Twin Traditions, the Individual and Community in Derek Walcott's Essays" in *The Art of Derek Walcott*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan: Seren Books, 1991), 164.

make clear-cut generic classification difficult. At the same time, the its relation to the elegiac tradition is marked simultaneously by its apparent move from sorrow to consolation as well as its constant meditation on loss. Walcott has suggested elsewhere that poetry as a form “moves off the page and goes into the memory. It goes into the collective memory of the entire race.”<sup>100</sup> In its cross-generic technique, Walcott’s poem traverses the spaces of literary history and cultural memory as much as it negotiates the historical trauma of colonization that paradoxically made these creatively hybrid forms possible.

In *Omeros*, the cure for the Antillean anguish is originally set up as a function of a return to the forgotten African past. Yet implied by Walcott’s figure of a wound that contains both the poison and the anecdote, the scalpel and the suture, is the fact that no return is sufficient to heal the trauma of dislocation, and that the past that is never forgotten but remains latent in the form of a hereditary ache. And just as Walcott’s poem testifies to a phenomenon of healing and non-healing, it becomes a place of simultaneous forgetting and not forgetting; even memories that appear to be lost as a result of a collective repression, surface unwittingly for his characters. While the critique of falsely homogenous origins is central to the characters’ failure to heal, I want to deviate from a focus on nation and homeland here to examine the way that the poem also frames the ocean as a wound, a wounded voice, and perpetrator of the wounds of others. If Walcott insinuates that Africa is not the place of healing by the fact that neither of his characters is healed by their return, then perhaps it is the ocean in *Omeros* that must be returned to – the literal Middle Passage that embodies the ancestry of the West Indian writer; that “ancestral swell / of the ocean”(O, 127) which joins Africa and St. Lucia, St. Lucia and England. Both the imperial past and the pre-

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<sup>100</sup> Robert D. Hamner, “Conversation with Derek Walcott (1975),” in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, 30.

history of the New World, for Walcott, meet on the very ocean which separates the Empire from the Caribbean and Africa from those colonized islands which are characterized as fragments broken off from the original continent. Accordingly, the sea itself is given an important voice in *Omeros*, elicited from the literal location where countless traumas were inflicted. It emits “a cry / from the small parted break”(O, 127), a cry indicative of the story of the countless atrocities committed against the prisoners of slave ships, “the story of trauma... inescapably bound to a referential return.”<sup>101</sup> It is a cry that evokes Freud’s Clorinda – the cry of the unconscious that has inadvertently witnessed the wounding; the cry of the voice of otherness within the self that testifies to the repetition of the accident. The ocean therefore, in this context, becomes a kind of metaphor for the psyche. It is the place of forgetting in that fragments of memory are lost in its vastness. It is the place of remembering in that those fragments are consistently surfacing – if only briefly – long enough to cry out and vanish into latency once more.

This complex and continuously moving site of wounding is especially important when we consider the poem’s skepticism about its return to originary African roots. If the Middle Passage represents the most forceful cultural trauma for the poem’s black West Indian characters, what might we make of the fact that it takes place on an expanse of water where roots could not possibly take hold? The figure of the ocean as the primary site of wounding, which repeatedly conjures and re-submerges the memories of the dead, complicates the linear model of rupture and return because there is no rupture immediately distinguishable from regeneration. Paul Breslin has argued that in *Omeros*, “the ocean is the central trope of memory-as-forgetting, hoarding the past in its depths, but erasing with each surge of generative

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<sup>101</sup> Caruth, 7.

energy, the marks of human presence on the shore.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, the ocean is often represented as a force that disintegrates memory and history:

The ocean had

no memory of the wanderings of Gilgamesh,  
or whose sword severed whose head in the *Iliad*.  
It was an epic where every line was erased

yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf  
in that blind violence with which one crest replaced  
another with a trench and that heart-heaving sigh (O, 296)

In this image of destruction and rebuilding, one crest replaces another, yet constantly builds upon the previous day’s work in a way that evokes, for Breslin, the figure of memory-as-forgetting. However, the same ocean that erases and replaces memory is also constantly “disgorging” it, as it does during Achille’s flashback.

Taking this into account, I want to argue that the ocean is not a model for memory-as-forgetting as much as it is a model for memory in which complete forgetting (and complete healing) is never completely possible. This model begins to answer the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter regarding the potentially melancholic outlook engendered by the persistence of the poem’s unhealable wounds. By rethinking the poem’s model of temporality, we can see again why the attempt to recuperate the poem as something like a conventional elegiac narrative of consolation must necessarily fail. This failure has to do with the cyclic narrative structure of *Omeros* to which to which many of the poem’s other readers allude. If *Omeros* is centrally concerned with the trope, act, and problem of “return” we must ask what mode of return is possible in a non-linear narrative. As I have already mentioned, a critique of linear historical time is central to Walcott’s work and ultimately provides

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<sup>102</sup> Breslin, 261.

an alternative a model of psychic rupture and closure. In a sense, one might argue that the fact that the wounds fail to heal could never testify to an anti-elegiac refusal of consolation because, from the outset, *Omeros* refuses to subscribe to a model in which that consolation or closure would be possible.

This continuous, non-linear model also comes across in one of Walcott's more memorable examples of the way that cultural growth might be produced by loss. In one of the closing sections of *Omeros*, the narrator asks:

Why waste lines on Achille, a shade on the sea floor?  
Because strong as self-healing coral, a quiet culture  
is branching from the white ribs of each ancestor,

deeper than it seems on the surface; slowly but sure.  
it will change us with the fluent sculpture of Time.  
it will grip like the polyp, soldered by the slime

of the sea-slug.

(*O*, 296)

This section of verse, which appears in the last of *Omeros*'s seven books, seems at first glance like the poem's climactic moment of consolation, in which Walcott employs the image of self-healing coral as a metaphor for cultural growth. Recasting the foundational myth of Eve branching from Adam's "white ribs," Walcott's amorphous "culture" branches from lost ancestral currents and springs from a wasted "shade on the sea floor." The fact that this cultural formation is "soldered by the slime / of the sea slug" evokes an outmoded medical use of the term "solder," "to cause (wounds) to close up and become whole; to reunite (tissues or bones),"<sup>103</sup> further evincing the suggestion of wholeness and re-established unity. As such, it registers the potential for regrowth as a compensatory gesture that might enable one to procure something productive out of historical trauma. But crucially, while Walcott seems to

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<sup>103</sup> *OED* definition, obs.

locate the potential for cultural formation in death and decimation, thus positioning cultural formation as a compensatory *aftermath* to loss, loss here is rendered temporally indistinguishable from production; the verse continues, “where coral died / it feeds on its death, and the bones branch into more coral, / and contradiction begins”(O, 297). The contradiction, of course, is the simultaneity of destruction and regeneration; in this rhizomatic model where newness branches from ancestors who, in the forced rhyme, are paralleled with the amorphous, ephemeral image of a “shade on the sea floor,” there is no discernable origin. This image of self-healing coral, then, echoes Walcott’s alternative model of temporality in which there is no distinct origin, and no complete progress that might lead to closure, in the case of the wounded psyche.

Significantly, the obsessive reiteration of the characters’ attempt to return to the origin of their trauma poignantly echoes a reference to West African symbolism that Walcott adopts, perhaps unwittingly. It is the Yoruban word *omeiro* which refers, according to Art Historian Robert Farris Thompson, to the fluid inside the shell of the lakoshe, or white snail, which is “patient, slow moving, teaching deliberation in [its] careful motion.”<sup>104</sup> When cut open, the liquid from the interior oozes from the shell in a thick white fluid, and is thought to have the power to heal all who drink it. Most importantly for Thompson, the spiraling of the shell that contains this fluid is emblematic of temporality itself. It grows with passing time and that passage is marked visibly on the pattern of the shell. Any damage done to the shell becomes marked in an eternal imperfection of its surface. The shell itself becomes what Thompson calls, “Time: Corporealized.”<sup>105</sup> I bring this up here not to suggest that the snail shell represents some kind of African cultural recovery in the poem, but to posit

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<sup>104</sup> Thompson, 5.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Farris Thompson used this term while elaborating on the symbolism of the white snail in a lecture at Yale University, January, 2003.

it as a suggestive model for the new modes of memory and memorialization the poem is suggesting. Walcott alludes to the snail early in *Omeros*, in another instance where the word “time” is rhymed with “slime” as it is in the passage above:

a red sail entered the  
drifting tree of a rainspout, and the faint pirogue  
slow as a snail whose fingers untie the reef-knots

of a common horizon left a silvery slime  
in its wake; yesterday, in that sea without time,  
the golden moss of the reef fleeced the Argonauts. (O, 36)

Here, the reference to Greek myth of the Argonauts and the search for the Golden Fleece (all words recapitulated in the last line of this stanza) doubly references the argonaut, or Paper Nautilus, a species of octopus that also has a spiral shell, which hides, or is “fleeced” in the “golden moss of the reef.” While it is “without time,” the sea temporarily registers the traces left by the wake of the boat that the speaker watches in this passage, the trail of slime left by the snail, the traces of Greek mythology evoked by the natural world. The snail-shell, or nautilus shell evoked here, serves as a marker from that natural world, which throughout the poem is the ultimate catalyst for buried memory – memory prompted by the sound of the waves or the movement of the sea-swift, or the seed of a transplanted plant. The spiral shell, in this sense, evokes and modes the different repetitions of memory left in traces and wakes, but registering repetition with a difference, employing the same circular movement I’ve discussed while marking the impossibility of complete return.

Reading *Omeros* with this emblem of the spiral in mind, we might consider Walcott’s construction of the text as a “fluent sculpture of Time”(O, 296). As the passage of time is corporeal in the form of the snail shell, so the infliction of trauma becomes corporeal in the form of the wound or scar. In *Omeros*, bodily wounds become markers of the past, of a past trauma, the physical marker of the passage of an

event in history, tangible evidence of the passage of time. And while the form of the spiral demands re-visitation to the site of the wound, it does so in a way that never allows a moment of complete convergence with the past. The spiral, then, becomes a subtle marker of the different kind of traumatic temporality Walcott's poem produces – one in which a complete fullness of return is impossible, but one which still enables a productive engagement with the future. Though other critics of the poem have already pointed out the centrality of a cyclical model of time in *Omeros*, I offer the mode of the spiral as a corrective precisely because it cannot accommodate *any* sense of completion. Focusing on the figure of the circle as the manifestation of the poem's non-linear narrative, for instance, Breslin has noted that "since Philoctete is already healed at the time of [the poem's opening]," that the action of the poem takes place "between the ritual of communal wholeness, about to be shattered, and the restoration of wholeness through the cure of the wound."<sup>106</sup> So while Breslin upholds a non-linear understanding for the poem's narrative structure, he still understands that circle as somehow punctuated by a "restoration of wholeness." Arguably, a cyclic model presupposes some kind of complete return, even if it is a continuous one; the spiral, on the other hand, figures a temporality in which that restoration is unthinkable. At first glance, *Omeros* stages these instances of a restorative return to the past based on what I described earlier in this dissertation as the false promise of "original skin," which would be figured, ostensibly, by the perfect, impossibly restorative closure of Philoctete's wound.

Taking into account the way that this new, spiral-based model of time might problematize the idea of closure, and thus the critique of closure central to the movement to depathologize melancholia, I suggest that the poem finally discards a model of return completely, tantalizing its readers with a dream of 'original skin' but

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<sup>106</sup> Breslin, 251.

giving us only the concrete reality of the scar. An appropriate metaphor for this model of time can be seen in the examination of a wound in itself. The victim characteristically returns to the place of wounding only to find a scar which has healed his wound and concealed the force of its trauma. While an exemplary method of healing would be the re-formation of the original skin that was peeled back, the actuality of healing includes the formation of a scar. Even the successful healing of a lesion therefore implies a continual manifestation of the wound itself. That is, once a wound is inflicted, it can never be truly healed because the scar remains as a trace of its former presence. In the case of Philoctete, “[so] an anchor / had hooked its rust in one sufferer, and the scar shows / on the slit bone still”(O, 298), and while by the end of the poem, Philoctete’s wound is healed, the scar stays behind as a vestige. Like the unhealed wound itself, the scar is a constant marker of the infliction of the trauma. While it carries with it all of the connotations of the cure, it is fundamentally inseparable from the wound itself. It is indicative of both cure and wound, permanently written on the body – hence the paradox of “the stitched, sutured wound that Philoctete / was given by the sea”(O, 242). The wound is at once sutured and open, cured and incurable. It is cured as the suture closes the cut and it is incurable as it never rids itself of the mark of the initial trauma. Crucially, as Ramazani has also noted, “[e]ven though the wound has scarified in these descriptions, Walcott never reduces the bitterness or pain to a condition that can be repaired completely; rather, it is constitutive of the new synthesis.”<sup>107</sup> For Ramazani, that new synthesis extends to the new hybridized cultural developments that Walcott also figures with the scar: “More somber than Walcott’s tropes of webbing and weaving, let alone popular metaphors like melting pot, tossed salad, or callaloo, the scar signifies cultural

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<sup>107</sup> Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse*, 62.

convergence in the Americas without effacing its violent genesis.”<sup>108</sup> Though it embodies a site of healing, the scar, not unlike the incurable lesion, maintains the memory of the wounding.

The scar as a marker for memory’s wound amalgamates the question of time and the question of place. The oceanic Middle Passage marks (in its inability to be marked) what Elizabeth DeLoughrey refers to as an “impossibility of spatial return.”<sup>109</sup> Crucially, this represents a shift in thinking about the inability to represent trauma. Throughout the poem, Walcott toys with the conventional connection established between wound and writing as both are a form of inscription – wound upon flesh and writing upon parchment. This connection serves as a foundation for Walcott’s portrayal of language as the wound as it is forced upon colonial subjects. However, the association simultaneously connotes Walcott’s implied question of what kind of language, if any, is capable of portraying suffering. As in the case of the wound itself, language offers no ideal healing. While there is an implied catharsis in the mediation and subsequent release of the trauma through language, an ideal healing is impossible simply because language offers no true return to origin. The scar, in this model, becomes a signifier for language. However, the inability to return to the unmarkable oceanic space has less to do with some kind of aporia or undecidability of the traumatic (and some intrinsic lack accompanying language) than it has to do with the kinds of movements and shifts Walcott outlines, both in terms of the changes a culture undergoes over time, and the changing motions of the sea which figure those fluctuations. Trauma in this new model is not something abstractly unknowable, and as such becomes something that might be addressed in ways that do not merely recapitulate the silence of some unsymbolizable “abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>109</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), 60.

grief.”<sup>110</sup> When DeLoughrey alerts our attention to the question of “how to mark – and thus materially make meaningful – ocean spaces that were traversed by slave ships when one cannot locate the exact coordinates of the places where, for instance, Africans died in the passage or drowned at sea,”<sup>111</sup> she implicitly raises the question of how to mourn or commemorate the losses that took place in those spaces – losses that are “unrepresentable” in a sense that there is no definitive way of marking exactly where or when they took place, and no distinct trace left behind, only a wake that flows and dissipates into the larger body of water.

The fact that the question of how to mark or represent those losses in this context departs from a model of unrepresentability based on unknowability is crucial to thinking about the way modes of responding to loss according to a “deconstructive ethics of remembrance” are rendered problematic. In this model, the otherness of loss is consumed and entombed within the self in what theorists have described as an ethical gesture in which the otherness of that lost other is preserved rather than assimilated. While proponents of melancholia have attempted to frame this consumption as the basis for a kind of communication where the otherness of the revenant communicates that trauma through compulsive return and acting out, I would argue that this kind of “communication” is ultimately hopeless in that it seeks to transmit that wound to others through silence or through a collapse of understanding that completely precludes working through.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 1.

<sup>111</sup> DeLoughrey, 68.

<sup>112</sup> LaCapra makes a similar critique of Shoshana Felman’s reading of the Holocaust film, *Shoah* in his *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. He points out how Felman’s privileging of “silence, indirection, and the ‘paradoxical’ witnessing of the breakdown of witnessing” (LaCapra 1998, 112) leads to a fixation on traumatic excess. In Felman’s reading, then, “witnessing the impossibility of witnessing becomes an all-consuming process: trauma is so overwhelming that distinctions threaten to collapse and the world emerges as a *univers concentrationnaire*” (113). In this model, in which Felman fixates on the “absolutization of trauma and...the limits of representation and

By avoiding this paralytic appeal to silence, *Omeros* raises the important question of how to talk about trauma without becoming trapped in a repetitive obsession with origin. In the same Boxing Day ritual in which Philoctete's pain returns, the poem suggests that while the trauma of the Middle Passage cannot be "marked," it can be iterated in controlled scenes of performance in a way that enables their communication to others. Crucially, when "[a]ll the pain / re-enter[s] Philoctete" (*O*, 277), it does so during a performance that he and Achille stage every year, not to celebrate Christmas, but "for something older; something that he had seen in Africa" (*O*, 275). When the pain of Philoctete's wound returns, the poem recounts how

He swallowed his nausea, and spun his arms faster,  
like a goblet on a potter's wheel, its brown blur

soothed by his palms, as the bamboo fifes grew shriller  
to the slitted eyes of the fifers. The drummer's wrists  
whirred like a hummingbird's wings, and, to Achille, the

faster they flew, the more he remembered, blent  
to his rite; then suddenly the music ceased. (*O*, 277)

While the scene ends with Philoctete weeping, it is important to consider how the reappearance of the wound here takes place during a performed rite to which that memory is "blent" or fused. The fact that the return of Philoctete's pain happens in the context of a public performance (even if that performance isn't ever explicitly aimed at vocalizing that pain) means that it happens in a way that counters melancholic isolation, in a venue where the very process of countering isolation is what is communicated to others. While the loss is never fully worked through, the somewhat ritualized process of grappling with it represents a way out of the isolation of

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understanding"(111) there is no available mode of "communicating" a traumatic event to an audience, except in a sense in which victim and witness are conflated.

melancholia. Re-performing the pain (as opposed to compulsively repeating it in isolation) becomes a way of communicating the pain to Achille and others.<sup>113</sup>

In the debilitating isolation of melancholia, where one consumes the loss whole, loss is totally cut off from history. The re-entry into a community, the participation in a shared language, becomes a way of putting that pain back into a historical context. In *Omeros*, the suggestive way in which trauma cannot be marked on the fluctuating oceanic body evokes another important site of mutability – that of the newly formed community itself. If a melancholic fixation on origin stories might serve as the basis for new types of community, as Butler and others have suggested, the continuous processes of working-through that take place in Walcott's poem destabilize a potentially problematic sense of fixed identity that those origin stories presuppose and produce. Taking this into account, these same processes of working through might also enable a way of relating to loss across rigidly delineated national or cultural boundaries.

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<sup>113</sup> I am grateful to Elizabeth DeLoughrey for first suggesting that this final scene might be one of controlled performance rather than simply the compulsive and uncontrollable return of the wound.

## CHAPTER 3

### KAMAU BRATHWAITE'S POETICS OF MELANCHOLIA

Derek Walcott's unhealing anchor-wound; Édouard Glissant's open boat; Aimé Césaire's "demasted hulls, old sores, rotten bones" and "suppurating syzygy of blisters;"<sup>114</sup> Kamau Brathwaite's middle passages: all are part of a lexicon of wounds inscribed again and again into the canonical texts of Caribbean poetry. Given that postcolonial literature generally positions colonial violence – physical, epistemic, historical, linguistic – as its condition of possibility, it is unsurprising that these preeminent examples of Caribbean poetics seem so incurably wounded. Indeed, Caribbean poetry is ultimately tied up in the politics and poetics of trauma. It is precisely this saturating of wounds, however, that Walcott condemns in "The Muse of History" when he insists that Caribbean writers abandon the melancholic reiteration of colonial violence and opt instead for a literature that eschews the "servitude to the muse of history" – a mode of writing which has in Walcott's view "produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters."<sup>115</sup> Postcolonial poetry – undeniably wounded, markedly elegiac – should offer some conciliatory relief from the pain of its subject matter. At one point, towards the end of Walcott's lauded epic poem, *Omeros*, we bear witness to and partake in the conventional compensatory strategies of the elegy when his obeah-woman, Ma Kilman, declares "We shall all heal."<sup>116</sup> Of course, contrary to his critical denouncement of despair, Walcott's characters do not heal; all the pain that reenters

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<sup>114</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, 77.

<sup>115</sup> Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History" in *What The Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 37.

<sup>116</sup> Walcott, *Omeros*, 319.

his poem testifies to the incommensurable wounds at its heart: the colonial trauma of “one pain / that is inconsolable, the loss of one’s shore / with its crooked footpath”(O, 151) and, more generally, “[t]he incurable / wound of time”(O, 319).

This tension between the call to heal and the wound’s apparent resistance to healing speaks to the critical arguments about collective trauma that I have described in the previous chapters. Recent scholarly attention to twentieth century elegiac writing has taken issue with modes of mourning traumatic events in the modern and postmodern era, affirming a lingering fixation on incurable wounds as an ethically preferable mode of engaging with the past. As a result, and despite the all too common cry to come to terms with the past, we are currently witnessing a proliferation of discourses which privilege the irreparability of loss and the inability to heal. From the Derridean valorization of “impossible mourning” to Butler’s later assertion that working through traumatic events might undercut the foundations of those communities situated around an originary trauma, much attention across literary and cultural studies has been devoted to both the ethical and creative potential of a melancholic attachment to the past. As I have already shown, it is not loss which is valorized as such; rather it is a melancholic attachment to the past which has been infused with political, ethical, and creative potential, and reframed as a mode of resistance to any fixity or mastery, whether it be over loss, or the knowledge of past events. In this model, Ma Kilman’s promise that “we shall all heal” is tantamount to a decision to move on from loss in a way that forecloses opportunities for continual, productive attention to the past that melancholia would ostensibly permit. For critics like Sam Durrant, David Eng, David Kazanjian, and Ranjana Khanna, a melancholic relationship with past events allows one to engage in an anti-historicist “persistent struggle with its lost objects”<sup>117</sup> that mourning closes down. The failure to heal, then,

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<sup>117</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 4.

marks a commitment to keep loss open in a way that resists the “totalizing” master narratives of history and the historicist’s impulse “to ‘grasp’ and to ‘hold’ on to the fleeting images of the past.”<sup>118</sup>

In this chapter, I turn my attention to the Barbadian poet, Kamau Brathwaite, to examine how the woundedness and incommensurability deployed in his work might allow readers to rethink this recent critical advocacy of an anti-historicist ethics of remembrance, as well as the imaginative rendering of traumatic experience. As I have already shown, scholars who understand mourning as a disavowal of the past subscribe to a stereotypical notion of mourning as closure rather than a productive, performative process in which the past might be worked through in ways that enable a real interest in the present and future. While the previous chapter aimed to debunk the problematic, simplistic notion of closure attributed to mourning, this chapter examines another aspect of the critical valorization of melancholia: the troubling conflation of absence and loss that LaCapra has already outlined as another product of this critical move. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra alerts us to the pitfalls of generalizing specific historical loss as transhistorical on the grounds that conflating absence with loss produces a decontextualized “discourse of absence” in which “one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia”<sup>119</sup> which shuts down any real possibility of working through the traumatic past. Furthermore, due to the fact that this conflation “typically involves the tendency to avoid addressing historical problems, including losses, in sufficiently specific terms,”<sup>120</sup> events are rendered into simple iterations of a pre-defined trauma narrative, with no way to tend to the specificity of individual contexts. When losses (whether

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>119</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss” in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 46.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 48.

they are individually or socially experienced) are reframed as an insuperable, universalized condition of existence, it becomes especially difficult to address not only the specificity of each loss, but also the specific historical conditions that made those losses possible in the first place. This facet of the argument has particular relevance for the study of colonial trauma since, as I have already pointed out, many of those historical conditions are ongoing in neocolonial practice, so the inability to address them has contemporary repercussions.

Keeping in mind recent trauma culture's tendency to render productive the pathological aspects of melancholia, I address these problems by focusing on Brathwaite's shift from a nationally oriented poetics of "nation-language" (rooted in a distinctly Caribbean experience of transgenerational historical trauma) to his more recent, "transboundary" aesthetic, which instead depicts a globalized, transhistorical sense of atrocity and loss at the heart of contemporary political life. Arguably, Brathwaite's recurring attention to the persistent wounds of colonial history in the Caribbean expands in his more recent work to embody exactly the kind of generalized, unmournable absence LaCapra describes above. The poet's refusal to mourn comes across in his new focus on a "transboundary" world – paradoxically fragmented and fused – in which all wounds are generalized, transhistorical, unhealable. Ultimately, however, this expansion has less to do with the disembodied condition of woundedness I have discussed so far than it does with figuring a model of transnational community where suturing together different wounds might allow for a continuous, collective process of working through historical trauma. As I will argue in this chapter, Brathwaite's new frame opens up a space for reading outside of the boundaries of an essentializing identity politics to which his work, and postcolonial literature in general, is often subjected, and posits cross-cultural relation as a possible locus of working through.

Admittedly though, it is through this same move that Brathwaite also risks conflating absence and loss, obscuring specific losses and participating in a discourse of foundational absence. While this comes across most obviously in the transboundary move I will discuss in the following pages, it is important to note that Brathwaite frequently blurs the distinction between loss and absence throughout his work, adopting a seemingly melancholic agency of the kind that the above scholars have described. As a trained historian, Brathwaite is no stranger to obsessing over the past, nor is he exempt from accusations that his work is either fundamentally nostalgic or implicated in a poetics of “recrimination and despair,” in Walcott’s terms. This is a fair enough charge, it seems, when we take into account the violent myth of origins he puts forth in a dialogue with Glissant:

[The Caribbean’s] tips are a sunken range of mountains which a million years ago angled a great eastward spiral from the Americas, from the Rockies to the cordillera of Central America and into the awesome Andes. We are at right angles to this, and because we were at right angles we were weaker, more subject to the pressures of the sliding curve of movement. And so we collapsed into the ocean, creating a catastrophe of sunken memory and leaving only the sunken tips of these volcanic memories, the islands of the Caribbean. It is my impression that even now, a million years later, we still hear the echo of that catastrophe, and much of our work relates to that memory. We somehow lost the sense of the mainland, the sense of wholeness and we became holes in the ocean.<sup>121</sup>

Brathwaite’s claim here that the Caribbean subject has lost a sense of wholeness deliberately plays into a prelapsarian discourse where a geographical split with the

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<sup>121</sup> Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant, “A Dialogue: *Nation Language and Poetics of Creolization* in *Presencia criolla en el Caribe y América Latina*, ed. by Ineke Phaf (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1996), pp. 19-36 (p. 21)

mainland substitutes for the Fall of the Old Testament. So, in addition to the frequent references to the trauma of colonialism and slavery in Brathwaite's poems we have a parallel creation myth – a specifically Caribbean one – which situates catastrophe at its center. This catastrophe is marked, however, by the unity of the same oceanic space into which the collapse takes place – a perceived unity which is again ruptured in waves of colonial invasions which carved up the Caribbean into different nations. From the beginning, then, there is a tension between the need to tend to specific iterations of colonial violence in each island context, and the need to re-establish a regional connectivity against the fragments imposed by colonization.

Ultimately, as I will show in this chapter, Brathwaite's transboundary phase is not an ahistorical turn to structural trauma, but an attempt to historicize the effect of globalization in the Caribbean and across the world. In this sense, LaCapra's opposition between historically specific and transhistorical trauma fails to map easily onto Brathwaite's work. While the increasing permeability of boundaries between temporal and spatial locations might appear to participate in a generalizing melancholia, Brathwaite's work implicitly disturbs the binary logic of local/global and instead offers a picture of the Caribbean as synechdochically global. Accordingly, when the "wounds" of his poetry become all-encompassing and not readily attributable to one individual, nation, or race, they are not depicting a universalized condition of existence. Fundamentally, Brathwaite's poetry begs the question of how art aesthetically captures catastrophe, be it geological in the example above, or socio-politically orchestrated. His interest in a "tidalectic" model of history necessitates a focus on interconnected disasters whose repercussions are felt all the more closely due to the effects of globalization. His transboundary turn, therefore, is not just about establishing some kind of equivalence between disasters, but highlighting the very question of how to represent events that are simultaneously historically specific and

undeniably intertwined.

Brathwaite's self-professed poetic project involves conveying a distinctly Caribbean experience (one punctuated by trauma) through new modes of linguistic and metaphorical experimentation – blending canonical English rhythms with African ones, evoking Christian and Rastafarian cosmologies, foregrounding the orality of his poems and manipulating syntax.<sup>122</sup> According to Brathwaite, the inherited poetics of English colonialism lack the raw materials necessary to convey the often painful specifics of everyday experience: “The hurricane which cuts into the Caribbean every year does not howl in pentameters. And for the slave-girl whose back is harshed by the whip of the slave-master when she shrieks in pain there is no English metric.”<sup>123</sup> But at the same time, at the heart of this project is the idea that the history of the Caribbean leaves its inhabitants with genocide in place of genesis. As he explains,

I recognized that the history that I had inherited did not permit me to inherit any natural genesis. It permitted me to inherit a sense of genocide, which is quite different from genesis, fundamentally the opposite, because the people that inherited that landscape picking up the echo of that catastrophe had been exterminated by the Spanish, by the conquistadores of Columbus... So that when the Caribbean was inherited by what has been called the New World, the modern world, we had no original native ancestors.<sup>124</sup>

Arguably, Brathwaite's deeply melancholic conflation of genocide and genesis runs the risk of confusing the specific traumatic losses his poetry enacts with a universalizing sense of absence. Surely if the generalized valorization of melancholia apparent in the work of critics like Butler and Eng risks effacing the specificity of

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<sup>122</sup> See Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon, 1984).

<sup>123</sup> Brathwaite and Glissant, 22.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

individual losses, the totalizing narrative of catastrophe Brathwaite employs here does the same. We might recall LaCapra's claim that if we ignore "the difference (or nonidentity between) absence and loss," we risk "[converting] subsequent accounts into displacements of a story of original sin wherein a prelapsarian state of unity or identity, whether real or fictive, is understood as giving way to a fall of difference and conflict."<sup>125</sup> In this sense, specific traumatic events risk slipping into a master-narrative of their own; Brathwaite's poetics become reducible to the foundational myth of geographical upset, colonial encounter, or middle passage as they become lost in a series of generalizing elegies for the loss of culture which we so frequently encounter.

The simultaneity of genocide and genesis culminates with Brathwaite's portrayal of the Middle Passage, where "birth was not breath // but gaping wound,"<sup>126</sup> echoing Walcott's well-known poem, "Laventille," in which the wounds of dispossession are also very much open and raw:

Something inside is laid wide like a wound,  
  
some open passage that has cleft the brain,  
some deep, amnesiac blow. We left  
somewhere a life we never found,  
  
customs and gods that are not born again,  
some crib, some grille of light  
clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld  
  
us from that world below us and beyond,  
and in its swaddling cerements we're still bound.<sup>127</sup>

The morbidity of these last stanzas of "Laventille" is heightened by the interplay of

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<sup>125</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 48.

<sup>126</sup> Brathwaite, *Middle Passages*, 44.

<sup>127</sup> Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 88.

birth and burial. The paradox of “swaddling cerements,” a combination of an infant’s swaddling clothes and the wax material used to wrap corpses, brings to mind Édouard Glissant’s haunting image of a slave ship as a belly “pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.”<sup>128</sup> This compendium of grief is punctuated by the overdetermined metaphor of an “open passage” – a suggestive image that doubles as a figure of the Middle Passage, and finally testifies to a wound or split in the Caribbean psyche often thematized in Walcott’s poems and constantly enacted in Brathwaite’s through the juxtaposition of found language from a multitude of cultural inheritances.

In these two brief examples, we can get a sense of the extent to which these images stop being singular and start functioning as a place-holder for absence. Crucially, however, the unhealable wounds portrayed here – the inability to distinguish between genesis and genocide, birth and death – are taken up by both poets as the impetus for poesy. The trauma of dislocation is the condition of possibility for a vibrant, hybridized mode of art-making. We might recall here Butler’s notion that loss has a deeply productive capacity when she affirms the post-traumatic space of “no belonging” as a place which advocates belonging and figures loss as “oddly fecund, paradoxically productive”: “Loss becomes the condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as a community.”<sup>129</sup> This claim is especially seductive inasmuch as it provides a means for marginalized communities to achieve political agency. In the first place, loss permits the newly-formed community to have a sense of itself as such. As Butler explains, “newness itself, is founded upon the loss of original place, and so it is a newness that has within it a sense of belatedness, of coming after, and of being thus fundamentally determined

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<sup>128</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wang (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6

<sup>129</sup> Butler, “Afterword,” 468.

by a past that continues to inform it.” In the wake of this insurmountable loss, Butler argues that “a fractured horizon looms in which to make one’s way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full “recovery” is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency.”<sup>130</sup>

As in Walcott, the Middle Passage surfaces in Brathwaite’s work as one of these “oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” sites where the artistic inheritance of jazz is inexorably tied up in (and linked through internal rhyme to) the pain associated with the sea. In “Word Making Man” Brathwaite depicts both the creative import of trauma in which “the sea between us yields its secrets / silver into pellables into sheets of sound / that bear our pain & spume & salt & Coltrane.”<sup>131</sup> This opening poem of *Middle Passages* invokes a sense of community based in a shared “history of ghosts” which, in a sense, enables the voice to speak in the first place as an individual and collective subject:

owners herein of what we must believe  
of what our hands encompass as we dream

so that together we say wind  
& understand its history of ghosts  
together we say fire

& again there is a future in those sparks  
together, comrade, friend  
we say this is our land & know at last it is our home<sup>132</sup>

As Butler has argued and both Walcott and Brathwaite have illustrated, the formation of a community held together by the common experience of a traumatic event might be impetus enough for valorizing a melancholic attachment to the past. If Brathwaite’s earlier work lingers on the Middle Passage as a site of foundational

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 467.

<sup>131</sup> Brathwaite, *Middle Passages* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 6

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 7.

importance, however, it does so somewhat paradoxically to counter the notion of complete, totalizing decimation. Accordingly, inheriting catastrophe's echo means inheriting not simply what was lost, but what remains.

Not unlike Walcott, Brathwaite imagines a sense of unity for the region based on its shared knowledge of colonial and indigenous influences. More than Walcott, however, Brathwaite privileges the Caribbean's connection with Africa as a strong point of coherence. As Maureen Warner-Lewis has pointed out, the "consciousness of the Atlantic, not as 'a divider,' but as a bridge, is one of Brathwaite's reiterated visions."<sup>133</sup> At the same time, we might read Brathwaite's understanding of cultural influence as positioning Africa not as a site of melancholic fixation, but as a site of continual re-discovery that takes place in Caribbean art forms. Against "a persistent, established theory which contends that the Middle Passage destroyed the culture of these people, that it was such a catastrophic, definitive experience that one of those transported during the period from 1540 to 1840 escaped trauma,"<sup>134</sup> Brathwaite puts forth a model of survival and creative adaptation; throughout his work he discusses the presence of Africa as submerged and in need of recuperation to counter the obliviousness toward an otherwise obvious "African connection and aesthetic."<sup>135</sup> While the "return" to Africa *is* a kind of psychical journey meant to repair the fractures of regional consciousness, at the same time, it is also one based on accessing latent echoes of that progenitor culture as they exist in present time and space, not as "authentic" elements of African culture available in the Caribbean today, but as traces that have been transplanted and changed over time. So, as another critic has noted,

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<sup>133</sup> Maureen Warner-Lewis, "Africa: Submerged Mother," in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), 53.

<sup>134</sup> Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Daedalus* 103.2 (Spring 1974), 73.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

Brathwaite's poems "create cycles of allusive patterning which reconnect West Africa with the rituals and spiritual traditions on the 'other shore,' lending new significance to old gestures, revitalizing through metaphor, dramatisation, and especially rhythm."<sup>136</sup> The figure of "sunken memory" in his dialogue with Glissant further emphasizes the understanding of historical trauma that does not happen in stages, but in tides and surges. Even the irreparable or the seemingly absent leaves a trace of its presence while the later surges of historical trauma in the Caribbean echo this sense of a memory that is submerged, even as the catastrophe it marks is long past and inaccessible.

The opening poem of *Islands*, part of Brathwaite's *Arrivants* trilogy, and its evocation of latent cultural memory, provides a useful illustration of this phenomenon, particularly since it is almost reminiscent of the exchange that takes place between Afolabe and Achille in Walcott's *Omeros*, which I discussed in the previous chapter:

For the land has lost the memory of the most secret places  
  
we see the moon but cannot remember its meaning  
a dark skin is a chain but it cannot recall the name  
  
of its tribe. There are no chiefs in the village  
  
the gods have been forgotten or hidden.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Bridget Jones, "'The Unity is Submarine': aspects of a pan-Caribbean consciousness in the work of Kamau Brathwaite," in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), 87.

<sup>137</sup> Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 164. The whole second section of "Jah," of which these lines are a part, is transplanted into *Born to Slow Horses* at the end of the poem "Bread," which is a completely different poem from the one presented in *The Arrivants*. The earlier poem, "Jah," traces a kind of pan-African continuum based on jazz and other music of the black Atlantic diaspora from Nairobi to Havana to Harlem. Gordon Rohlehr has argued that the God of the poem – Jah, the Rastafarian word for Jehovah – is "neither the Hebrew Jehovah... nor the Rastafarian Jah Jah" but rather, "the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant perversion of the Christian message." (See Gordon Rohlehr,

This poem registers the paradox of an irreparable loss that is also somehow retrievable inasmuch as parts are fragmented and dormant, but nonetheless preserved, in contemporary cultural forms, waiting to be revitalized. The centrality of traces, surges, and wakes of the past explains how things might be “formed from unknown but not forgotten African fingers,”<sup>138</sup> to borrow a phrase from Brathwaite’s “Guanahani” in *Born to Slow Horses*, without privileging a sense of originary purity or a state of complete wholeness to which a full return is impossible.

It is precisely this sense of revitalization, which I have already explored in Walcott’s work, that begins to complicate the notion of simple return to the originary loss occasioned by the Middle Passage and other traumatic ruptures in Caribbean history. With its focus on the aspects of West African artistic culture – cultural references, rhythms, and spiritual traditions that survived (even as they changed) – Brathwaite’s poems fixate on that originary loss if only to advocate an awareness of the way its traces have been central to Caribbean artistic production, but have not entirely determined it. Still, the sense of the productive possibility of tending to foundational loss raises questions about what we might call Brathwaite’s anti-elegiac

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*Pathfinder: Black awakening in The Arrivants of Edward Kamau Brathwaite* (Tunapuna, Trinidad: G. Rohlehr, 1981), 166.) The later version, “Bread,” in *Born to Slow Horses*, omits any mention of God or Jah, aside from two references to “this scarifice / of isaac”[sic] and to the “warm dead... flesh of the god you break.” That bread or flesh is linked to the land, to “the dream of the soil itself” which is unavailable to “the multitudes who howl all day for ijs saviour”[sic](*BTSH*, 60), but these multitudes are never specifically identified nor positioned in space or time. While the vague sense of injustice and dispossession is central to this poem, the addition of the second group of stanzas from “Jah” regarding the land that “has lost the memory of the most secret places” seems somewhat out of place. In the earlier poem, jazz and other cultural forms come to represent the “gods [that] have been forgotten and hidden.” In the later version the centrality of the a specifically Caribbean traumatic history is completely abandoned in another instance that replaces a historically specific context with a vague sense of absence.

<sup>138</sup> Brathwaite, *Born to Slow Horses* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 10. Hereafter referred to in text as *BTSH*.

elegies for colonial loss, particularly when those losses proliferate and branch out in his new phase of poetry.

At the end of *Born to Slow Horses*, Brathwaite explicitly defines this new phase as a continuation of his “post-catastrophe” poetry, referring to the work he completed in the years following three major traumatic events in his personal life – his wife’s death from cancer, Hurricane Gilbert’s destruction, and the experience of being assaulted and robbed in his own home – all of which he documents in *Shar* (1990), *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1993), and *Trench Town Rock* (1999). Brathwaite names this period of intense personal traumatization his “Time of Salt,” which he clarifies as

the years 1986-1900 which see in rapid catastrophic succession, the death of his wife Zea Mexican (1986), the destruction by hurricane of their home & archives at Irish Town in the high hills outside Kingston (1988) and his own death at the hands of brigand gunmen in his Kingston apartment in 1990, all chronicled in his largely new & strangely unknown groundbreaking ‘post-catastrophe’ work (*BTSH*, 142)

“1986-1900” is not a typographical error here; it appears that way in the collection, possibly testifying to the way Brathwaite manipulates time and causation in these recent poems. At the same time, in this short third-person autobiographical passage, Brathwaite gives the reader the impression that his body of work has progressed in a somewhat linear sense, explaining that his “post-catastrophe” work here has given way to a new phase which, he explains, “should be read in the context of KB’s post-Arrivants, postAncestors, postSalt work”(*BTSH*, 142). While the emphasis on the centrality of catastrophe or loss suggests some sense of continued, unresolved loss, the admitted transition from his “post-catastrophe” work to his “postSalt” phase itself indicates some process of working through those events which shaped and continue to shape his poetics. If this is the case, however, it takes place through an expansion into

what Brathwaite calls “a significant transboundary development” that draws even the regionally focused poems out of their regional boundaries. As he explains,

*Born to Slow Horses* is the first major appearance in this country of this new (?4<sup>th</sup> phase) of Brathwait(e)’s poetry; a work which in a sense, surveys or makes natural reference to the entire tidalectics, but at the same time marking, even with the most remarkable of his ‘Caribbean’ poems here, a significant transboundary development (*BTSH*, 143)

By examining this ostensibly “new (?4<sup>th</sup> phase)” I want to trace what I see as a shift in Brathwaite’s own recent work into a more transhistorical poetics of melancholia. In his earlier work we can understand the melancholic attachment to a colonial “history of ghosts” as at least a specific locus of postcolonial traumatization, even if it reaches beyond the Caribbean to address certain parallels with the rest of the global South. Take for instance two versions of a short poem, “Irae” set against the later “Dies Irie” from *Ancestors*. A play on the liturgical “Dies Irae” of a Roman Catholic requiem Mass, the second of the two versions certainly becomes more transhistorical as it invokes a series of specific instances of colonial violence and resistance. Also important is the change of the title from *Irae* – translated from the Latin as “wrath” – to *Dies Irie*. While Brathwaite’s substitution of the Rastafarian word for “excellence” or “total peace with one’s state of being” for *wrath* might signify a shift from days of wrath to days of peace, the vast expansion of the poem’s scope suggests otherwise, particularly since the latter is more rhythmically complex (the first often conforms to the medieval poem on which it is based), and metrically frantic. The original rhymes have been interrupted and spread out over different stanzas. The handful of place and proper names from the shorter *Middle Passages* version (my lai sharpville wounded knee, nanny cuffee cudjoe, and a few others) have

exploded to include important figures of colonial resistance such as Toussant L'Overture, Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, Jose Martí, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Steven Biko, Nelson Mandela, Malcom X, next to Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Hernán Cortez, and Apartheid perpetrators – D.F. Malan, P.W. Botha, and Hendrik Verwoerd. What this version lacks, however, is the concise rhyme and rhythm of “Irae” which is tightly held together at the level of meter. Unfettered, the new poem gives the impression that the old one was exploded all over the page, seeming to suggest there is no limit to its portrayal of colonial violence and neocolonial hypocrisy. While Brathwaite seems to bring together history’s perpetrators with history’s victims here in an almost undifferentiated way, his extension of the original poem still registers models of differentiation that are necessary, both in relation to the past and in relation to present ways of engaging it. Hitler, Göing, Cortez, Malan, Botha, and Verwoerd stand out as part of the same historical process that engenders the need for creative affirmation. Accordingly, the gesture to the interconnectivity of these figures with those of colonial resistance motivates the impulse and necessity of continual acknowledgement and engagement with history.

While it is true that Brathwaite maintains a focus on the global postcolonial here, we can no longer suggest that his poem is distinctly “Caribbean.” Rather, if we do we must keep in mind Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s designation of the Caribbean as a “meta-archipelago without center and without limits.”<sup>139</sup> In *Born to Slow Horses*, Brathwaite participates in such a centerless, limitless expansion into an apocalyptic world of “seething old sores / of no longer verbs / that can heal. of no longer baptisms / that will bawl out yr name / from the top of disaster / adjectives already gone a- / way clattering. lounging in shame. the silence of rot / of the hot of unheavens”(BTSH,

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<sup>139</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James Maraniss (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 9

101-2). The poems register a kind of interconnectedness, not just between instances of colonial violence but all events, and posits existence itself as “wound & absence”(BTSH, 64). While we still encounter the characteristic Middle Passage iconography so prevalent in *Ancestors* in the form of “the slaves graves rocking underwater,” the historical references expand to include the first human colonization of the ancient archipelago to the early 1960s: “over moncada & the white marl of the arawaks / over the bay of pigs & the isle of pines / over the fountains of youth & the ever. glades / over the drowned gardens of atlantis / over the slaves graves rocking underwater.”<sup>140</sup>

*Born to Slow Horses* enacts the concept of the “transboundary” by crossing both temporal and regional borders to highlight comparisons between distant atrocities. Crucially, the earlier comparisons between with Caribbean and other regions of the global South has given way to unexpected analogies, even if they are accessed through the distinct poetics Brathwaite developed early in his career. There are notable passages of the Brathwaite we recognize from earlier works – his phonetic spellings, emphasis on orality, the tones of “nation language.” However, as in the reworked version of “Dies Irie,” we encounter a “cosmology of sudden unXpecting disaster / & its unutterable grief unvomiting the world”(BTSH 73). Crammed together in the lines of *Born to Slow Horses* we find “Birminham that ku / klux Christian tabernacle night in Sodom & Herero”(102), “the corn / husk terror of Rwanda”(102), the shooting of JFK in Dallas, “the curling Black Death mushroom gloam / of God in Nagasaki”(102), Pol Pot, King Leopold and the Belgian Congo. Not only does one catastrophe beget another, but each catastrophe played back in memory compounds the memory of all others and haunts the poems as an nonlinear amalgam of disaster.

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<sup>140</sup> Brathwaite, *Ancestors* (New York: New Directions, 2001), 460-1

This sense of disjointedness is intensified by the fact that, unlike *Ancestors*, *Born to Slow Horses* is not a unified narrative but a collection of poems, many of which have been revised from earlier collections and compiled here. Though Brathwaite himself has explained that “There is no ‘large theme’ here since *Born to Slow Horses* is not a long-poem like *Masks* or *Mother Poem*, but a collection of poems w/ various themes...arranged more or less chronologically,”<sup>141</sup> I would argue that the collection’s very overt theme is the negotiation of the “post-catastrophe” in memory. This process takes place in different forms throughout the book – in a single voiced narrative of the poet flying over the Bahamas in “Guanahani;” in dialogue, as it does in “Mmassaccourraamann,” a reworked correspondence between Brathwaite and writer Cyril Dabydeen, or in “Namesatoura,” an exchange between the ghost of the slave and the poet who has just disturbed her grave in Cowpastor, Barbados by taking photographs of a spiderweb on the ground above it; and finally in the multiple, overlapping voices of mourners in “Kumina,” which recounts a deeply personal loss of a family member.

In this new transboundary phase, analogous wounds do not just transcend national boundaries, but time as well, in a gesture that might be interpreted as a mimetic attempt to grasp the disjointedness of traumatic temporality in which events, cognitively missed at the time of their infliction, are paradoxically “experienced” only in later repetitions.<sup>142</sup> This collapse of chronological time comes to a climax in “9/11 Hawk” where a Jazz saxophonist’s London performance in 1967 foresees the collapse of the twin towers. Tellingly, “Hawk” is not numbered as a section in the introduction; in the table of contents, 9/11 appears instead as a ghost numeral between

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<sup>141</sup> Opal Palmer Adisa, personal correspondence with Kamau Brathwaite cited in a book review of *Born to Slow Horses*, *The Black Scholar* 37.1 (Spring 2007): 55.

<sup>142</sup> See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

sections V and VII. Central to the poem is a disordering of time where the earlier performance actually gives the speaker a position in both past and future. This is not a speaker “recollecting” with the advantage of hindsight; to him the performance of this piece of music decades earlier is paradoxically haunted by the images he conjures of the twin towers – “haunted by twins”(BTSH, 92), “voices of falling wires. crumbol /- ing towers long before his time here flare. ing future”(BTSH, 92). At its height, the snare-drum sounding “ashes ashes ashes” of the poem lend a eerie prophetic element to its images of falling towers which form a “smouldering wound” on the cityscape:

the body body body bodies pour-  
ing from this dark Manhattan strom-  
boli into dim catacombs of dis-

appearing love & grace & pain & smouldering wound

[...]

altho we know it coming even while we count  
the deed the dead the cruel lame the gnash the cost  
the small the blind the debris falling from the air of shar

& lashes lashes lashes. such lash. erations of the hurt  
& herd. the blunted flash & flint of oriole  
& warp & timbrel flesh upon the manacle

flesh become salt. salt be-  
come char & ruell achar ashes ashes ashes  
upn the lips upon my lids until this now curl-

in cowl of howl & tears. (BTSH 97-8)

As we can see from this excerpt, Hawk is a poem that seems “possessed” by trauma; its language seems to flow along based on free associations based on the sounds of words that evoke words for other disasters – for instance, later in the poem when we are shifted along by “o hero scream . Hiroshima . au quelle dommage / which Agent

Ornage kora”(BTSH, 98). Here, the “hero scream” of the fireman in one of the towers sonically prompts the invocation of Hiroshima; the found phrase “au quelle dommage” [sic] is then linked to a deliberately misspelled Agent Orange, whose “Or-“ syllable flows into the kora, a West African string instrument made from a calabash which, in turn, brings the reader’s focus back to the musical riffs and tropes of the poem. This one line, which through sonic associations links the events of September 11, 2001 with World War II and the Vietnam War also problematically strings together the “hero” victim of 9/11 with two events in which the United States perpetrated massive human and environmental damage – the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the dispensing of herbicides over rural Vietnam.

Later in the poem, the image of “*so so so so so many*” people fleeing lower Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge evokes countless other disasters on which the speaker “looks back”:

our souls sometimes far out ahead already of our surfaces  
and our life looking back  
salt. as in Bhuj. in Grenada. Guernica. Amritsar. Tajikistan

the sulphur-stricken cities of the plains of Aetna  
the young window-widow baby-mothers of the prostitutes .  
looking back looking back as in Bosnia. the Sudan. Chernobyl

Oaxaca terremoto incomprende. al’fata el Jenin. the Bhopal  
babies sucking toxic milk. (BTSH, 100-1)

Listed like this, natural disasters like the volcanic eruptions of Martinique’s Mount Pelée in 1902 and Indonesia’s Krakatoa in 1883 are undifferentiated from colonial violence like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, which is in turn undifferentiated from the civil wars in Bosnia and the Sudan. The post-apocalyptic volcanic landscapes of “the sulphur-stricken cities of the plains of Aetna. Pelée. ab Napoli & Krakatoa” are made equivalent to the landscapes of industrial disasters like

those in Chernobyl and Bhopal, and other massacres and conflicts that have punctuated recent history. Significantly, the speaker's comment, "*i had not thought death / had undone so many*"(100) produces a tone of depressive recognition; if these events are all brought together it is not to diminish the horror of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks by suggesting that such trauma is ordinary, but to register the overwhelming presence of historical trauma which is equally debilitating all over the world and through time.

This assimilation of one loss into another occurs again in the poem when Brathwaite transcribes and renders in verse a memorial speech given by one of the widows of the firemen killed in the towers' collapse. Out of trauma that Brathwaite references here, one specific voice emerges in a changed typeface – the voice of a woman recounting the moment she “saw the building come down” and “knew [her husband inside] had no chance”(104). From a note we learn that this is “Beth Petrone speaking in the HBO/TV Memorial Tribute to the Heroes of 9/11 (26 May 2002) ... for her own beautiful self . and for all the women of this poem's world in New York Rwanda Kingston Iraq Afghanistan...”<sup>143</sup> That the places listed here are not separated by commas indicates in the most simple way the kind of transboundary, transhistorical connections Brathwaite makes throughout the poem. Significantly, Brathwaite's juxtaposition of verse, prose, and the “found object” of Beth Petrone's own speech pushes the limits of elegiac convention in poetry, opening up the work of commemoration to any and all speech that might stage the move from sorrow to consolation in the most provisional of ways.

While Brathwaite's elegiac poems continually return and reopen the wounds of loss, rendering them constitutive of contemporary existence, it would be problematic

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<sup>143</sup> *BTSH*, 105. The ellipses here are present in the original text, even though that is where the note ends.

to suggest that they are straightforward anti-elegies; they seem to exist in a flux of mourning and melancholia, wounding and healing, and suggest the inalienable interconnectedness of public and private. While in their repeated return to sites of foundational violence and rupture they certainly steer clear of the conventional “compensatory” mourning that Peter Sacks locates as elegy’s prime goal, neither do they explicitly attack conventions of mourning. On the contrary, the prevalence of possession and the performance of ritual – both in content and in the formal use of chant and reiteration – suggests that Brathwaite is not at all opposed to mourning convention as such. At the same time, his lingering attention to the wounds of Caribbean history makes his work exemplary of the kind of anti-elegiac impulse I have described so far. We might recall here Ramazani’s argument in *Poetry of Mourning* that modern poetry has launched an attack on the compensatory elegy, rejecting the possibility of achieving consolation after loss. Modern elegy, in Ramazani’s view, turns on itself, combating any anachronistic consolatory gesture in an age where global losses seem insurmountable. Against Sacks’s understanding of the elegiac as consolatory and conciliatory Ramazani puts forth “the psychology of melancholia or melancholic mourning” and argues “that the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss.”<sup>144</sup> Like parallel arguments in trauma studies, the turn to the “melancholic mourning” of modernist “anti-elegy” privileges both the uncertainty of “memorable puzzlings” and a traumatized “fractured speech”<sup>145</sup> – quasi-mimetic in its fragmentation and refusal of narrative closure or psychic wholeness.

Significantly, later scholarship on the anti-elegy has focused on the way that

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<sup>144</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, xi. Also See Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Sacks understands the traditional elegy as an instance of working through.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

the same resistance at work in the turn to melancholia might also oppose a kind of nationalized appropriation of loss. Along these lines, as R. Clifton Spargo has suggested, “the ethical posture of anti-elegy unfolds, if only implicitly, a politics of mourning to be associated with the politics of dissent, as mourning refers us to a meaning of loss not already accommodated by the extant political order.”<sup>146</sup> Part of this resistance to assimilation by the “extant political order” is drawn from the notion that mourning never “stops at national boundaries,”<sup>147</sup> but cuts across them in terms of both genre and affect. One aspect of elegy’s ability to “travel,” says Ramazani, is the fact that the study of any genre is inherently transnationally oriented: “[when] you in interpret a work as an elegy...you understand it differentially in relation to other elegies of other times and places.”<sup>148</sup> The other part of elegy’s mobility has to do with the centrality of the feelings it portrays and communicates: “we recognize the affective universe of elegy across boundaries of place and culture: grief, love, and anger; the search for, and thwarting of, consolation; commemorative and anti-commemorative impulses.”<sup>149</sup> While both scholars read a politics of dissent inherent in anti-elegy’s protest against mournful completion and compensation, Ramazani’s work on the modern elegy has focused more recently on the implications of “transnational” poetic responses to mourning, which would resist assimilation into a nationalist narrative in which loss is too easily appropriated for unguarded patriotism and exclusionary politics. While he argues that genre is inherently prone to “travel,” Ramazani highlights how the modernist period in particular “witnesses the vigorous

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<sup>146</sup> R. Clifton Spargo, “The Contemporary Anti-Elegy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 417.

<sup>147</sup> Ramazani, “Afterword,” 291.

<sup>148</sup> Ramazani, “Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 601.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 602.

transnationalization of elegy as a form” which carries over to “the still more vividly transnational mourning”<sup>150</sup> in contemporary postcolonial writing. The questions he raises in the face of this move are especially relevant to my discussion of Brathwaite’s work:

What is the significance of such translocational grief, of the construction of a transnational cultural space of mourning, at a time when modern nationalisms were ravaging the face of the earth? If mourning is usually conceived as culturally delimited, what alternative structures of feeling emerge when grief spills across the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation?<sup>151</sup>

Arguably, if the process of mourning remains incomplete and open to fluctuating interpretations, the loss can never become a clearly defined monument that contributes to fixed national identities. Accordingly, with its broad focus on a sometimes undifferentiated “affective universe” of grief, Brathwaite’s “transboundary” phase opens up questions about mourning onto Ramazani’s call to think in terms of a transnational poetics that would render those losses somehow impossible to complete and impossible for one specific group to claim.

Here we might recall here one central argument of Eng and Kazanjian’s work regarding the resistance to digesting the apparent alterity of grief and traumatic experience. Toward the conclusion of *Born to Slow Horses*, in “Mountain,” Brathwaite acknowledges the incompleteness of the poem (and perhaps the collection as a whole), highlighting “too many fault-lines marking where I sorrow / craft & hurting heart & diligence of art”(BTSH, 132). His claim that “the poem ‘finish’ but not yet complete”(BTSH, 132) testifies to the presence of those sorrow-driven “fault-lines” which the “diligence of art” or craft can never fully seal, registering the same

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<sup>150</sup> Ramazani, “Afterword,” 292.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

reliance on incompleteness and openness to a dialogic relation to past events that Eng and Kazanjian locate in a melancholic stance. In its incompleteness and dissolution of the boundaries between specific traumas, I have asked so far whether Brathwaite's poem "situate[s] loss on a transhistorical level,"<sup>152</sup> pitching his work into a generalized world of absence from which recovery is impossible, or whether it makes room for provisional, plausible modes of working through loss and, to borrow Ramazani's phrase, whether it articulates "alternative structures of feeling."

With its plethora of wounds and tears, we might also ask whether Brathwaite's new poems merely enact, or *act out* a state of injury, or if they participate in some sort of compensatory process. Crucially, we should note that this new "transboundary" aesthetic that Brathwaite discusses at the very end of the collection is troubled at the outset by the speaker's apparent subject position in "Guanahani," the third poem of the collection, set as the speaker is "flying over the Bahamas 12 Oct 1492 on AJ 016 over the US Easter Seaboard of Gaugin of Afghanistan 11:19am/w/the pilot beaming us the news that the cold front from the North we are leaving is following us South bringing this kind of history"(7). Despite his lingering concern regarding what kind of history – here figured as a cold front – the North forces upon the global south, the speaker dictates from the privileged "transboundary" medium of an airplane. Since the poem reads at times like a travelogue, Brathwaite's designation of it as transboundary appears very much tongue-in-cheek. While an airplane might invoke a certain ease of passage between the boundaries of land and sky or make minimal any intercontinental boundaries by shortening the time it takes to get between two points, it also foregrounds the boundaries between inside and outside, rich and poor, first and third world. The speaker of this poem, not unlike Walcott's narrator in *The Prodigal* is distant from the things he is observing and, alone with his thoughts, meditates on the

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<sup>152</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 49

paradoxes of “thinking of the Dardanelles” while flying “Somewhere over Central Turkey”:

(8)

12:28 PM

**Now we are somewhere over Central Turkey**

thinking of the Dardanelles. some musician

whose name I can't remember playin vibes on a 78 I have lost  
thinking of Central Asia. Ozzajistan. Tajikstan. Afghanistan. the mos

beautiful cruel landscape in the world. the most  
beautiful starving people. the most

beautiful women veiled in pale blue burkhas of dust. the most  
bomb. bombarded . the most

spectacular ruins . rubble like a Beethoven symphony  
stigmata

the strings of their violence & their one multiple continua  
voices. mantras of tabla music. darker

than the Hindu Kush more Arabian more Red Sea more African more Nile  
w/out the verdure & the fertile water

and now their bearded warriors. drugged. handcuffed. shaved. blind-  
folded over the Caspian over Mt Blanc over the while cell blocks of the Alps

the Atlantic where we are now flying & be landed at Guantánamo Américano of all places

unplacated in cages

their heads & faces. their full souls & bodies. xpose to the weather. not

even like horses or cattle w/out rights against torture  
& the soft hiss of injustice & patience & poultice

(9)

And i realize that i have been thinking of them all morning from this high  
freeling air. watching the clouds changing shade into the fate  
of their future . into landscape & memory

into the bleak beautiful meaning of reality  
plummeting towards my own horse of ruins  
& dreams. of how they too will be forgotten in time

*(BTSH 10-12)*

Inasmuch as this poem constitutes a general meditation on time and memory, it is part of an elegiac tradition punctuated with the conventional elegiac markers: a permeating sense of loss, a speaker deep in thoughtful meditation, the ephemerality of dust, the

melancholic presence of ruins and rubble, the dissipation of loss into “landscape and memory.” The awareness of “how they too will be forgotten in time” evokes the anxiety implicit in the elegiac substitution of poem for lost object, a substitution that never fully comes to pass.

Significantly, Brathwaite’s uncharacteristic use of capital-I in section 8, and a confessional “i realize” in section 9 highlights a potential tension in his transboundary aesthetic, or at least how it is deployed in this poem; the “i realize” and “i have been thinking” situate the poem as less of a boundary-crossing act and more of a series of thoughts which anyone can have anywhere. We might recall Ramazani’s hesitation in *A Transnational Poetics* regarding an unguarded valorization of transnationalism; after all, the same critical emphasis on “dialogic energies and interstitial identities” that can “evoke non-coercive and nonatavistic forms of transnational imaginative belonging” might also function as “a synonym for neoliberal globalism or corporate jet-setting.”<sup>153</sup> Is the poem merely plucking at the strings of “violence” and giving itself over to a universalizing melancholia in which everything wounds and nothing heals, and in which everything might be a symptom of a speaker who thinks ceaselessly about the bleakness of “reality”?

Does Brathwaite’s apparent shift towards the transhistorical undermine his earlier dedication to a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic? Does repetition of something like the Middle Passage (which makes a subtle appearance as the Atlantic in the poem above) as a site of wounding stand in for a broader, more transhistorical feeling of absence, or a universalizing condition of traumatization? And what happens, finally, when every city and every name has the capacity to evoke a wound? As Ramazani implies, forming the theoretical models for a transnational, unhindered mourning might establish new grounds for comparison in global English poetry, not to mention

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<sup>153</sup> Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, 31.

literature and criticism in general. But the question remains whether or not it can do so without effacing the specificity of individual losses. By considering Ramazani's argument about the way in which "the long-acknowledged equalizing and leveling force of death functions for many elegists as a useful counterforce to the differential impositions of the nation,"<sup>154</sup> we can begin to see how Brathwaite's recent work is refiguring the boundaries of a community, not as one situated around and determined by loss, but one in which national, ethnic, or religious boundaries might be permeated by the knowledge that loss (in varied, specific iterations) is commonly experienced. Accordingly, Ramazani offers a suggestive alternative to the view that Brathwaite's transboundary phase – exemplified in "9/11 Hawk" – collapses the world into an abyss of absence from which recovery is neither possible nor desirable:

Invoking Coleman Hawkins's jazz saxophone, heard in London in the 1960s, as an upwelling of wordless grief, Brathwaite draws no lines between his grief and Beth Petrone's, between black and white mourning, between First and Third World loss, catastrophe, and desolation.<sup>155</sup>

While this claim does risk slipping into a valorization of an indistinct conflation of "First and Third World loss, catastrophe, and desolation," I want to emphasize the potential of the first part of the statement – the part regarding the absence of lines between two mourners and two modes of mourning. As this claim also implies, the boundaries that are being transgressed are the boundaries between one person's grief and another's, *not* the specificity of their losses, nor the boundaries between those catastrophes that they mourn.

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>155</sup> Ramazani, "Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning," 613. This essay in the *Oxford Handbook of Elegy* (2010) is an updated version of a chapter of the same name from Ramazani's *A Transnational Poetics*. Where there are slight differences in the text, I cite the later version.

In *Born to Slow Horses*, a deeply elegiac collection that addresses both personal and broad cultural losses, the poem “Kumina” stands out as an overt type of elegy, linked to Afro-Caribbean mourning rites by Brathwaite’s explanatory preface on the African-derived religion, which explains that “Kumina ceremonies are usually associated with wakes, entombments or memorial services but can be performed for a whole range of human experiences”(BTSH, 70). The poem itself staggers between introspected diary and apostrophe to the dead, though we have no assurance of a singular speaker as it switches back and forth between second and third person, and pronoun and proper name. The biographical beginning explains that the poem is “for DreamChad” and the death of her son, though it later switches to DreamChad’s narrative in a pathos-driven section that features DreamChad’s (Brathwaite’s wife) meditation on her husband’s reaction to his “time of salt”: “ah well...he had his 10 years time of salt already an he went thru hell / and now he marred me the poor man like he have to wear my bell / he nevva ty to rush me. dough...e mean me mean me well”(BTSH, 84). At the end, the poem returns to the first speaker’s voice in its more detached contemplation of “the uttar lamentation of this broken blank” and “this strip & vivid unconstructed verb. constricted”(BTSH, 86). The poem – both an account of the wake and the wake itself – features two speakers attempting to depict each other’s grief, and in this sense testifies to a site of public or comparative mourning in which grief is no longer “shut in” but shared. Brathwaite’s poetics opens onto a politics in a sense, because he demands that we de-privatize grief in favor of establishing “relational ties.”

I borrow this expression from Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, where she argues that contrary to being privatizing, grief “furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and

ethical responsibility.”<sup>156</sup> While Butler’s reference to grief and ethical responsibility echoes the valorization of melancholia she performs earlier, I wonder if we might salvage her notion of “relational ties” in a way that does not assume that those ties form solely out of loss, but can begin to cohere in the inauguration and performance of the very process of working through that loss. I began this chapter by asking how the ubiquity of woundedness in Brathwaite’s recent work might help us rethink both the viability of an anti-historicist ethics of remembrance and the imaginative rendering of traumatic experience. In the sense that he brings together different wounds and different mourners, the transboundary phase of his poetry potentially allows for a collective and communicative process of working through different historical traumas.

In the Caribbean context Butler’s notion of “relational ties” cannot help but invoke Édouard Glissant’s concept of Relation as an innovative means of comparison for the cross cultural and the transhistorical, something which is clearly at work in Brathwaite’s poems. Though he opens his *Poetics of Relation* with the image of the slave ship as a kind of originary trauma, Glissant eschews a simplistic model of cultural inheritance. Taking up the concepts of errantry and exile to formulate a more mutable, less exclusionary theory of cultural identity, Glissant advocates the poetics of relation as a space in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other,”<sup>157</sup> Cultural identity in this worldview is not rooted but rhizomatic, “an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently.”<sup>158</sup>

By exchanging a narrow concept of rootedness for a rhizomatic model of

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<sup>156</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 22-3

<sup>157</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997)

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11

relational distinctions, we can rethink conventional oppositions between mourning and melancholia, and reposition foundational myths. Here we might recall Eng and Kazanjian's claim that in mourning the past is declared "resolved, finished, and dead" but in melancholia "the past is neither fixed nor complete" and allows us to have an "ongoing relationship with the [it]."<sup>159</sup> Historicism, according to Eng and Kazanjian, tries to locate the "root causes" of sadness and only results in hopelessly fixing the past. But we might address the possibility of exchanging ideas of rootedness for notions of the rhizomatic. Indeed, the ambivalence of "root causes" in both Brathwaite and Walcott forces us to question whether the Middle Passage functions as a root or a rhizome. As I suggested earlier, Brathwaite's *Born to Slow Horses* depicts a more fluid network of cultural influences and renders productive and endless dialectic of remembering and forgetting; in testifying to the "forgetting/the-beginning-the-forgetting-and-the-always-always-remembering" (*BTSH*, 135) it instead relies on the mutability of a poetics of *relation*, implicitly questioning earlier theories of cross-cultural interaction, especially those concerned with potential for homogenization of the world.

While Glissant's concept of Relation helps problematize the originary thinking associated with a melancholic agency, I want to focus instead on another potential aspect of Brathwaite's "relational ties," that is, the way that the performative element of his elegies also enable a shared process of mourning loss. Brathwaite's fragmented, typographically diverse "video style" of writing visually accounts for the sonic variations of his phrasing, lending to the written text a lively sense of dialogic performance. Furthermore, as one reviewer of the collection points out, "[m]any sections of the book require reading aloud. In some cases, vocalization of the

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<sup>159</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, p. 2

vernacular is necessary for comprehension.”<sup>160</sup> For example, the multiple typefaces and voices in “Kumina,” a poem which iterates the very act of lamentation it portrays, extend to involve the reader who must, because of the way the words are often spelled phonetically, actually vocalize those words while reading them. In a way, the reader who reiterates the work of mourning participates momentarily in the process of grieving and the articulation of lament. Since it takes place in a context where the reader is always conscious that he or she is vocalizing another’s words and wounds, however, this temporary participation in an act of mourning does not lead to an unguarded identification in which self is conflated with other and witness confused with victim.<sup>161</sup> As a result, this type of performance and engagement might provide a way of relating to loss that preserves the specificity of individual experience while still providing a communal stage for vocalizing it.

The discussion of performance would be incomplete without a reference to the way Brathwaite’s “9/11 Hawk,” an exemplary model of his transboundary phase, is organized around a jazz performance. In all of Brathwaite’s work, in fact, it is important to consider how the resurgence of the wounds of history is often intertwined with the repeated phrasing of a jazz performance as we saw in the poem, “Word Making Man” from *Middle Passages*. Crucially, the performance in “9/11 Hawk,” rather than enacting the loss or acting it out in isolation, is central to the process of communicating traumatic experience and thus working through it in unexpected ways. In his essay on “Brathwaite and Jazz,” Louis James outlines several important elements of jazz that are relevant to the way the poem gestures toward the shared performance of mourning rites I am discussing here. Jazz is “dependant on performance” and “continually creative;” as James explains, “it is not the score that

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<sup>160</sup> Darlene Shatford, “Ways of Seeing (Review of Kamau Brathwaite’s *Born to Slow Horses*)”, *Canadian Literature* 195 (Winter 2007): 162

<sup>161</sup> See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 78.

creates the jazz experience, but the actual moment of playing,”<sup>162</sup> evoking a kind of immediate present-oriented sensibility. Also suggestive is the way that jazz “improvisation operates both individually and within the ensemble”<sup>163</sup> and therefore works as a metaphor for the specific, separate kinds of creative work done by different performers in the group. Finally, referring in particular to Brathwaite’s performances of his own work in which he “characteristically goes beyond the conventional ‘oral’ verse in evoking a ritual enactment,” James highlights how “jazz grows out of the ‘jam session’, where the musicians interact with the audience, building up to a climax of shared emotion.”<sup>164</sup> This shared emotion registers the shared language of a mutable community engaged in a continuous, improvised process of representing the wounds of history, a process that has been central to my argument about rethinking a model of valorizing a melancholic attachment to the past in which mourning is deemed as cutting oneself off from history.

In *The Hybrid Muse*, Ramazani addresses certain critics of Walcott who suggest that the omnipresent wound is too open, and therefore too universally applicable. In response to this Ramazani suggests the following: “To write about pain and mortality as transcultural experiences may seem to risk an easy humanism or discredited universalism. Walcott keeps this tendency in check by reserving for the wound an interpretive opacity.”<sup>165</sup> If we take into account the dominant tendency to read Brathwaite as Barbadian poet, a Caliban figure, politically engaged Caribbeanist, perhaps the interpretive opacity we encounter in his work – in both its seemingly incommensurable subject matter and highly original form – might tune us into new

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<sup>162</sup> Louis James, “Brathwaite and Jazz” in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1995), 63.

<sup>163</sup> James, 63.

<sup>164</sup> James, 67.

<sup>165</sup> Ramazani, *Hybrid Muse*, 66.

modes of reading. While Brathwaite's turn to the transhistorical risks conflating absence and loss, it also permits the poet to resist the essentializing identity politics that motivates a model of "competitive memory." While I do not wish to fall into the same melancholic valorization with which I take issue in this dissertation, I want to suggest that Brathwaite's recent treatment of transhistorical trauma engenders a new potentiality for the study of postcolonial poetry. Resisting the kind of dubious identity politics which, in LaCapra's words, "[repeats] and further [legitimizes] or [acts] out the subject positions with which one begins without subjecting them to critical testing that may either change or in certain ways validate them,"<sup>166</sup> Brathwaite's cross section of different wounds aren't readily reducible to a symptom of Caribbeanness or postcolonial oppression.

Inasmuch as Brathwaite's poems register the paradoxes and inherent problems in any consideration of melancholia and loss, they reveal the flaws in any theoretical model which advocates a simple solution like rendering the pathological productive. While the current popular reasons for valorizing a melancholic attachment to the past – community, creativity, ethics – are somewhat appealing, they are undermined by the kinds of pitfalls LaCapra has outlined, in particular the conflation of absence and loss. Brathwaite, however, recognizes and reconfigures what's at stake in this perceived distinction, providing us with a more fluid non-boundary between the "m/we", the distinction between the individual and the collective, the specific and the transhistorical.

As Ramazani and others have shown, the suppurating wounds of postcolonial poetry are integrally linked to the "open wound" of modern elegy itself; or, rather to the way in which modern elegy openly foregrounds its woundedness. If Brathwaite enacts a distinctly melancholic poetics, he does not do so in order to react against the

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<sup>166</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 41.

conventional notion of compensatory mourning but to enable a different kind of elegy – one which concerns not just the individual mourner but the world collective. The most important socio-political import of these poems, therefore, is that they force us to rethink the analytical distinction between individual and collective, psychic and social. To a certain extent, they might also allow us to rethink the elegizing of the global and the globalization of the elegy.

## CHAPTER 4

### **MOURNING AS IMPROVISATION IN ZAKES MDA'S *WAYS OF DYING***

In the preceding chapters I have focused on two writers whose work deals with a long history of trauma in the Caribbean. The memories that their poetry invokes – the decimation of the indigenous populations, the trauma of the Middle Passage, and the experience of plantation slavery – are arguably part of a collective historical memory in the Caribbean, but present only inasmuch as their aftershocks are palpable in today's economic, socio-political, and creative practice. Because they are events which have no living survivors, the discussion of how to properly “mourn” them is restricted to a discussion of how to negotiate their legacy in contemporary culture. While both Walcott and Brathwaite testify to a centuries-long, intergenerational cultural memory that ebbs and flows from the past into the present, they are what we might call secondary witnesses to most of the violence of the region's history, particularly the ostensibly foundational trauma of the Middle Passage which figures so prominently in their work. In the next two chapters, I turn to a historical context that has formed an important legacy in a region's collective memory, but which differs from the Caribbean context because it marks a series of events to which living survivors are continuing to testify today. Obviously, South Africa's long history of colonialism created the conditions under which apartheid came into being; the history of early colonial racism and dispossession is the very root of the legally enforced racial segregation of 1948 to 1994. But by looking at apartheid as South Africa's foundational cultural trauma of recent history (as opposed to, say, the earlier colonial history which eventually created the conditions under which apartheid was instated), we can address pertinent questions about the role of collective mourning with regard to contemporary events that are still being worked through in living memory.

The South African context provides such a rich ground for exploring these questions because of the way that the perceived ethical potential of resistant mourning is opposed to a nationally pragmatic need to assuage the wounds of the past. Part of my interest in South Africa is the way in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) initiated a state-managed mourning process which contemporary literature has attempted to address alongside its own unrelenting attention to the traumatic past. But the commission is especially relevant because its model of social healing is based on the same stereotypical model of closure opposed by the scholarship I have been discussing. In one of the most overt examples, Desmond Tutu invokes a powerful trope of the return of the repressed in his Chairperson's Forward to the report, describing how "the past refuses to lie down quietly. It has an uncanny habit of returning to haunt one."<sup>167</sup> Because of the threat that the unresolved past poses to the present and future, Tutu puts forth a model of healing based on administered relief – an opening and cleansing of the wound so it might then close:

However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future.<sup>168</sup>

The act of returning to and reopening the wound here is based on something like the remembering-to-forget model rigorously disputed by those who advocate an ethics of melancholia – an approach to the past that would keep the wound open, ostensibly countering the possibility of "political and ethical misappropriations of loss."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Volume 1 (London: Macmillan, 1998), 1: 7

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Eng and Kazanjian, 1.

Central to the valorization of melancholia in recent theory is a concern with the potential codification of traumatic memory. Critics like Eng and Kazanjian claim that an endlessly melancholic response to loss contravenes a fixed historicist understanding of the past, leading to a continuously revisable understanding of past events and their relationship to present ones. As I have discussed in previous chapters, scholars who valorize a melancholic attachment to the past repudiate a stereotypical idea of mourning-as-closure as a totalizing overcoming of history, suggesting instead that the “sustained” melancholic attention to loss engenders continually new understandings in the world of the present. These continually (re)produced understandings make it difficult for the state, the archive, or any other regulative body to resolutely pin down the nature of that loss. In this particular sense, the urgency of rendering loss ungraspable has to do with assumption that mourning codifies and fixes the past, creating unchangeable collective narratives that are either inauthentic, or belies the acts of resistant mourners for whom those events register different meanings.

In the case of the South African TRC, this resistance to closure is further motivated by an intense suspicion of “political motivations to forget the past.”<sup>170</sup> Accordingly, contemporary literature and criticism recognizes a tension between the need to definitively mark the arrival of a new social and political regime – one which needed to emphasize that the atrocities of the past regime were definitively over – and the need to memorialize that traumatic past in a way that prevents its easy assimilation into a triumphant national narrative. This desire to resist assimilation is based on a more sinister understanding of the healing process as less concerned with the psychological welfare of individual victims than it is with the economic future of the country. So, as Shane Graham suggests, by “appropriating the stories of trauma and

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<sup>170</sup> Shane Graham, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 10.

loss in the service of a nation-building agenda aimed at reassuring international investors, the TRC threatens to consign those memories to the ‘archive’ of a safely contained history.”<sup>171</sup>

While it is predominantly focused on national appropriations of apartheid memory (as opposed to a general sense of mourning as a foreclosure of the past), Graham’s analysis of the potential “petrification of memory”<sup>172</sup> in certain memorial efforts neatly coincides with the critique of mourning I have so far outlined. Eng and Kazanjian’s sense that mourning fixes the past is echoed in Graham’s analysis of monuments and museum spaces in South Africa which risk rendering the memory in such a way as to make it forgettable. For Graham, the advertising campaign for the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg exemplifies this petrification with its suggestion that “Apartheid is where it belongs - in a museum.” He argues that

while condemning apartheid, the slogan also implies that it is safely tucked away in the confines of a museum and can thus be largely forgotten in day-to-day life. In this sense, the museum and the archive - and, perhaps, the Truth Commission - are sites of relegation and consignment: official remembrances that enable a general forgetting”<sup>173</sup>

In this formulation, the paradox of this forgetfulness is that it takes place through the very process of remembering; “ostensibly a mechanism for registering and preserving a record of the past, the Commission might instead serve as a mechanism for

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 12. Rather than focus on a general understanding of “coming to terms with the past” as petrifying memory, Graham focuses specifically on the TRC as a nationally run mourning process which might produce certain codified national myths out of its stories. Because of this, he doesn’t valorize a complete resistance to mourning, but suggests instead that we “may avoid this pitfall... by giving equal focus to stories of everyday lives under and against apartheid”(12).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 10.

obscuring and forgetting it.”<sup>174</sup> Against this model of a memory that declares these events safely condemned and confined to the past, Graham advocates a rejection of monumentalism in favor of a palimpsestic arrangement of contemporary memorial sites and objects, where the past is visible just below the writing of the present. Post-apartheid literature performs exactly this type of memory work, according to Graham, “[exploring] the psychological challenges of trying to memorialize and preserve the traumatic past without freezing it into ossified formulae that may be easily forgotten precisely because they become so familiar.”<sup>175</sup> While in this instance, the preservation of the past renders it into something “familiar,” either desensitizing its audience, or rendering the event unexceptional, Ingrid de Kok has identified two other important senses in which this potential for amnesia might be manifest: one involves a repression of the apartheid past in the agreement to “forgive and forget;” the other involves a model of remembering for the sake of catharsis, after which “some version of ‘reliving’...will purge the perpetrators and restore the dignity of the victims.”<sup>176</sup> While this kind of critique is no doubt important for countering the possibility that individual stories will be translated into nationalist myths, or repudiating the very idea

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 4. While this appeal to palimpsest as a model for productive remembering echoes Eng and Kazanjian’s appeal to melancholia as the affect which renders the past continuously visible, Graham’s palimpsest model might allow for the more provisional understanding of working-through. The monument/palimpsest argument evokes the same binary opposition between mourning as ossifying and melancholia as active; however, the sense in which palimpsest implies stages of writing, where the new overwrites the old, it might also accommodate a sense of working through the past in a way that never forgets it. Once worked through, the past no longer haunts in a way that would allow the victim to mistake it for the present; but the memory itself has not been completely obscured. Alternatively, the palimpsest model might also embody a mode of repression in which one writes over the past in order to move beyond it, but like the trace of traumatic memory, it is unmistakably present.

<sup>176</sup> Ingrid de Kok, “Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition,” in *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59.

that one story might somehow account for the heterogeneity of different experiences and communities, the problem with obsessing over the potential for fixity and stereotypical closure is that the alternative becomes an equally problematic radical open-endedness. In other words, when the concern over the ossification of memory becomes paralyzing, it arguably leads to an unguarded valorization of melancholia in the name of a somehow *unossifying* remembrance.

Zakes Mda has approached this problem in his fictional and critical writing from a slightly different position, articulating the way in which the nation-building agenda of closure has similar manifestations in the publishing world. The continued need to testify to the events that took place during apartheid is thwarted by an anxiety about the potential “trauma fatigue” produced by excessive public attention. Commenting on the recent lack of newly published fiction “that narrates reconciliation in general and that draws its inspiration from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in particular,”<sup>177</sup> Mda suggests that “[p]ublishers wrongly believe that stories about apartheid don't sell; people don't want to read about the past. This is part of the collective amnesia that is demanded of South Africans in all areas of South African life.”<sup>178</sup> His appropriation of the term “collective amnesia” highlights the ways in which the nationally prescribed work of collective mourning can paradoxically fail to work through loss precisely by subscribing to a model of

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<sup>177</sup> Mda, “The Fiction of Reconciliation: Creating Dialogue through Verbal and Performance Arts in South Africa,” *Journal of Human Rights* 8 (2009),” 121. In this lecture, Mda comments on the TRC as a space of “spectacle” in itself that evokes “the narrative shape of a carnival or a ritualized spectacle that traveled from city to city”(126). Mda stresses the importance of the TRC’s “performative moments”(125), in which the spectators themselves partake, as a link to “black South African expressive culture where there is a strong interrelationship of performance and reality”(126). This is significant because it frames the TRC in terms of black South African culture instead of simply in terms of a Freudian-based, collective “talking cure.”

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

complete closure; people do not want to read about the past because it has been declared over and done with. Repudiating the closure-based model of remembering-to-forget, Mda argues elsewhere that South Africans living in the post-apartheid aftermath “must never forget,” but, crucially, must also resist the urge to slip into melancholic acting out. For Mda, the decision to never forget “does not mean that we must cling to the past, and wrap it around us, and live for it, and be perpetual victims wallowing in masochistic memory of our national humiliation. We only look back to the past in order to have a better understanding of our present.”<sup>179</sup>

It is with this theoretical discussion in mind that I focus on Mda’s novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995), situating it against the proliferation of theoretical arguments that suggest that a continual, melancholic preoccupation with the past might lead to a continually revisable understanding of history in a way that resists hegemony in various guises. Fundamentally, Mda’s novel problematizes this idea of superficial closure while at the same time showing the darker undercurrents of valorizing a refusal or inability to mourn. Though it was published in the same year in which the TRC was set up, and thus before the main public broadcasting of the hearings, the novel raises pertinent questions about the ways in which catastrophic loss might be mourned by portraying a world where all known modes of mourning have been exhausted and the unresolved losses of the past beget more losses. Where the prevalence of death renders the living world absurd, Mda’s characters exist in prolonged states of numbness.

By focusing on the ways in which the shattered, traumatized community of Mda’s novel is plagued by the loss that would ostensibly unite it, this chapter addresses the question of mourning rites with regard to collective remembrance. One

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<sup>179</sup> Mda, ‘Introduction’ to John Kani, *Nothing But the Truth* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007), ix.

question that remains to be addressed is the role of funerary rites in contemporary mourning practice, something that is a culturally specific matter but has nonetheless been figured in universal terms. Ramazani's claim that modern mourning is characterized by the "abbreviation, objectification, and bureaucratic regulation of mortuary rites,"<sup>180</sup> grounded in the large-scale violence of twentieth century war, genocide, and other instances of mass death, represents a common attitude about the perceived inadequacy of modern mourning rituals. Coupled with the exhaustion of rites is the sense that death itself has been stripped of meaning; as Peter Sacks explains, "sociologists and psychologists, as well as literary and cultural historians, consistently demonstrate the ways in which death has tended to become obscene, meaningless, impersonal."<sup>181</sup> The threat of ossification, forgetting, and complete closure has prompted the anti-elegiac turn that critics like Ramazani have located in the modernist writing of Eliot, Stevens, and Langston Hughes, among others, a trend which forms a part of the broad tendency to valorize melancholia across trauma studies and cultural studies.

The fundamental problem with these accounts is the way that they unwittingly assume the existence of some lost plenitude of mourning, a time where mourning succeeded in a way that is now nonviable due to some definitive break that occurs as a result of the particular atrociousness or irreconcilability of modern death. The claim that only in recent history have mourners been faced with a certain deficiency of all established rites and conventional responses to death presupposes some break that occurs in the early twentieth century and, most importantly, opposes modern "impossible" mourning with a pre-modern instance in which now inadequate modes of mourning worked. In this way, the turn to the anti-elegiac as an attack on the now

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<sup>180</sup> Ramazani, "Afterword," 291.

<sup>181</sup> Sacks, 299.

exhausted, unworkable modes of mourning conceals an implied desire for this impossible time of mourning's perceived success. Furthermore, the accompanying tendency to derive a strict opposition between mourning-as-closure and melancholia-as-openness problematically assumes that mourning ever accomplishes something like the impossible "closure" for which current practices are implicitly nostalgic.

Rather than fruitlessly yearning for the possibility of recuperating rites that once worked – rites which never actually "worked" in the stereotypical idealization that anti-elegy bestows upon mourning – new responses to loss must instead attempt to articulate innovative modes of mourning that challenge this problematic opposition. Mda's novel is relevant to this task because it proposes an alternative model of responding to traumatic experience – improvisation. These improvised rites suggestively highlight the possibility of creating new modes of grief work rather than attempting to recuperate ones that are ostensibly lost. Most importantly, perhaps, they gesture toward a theory of mourning as a process related to collective models in the sense that something is communicated to another, but not through a privileging of the wound's autonomy to "speak" to witnesses who refuse to foreclose its otherness through mourning. Bringing critical attention back to rites is important for a critique of the turn to melancholia because it emphasizes something very specific that even the stereotypical concept of mourning can offer that melancholia can not. The refusal to mourn, after all, leaves no provision for mourning rites. While one might perversely understand melancholic acting out as a kind of ritual, or never-ending rite for the dead, its involuntary nature makes it incompatible with notions of rites that are consciously enacted as response to loss. It is through an analysis of the improvised performance of rites in Mda's novel that I want to emphasize again the importance of articulating loss in a controlled space so that it might be communicated to others in a way that is not entirely about acting out and, instead, allow for a more provisional process of working

through.

At the same time, I am interested in the way in which Mda has chosen to articulate these improvised mourning rites, which emerge not in a theatrical performance or a dialogue, but in the controlled space of a (magical) realist novel. With all of its magical elements, *Ways of Dying* follows a conventional plot in which two dispossessed characters living in isolation meet after some time and, together, proceed through an ostensible resolution of their past problems. However, as I will argue, the novel ultimately fails to fully offer this resolution, calling into question the possibilities for complete closure, both in terms of grief and the novel's own formal strategies. One central question I will attempt to answer is how the problem of articulating trauma is raised by Mda's choice of novelistic form. How does a novel that is, in a sense, about the performance of grief-work, articulate the pain of the experiences it describes? The centrality of funerary ritual to the 1995 novel has already been linked to Mda's earlier work in theater.<sup>182</sup> Reading Mda's first novel as related to his theatre for development allows us to trace an important "shift from a dominant, binary discourse determined by apartheid to a much more problematical

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<sup>182</sup> See David Bell and J. U. Jacobs, "Zakes Mda: Ways of Writing" in *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda*, ed. David Bell and J.U. Jacobs (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 4. Bell and Jacobs have noted that much of Mda's prose fiction dramatizes moments of performance and therefore draws on his experience as a playwright. Also see David Bell, "A Theatre for Democracy," in the same collection. Bell classifies Mda's work according to three major phases: "from a theatre of protest via a theatre of resistance to a theatre of reconciliation"(21). According to Bell, the theatre of protest (the dramatic mode that characterized much of the 1960s) was "based on western models" and "designed to appeal to the consciences of the oppressor"(22). The theatre of resistance, which coincided with Black Consciousness in the 1970s, was geared toward mobilizing black South Africans to protest apartheid rule. Finally, the theatre for reconciliation is "once again, it is a theatre of Western modes with priorities chosen by the elite"(22). Mda has also described a post-apartheid phase as the "theatre for development," a "theatre of the many"(22) similarly aimed at reconciliation, but using "indigenous modes of performance"(23).

discourse that concerns itself with the uncertain interactions of history and memory, and with present and future aspirations.”<sup>183</sup> Accordingly, it also prompts the question, how do modes of articulation standard in theater emerge in new ways in his prose fiction?

Set in an unspecified time and place (with obvious parallels to South Africa during the final stages of Apartheid), *Ways of Dying* follows Toloki, a self-appointed Professional Mourner, as he navigates his way throughout the impoverished settlement communities of an unnamed city. Narrated in part by an individual and in part by a collective narrator, the novel constantly sways back and forth between flashbacks to the protagonist’s youth and a brief, violence-laden present-day period between Christmas and New Year in which Noria, a childhood acquaintance from Toloki’s village, is coming to terms with the recent death of her five-year-old son, whose funeral opens the novel. When Toloki and Noria finally meet again, they take turns exchanging stories about the horrific events in their lives which led up to the present day, which include accounts of unimaginable violence and personal loss, the climax of which describes Noria’s son’s murder at the hands of other young children who are imitating a “necklacing” – a common act of retribution against political informants in which the victim is restrained with a gasoline-filled tire and burned alive. As the narrative progresses, Noria begins to bring the outcast Toloki into the community while Toloki introduces her to his mourning practices and, as Noria believes, ultimately teaches her “how to live” in a narrative world where life and death are conflated, where, as Noria explains to Toloki, “Our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or... our ways of living are our ways of dying.”<sup>184</sup> Where the unending presence of death infiltrates and contaminates the world of the living, the novel’s

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<sup>183</sup> David Bell, “A Theatre for Democracy,” in *Ways of Writing*, 15-6.

<sup>184</sup> Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (New York: Picador, 1995), 98. Hereafter referred to in text.

characters are caught in a grief-stricken state where funerals seem to produce more funerals, and the conventional modes of mourning have been disassembled within the same community that would otherwise enact them. Potentially a model of Butler's quasi-utopian community united by a foundational traumatic history, the novel's characters are so haunted, dejected, and overcome by loss that all actions seem only to perpetuate cycles of violence. Toloki's task, then, is to attempt to articulate rites of mourning in a world where all modes of coping with loss have been cut off.

Toloki is a liminal figure situated on the cusp of comedy and horror, ridiculousness and profundity, life and death. Described as "something that has come to fetch us to the next world"(72), he embodies a quasi-ghostly existence: as a homeless man he fails to exist for the "beautiful" inhabitants of the city, some of whom were once Toloki's "homeboys and homegirls" from the village but have now become part of a national bourgeoisie, as Toloki's friend Nefolovhodwe has by manufacturing coffins for the novel's countless victims of violence. Though he first envisions his profession merely as a mode of material gain – a way to "profit from death like his homeboy Nefolovhodwe" – Toloki comes to view mourning the dead as "a spiritual vocation"(134). Desperate to formulate rituals which would legitimate him and cultivate his "aura of austerity"(15), he models himself on a vague understanding of "Eastern religions" he hears about from sailors. He invents rituals to cement his self-perception as a meditative figure – for instance, he concocts a bitter mixture of old cake and green onions, explaining to Noria, "I had to invent a diet of my own that would mark me as an austere and ascetic votary of my own order of Professional Mourners"(114). His improvisational mourning consists of creating new wailing sounds which he thinks are apt for certain ways of dying: "At the cemetery Toloki sits on one of the five mounds, and groans, and wails and produces other new sounds that he has recently invented especially for mass funerals with political

overtones”(109).

In this way, Toloki cultivates a reverence for death which he sees as lacking from current funerary rites. The settlement community of the novel, which would ostensibly function as the main collective body offering consolation to its grieving individuals, is depicted from the beginning as divided from within, particularly regarding the treatment of the dead. The opening funeral especially testifies to a sense of discontinuity between the community of mourners who are portrayed as a “feuding crowd”(9) that turns the funerary ceremony into chaos. As the Nurse – the funeral orator – attempts to state the true story of the child’s death, the community suppresses it. One gets the sense that there are certain customs to be followed, but those customs are quickly dismantled by the crowd, which hopes to cover up “the sorry fact that [Noria’s] son was killed by his own people”(9). The eulogy is rendered inaudible because some of the crowd is “heckling the Nurse” – an act which Toloki thinks “is a sacrilege that has never been heard of before”(8) – while others, opposed to the suppression of the story, are “hecking the hecklers”(8). The sacrilege here occurs against a well-known history of politicized funerals which took place during the final years of apartheid when other forms of public meetings were forbidden by the government. Margaret Mervis, writing on Mda’s novel, relates how “[they] took the form of spectacles with rousing speeches by political leaders alternating with hymns and freedom songs and were attended by thousands of people, some of whom were bussed in from outside the community.”<sup>185</sup> But as portrayed here, the sense of organized ritual has been traded for in-fighting and repression:

The Nurse cannot go on to tell us the story of the death  
of the deceased, this our little brother. The din is too

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<sup>185</sup> Margaret Mervis, “Fiction for Development: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*,” *Current Writing* 10.1 (1998): 44.

loud. The church minister says a quick prayer. Spades and shovels eat into the mound of earth next to the grave, and soon the hole that will be the resting place of this our little brother forever more amen is filled up. (9)

This rushed burial is followed by a procession back to the settlement where, aside from brief mention of the ritual of hand-washing and feasting on food the community prepared, the rites are similarly attenuated and the bereaved Noria is further isolated, even as she is “surrounded by women who try to comfort her”(8). The other members of the community refuse to let Toloki talk to Noria in an ostensibly protective gesture that seems to insinuate the presence of a community-based support system whose members “are determined to protect her from all those who want to harass her with questions about the death of her son”(9). But the image of the protective community, “vigilant” in its care for the grieving mother gives way in the end to a dysfunctional image of a community attempting to stifle the truth about her son’s death for fear that it “would give ammunition to the enemy”(178). Finally, the funeral is further debased by a clash between the residents of the settlement (or squatter camp, as Toloki first calls it before Noria corrects him) and the middle class citizens of the nearby city. When the funeral procession collides with a wedding party, the latter refuses to give way. Far from being a social equalizer, death here is unrecognizable to the other party, whose unsympathetic participants “[enjoy] the stalemate” while “they sing at the top of their voices”(10).

In his imperfect mimicry of “eastern rituals,” and improvisation of “pure sound” which never affects him, Toloki aims to create a space of total transcendence amid immanent political atrocity. That the novel never identifies its exact location or time-frame pivots it into a generalized conflict zone where instances of apocalyptic violence are unremarkable,<sup>186</sup> and where stories of excessive violence defer the actual

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<sup>186</sup> Readers of the novel have pointed out the obvious parallels between the events

narrativization of the child's death – the story the Nurse was prohibited from vocalizing – to the novel's concluding pages. Throughout the novel, there is the sense that the members of the settlement community have been pushed into total abjection:

All these people are casualties of the war that is raging in the land... They silently curse the war-lords, the police and the army, or even the various political organizations, depending on whom they view as responsible for their fate. The smell of infection and methylated spirits chokes them, and leaves much of their anger unarticulated. (140)

The sense of unarticulated anger that “chokes” them never translates into the political potentiality that recent criticism has attributed to unresolved grief. In response to these atrocities, Toloki's response to loss represents a turn to pure expression that might in turn invoke an expression of grief in others. For Toloki, who is put off by the mixture of politics and mourning, “the work of the Professional Mourner was to mourn, and not to intervene in any of the proceedings of the funeral. It would lower the dignity of the profession to be involved in human quarrels”(24). Toloki's eschewal of politics, his complaint that “this politicking was interfering with [his] inspired mourning”(23) is for Grant Farred a symptom of the novel's surrender, in which “the self-styled artist can be blithely oblivious to or retreat from politics even when he is in its midst.”<sup>187</sup> Farred claims the novel, which really makes no

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depicted in the novel and those during the early 1990s in South Africa. In particular, the novel's quasi-mythic “tribal chief” is a well-known allegorical rendering of real-life leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, Mangosuthu Buthelezi. David Bell explains that the novel is specifically “based on reports of violence Mda found in South African newspapers available at Yale University – the *City Press* and *The Sunday Times* – in the first few months of 1993 and supplemented by other first-hand accounts.” See David Bell, “The Teller of Tales: Zakes Mda and the Storifying of Post-Apartheid South Africa”, *lwu: Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 39.2/3 (2006): 161.

<sup>187</sup> Grant Farred, “Mourning the Postapartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (Spring 2000): 195.

differentiation between the crimes of Apartheid and the internecine violence in victim communities, implies that “the postapartheid moment...signals the end of a need for a radical politics.”<sup>188</sup> I would argue in response to this claim that the novel doesn’t enact a simple repudiation of politics (radical, or otherwise) in favor of totally aestheticized approach, but a resistance to a politically-motivated or politically appropriated mourning – mourning which prescribes, or has a political agenda.<sup>189</sup>

Ultimately, I suggest that the novel neither simply embodies Farred’s political dismissal, nor what Barnard describes as a “post-anti-Apartheid” “turn to gaiety and laughter,”<sup>190</sup> both of which understand the ending as a projection about the “new” South Africa (the latter more optimistically). In the novel’s final pages, Noria and Toloki enter into a “creative partnership”(201) after an old acquaintance from the city who is being haunted by the ghost of Toloki’s emotionally abusive father, gives to Toloki countless boxes of his father’s hand-made iron figurines – figures which haunt Toloki in his dreams – but not before showing them to an art dealer who declares them

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid. Farred’s claim is historically relevant given the thematic shifts Mda himself locates in his earlier and later plays. Also worth mentioning is Bell’s and Jacob’s suggestion that Mda’s turn to prose fiction was enabled precisely by the end of apartheid, after which he was “[no] longer under pressure to produce theatre to mobilise against an oppressive regime” and “found the time to work on long pieces of prose and moved from being a political playwright to a critical novelist”(Bell and Jacobs, 4). However, while Bell and Jacobs clearly reiterate the idea that the need for radical politics in art was less pressing after the end of apartheid, I do not agree that Mda’s novel rejects political engagement. Even if one agrees that Toloki’s ostensible turn to empty aesthetics takes place, one must remember that the narrative is not always sympathetic to Toloki’s endeavors and often undermines his seriousness.

<sup>189</sup> Sam Durrant, “The Invention of Mourning in Post-Apartheid Literature,” *Third World Quarterly* 2.3 (2005): 441-450. Durrant has similarly criticized Farred along these lines for failing to note that “it is precisely the politicisation of funerals during apartheid that creates the need for a non-instrumental mode of post-apartheid mourning”(443). He also suggests that Toloki’s “improvisations are designed to recover a space for grieving that has too often been usurped by political exigencies, violent protests and yet more death.”

<sup>190</sup> Rita Barnard, “On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*,” *Novel* 37.3 (Summer 2004): 280.

valuable commodities because they “[look] quite kitschy,” and “kitsch [is] the “in” thing for collectors with taste this season”(209). Neither critic takes into account the ironic undercurrent of the novel’s ending, which most readers of the text seem to take at face value as the optimistic look to the future, if not the initiation of restored humanity.<sup>191</sup> For instance, Margarent Mervis suggests that “[the] figurines are a metaphor for the reconciliation between father and son, and for the inclusion of what is usable from the past in the creative reconstruction of the present and the rebuilding of the future.”<sup>192</sup> Sten Moslund similarly reads the ending as having “promise of restored placidity, symbolised in the township children’s laughter, by cultivating a

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<sup>191</sup> In their analysis of funeral rites and community memory in *Ways of Dying*, Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murphy adopt this optimistic position, suggesting that the funerals become “ritual enactments of the memory and loss of relatives, a source of continuity and a form of relation for the larger black urban community”(91). While their interest in the way that the process of mourning might become the very basis for relational ties between the community overlaps with mine, I think their reading simplifies the complicated nature of the novel’s settlement community, which never *fully* integrates or accepts Toloki. More importantly, their reading seems to misinterpret the effects of Toloki’s improvised rites which, the narrative tells us, are really more about Toloki than the deceased (Toloki explains again and again that he feels a physical need to mourn which transcends his interest or engagements in any particular funeral). In line with this, the following claim seems completely to miss this ambivalence: “In Toloki’s publicly claiming and affirming the substance of an individual’s life, the reader is given access to a form of composite discourse. It is confessional in expressing the feelings of those who are attending the event, be they shared or individually felt, about the deceased, but is also faithful to the memory of the individual who is being memorialised”(106). Because Toloki is often more or less unfamiliar with the deceased, one can only assume that Courau and Murphy refer here to the ways in which his hollowed-out, nonspecific wailing might form a space for the “composite discourse” of the funeral’s other mourners who are otherwise at a loss for a reaction. But the sense that Toloki might, in a direct way, be faithful to the memory of the individual misunderstands or erases his general dissociation from the community. See Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murphy, “Of Funeral Rites and Community Memory: Ways of Living in *Ways of Dying*” in *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda*, ed. David Bell and J.U. Jacobs (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009): 91-114.

<sup>192</sup> Mervis, 45.

creative link between the traditions of the past and the present.”<sup>193</sup> These and other interpretations affirm what Barnard calls “the generative power of African popular creativity”<sup>194</sup> or the “healing power of art.”<sup>195</sup> Some discuss how the main characters “manage to humanise the most inhuman conditions”<sup>196</sup> and privilege Toloki’s entrance into political consciousness. Others read the return of the figurines as a return to traditional, or a repudiation of the city in favor of rural life and customs, or generally understand the ending as participating in “a vision which reconciles enmity and heals psychic wounds, thus liberating the protagonists from the past and opening up a new future.”<sup>197</sup>

However, taking into account the novel’s moments of biting self-reflexivity where it identifies even instances of laughter as manifestations of grief (such as the narrative comment about the New Years’ revelers, that “their jubilation belies the sadness of their message”(170)), one might be more inclined to read it as the ultimate self-consciously manufactured – even gimmicky – finale. Take for instance the fact that as a child, Toloki is unable to draw pictures of human figures, but in the final pages of the book, after Noria has, in a sense, “restored humanity,” he is suddenly “possessed by this new ability to create human figures”(199). Or the final lines:

We look at the mountain of boxes that dwarfs the shack.  
We do not touch. We just look and marvel. Our children

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<sup>193</sup> Sten Pultz Moslund, *Making Use of History in New South African Fiction: Historical Perspectives in Three Post-Apartheid Novels* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), 102.

<sup>194</sup> Barnard, “On Laughter,” 298. Mervis also reads the end of the novel in terms of a valorization of creativity, suggesting that “the implication of Mda’s optimistic ending is that creativity, be it visual or performance art or, for that matter, literary art, has the power to dissipate fear and hatred and to return society to a state of health and normality”(Mervis, 55).

<sup>195</sup> Bell, “The Teller of Tales,” 163.

<sup>196</sup> Moslund, 97.

<sup>197</sup> Irene Visser, “How to Live in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Reading Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*,” *Wasafiri* 37 (2002): 42.

have told us about the monsters that make people happy. Maybe it is the drink, but it seems that we can see them through the boxes, shimmering like fool's gold... Tyres are still burning. Tyres can burn for a very long time. The smell of burning rubber fills the air. But this time it is not mingled with the sickly stench of roasting human flesh. Just pure wholesome rubber. (212)

Barnard reads this ending as a redemption in which “[the] violence of the past...has been eliminated” as the “meaning of the novel’s recurrent image of fire is thus redeemed”<sup>198</sup> in an image of renewal and reanimation. But part of the ambivalence of this final paragraph comes not just from the fact that the novel wraps up so quickly and with the sense that nothing has really been worked through, but from the fact that the figurines which will ostensibly bring some kind of financial salvation to the settlement shimmer “like fool’s gold” to drunken onlookers. How can we interpret Mda’s retreat into this totally unsatisfying “happy ending” which takes place in a New Year’s Carnival, which the narrator explains is the day “when we are all carefree and forget about the problems that live with us the whole year round”(195), mere days/pages after the unimaginably violent death of Noria’s son, who is murdered by a group of adolescents for “selling-out” to rival hostel dwellers for candy? Finally, the moment which many of the above readers interpret as the apotheosis of a community effort to rebuild is punctuated by the troubling reminder of Noria’s loss and the perpetuated “silence that everyone is demanding from her”(178) regarding Vutha’s death.

The superficial lightheartedness with which the novel concludes is, in some sense, based on the continued pain and repression of the truth about the death that frames the narrative on both ends, a point which deeply problematizes any critical attempt to recuperate a sense of complete wholeness or perfectly cohesive community.

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<sup>198</sup> Barnard, “On Laughter,” 289.

In a similar attempt to derive some kind of consolation from the novel's ending, Mervis alludes to a moment when children are singing offensive songs about Toloki; when Noria attempt to stop them, Toloki tells her, "Never stifle the creativity of children"(62). While Mervis reads this as a suggestion that "the emotional reconstruction and imaginative reawakening of children who have suffered in the cross-fire of the ethnic and political warfare...are the requisites for the future development and prosperity of this country,"<sup>199</sup> she neglects the ominous way in which the childrens' creativity comes at the expense of Toloki and, in a sense, perpetuates the same kind of exclusionary practices that caused him and Noria to suffer in the first place. When Mervis claims, then, that *Ways of Dying* "ends in an apt, if rather contrived, 'grand finale' which represents a new beginning,"<sup>200</sup> she overlooks the way the novel hints at a perpetuated irresolution based on the resilient structures of exclusion and repression. Is the novel's final gesture of consolation fundamentally anti-consolatory or melancholic if it posits only a fanciful "aestheticized" resolution to the violence that takes place just a few pages earlier, where the burning rubber is restraining Noria's burning child? What if the laughter at the end is *manic* laughter, melancholy's double? And is the infatuation with the "pure wholesome rubber," and the negation of the previous week's events, in the emphasis that the smell is "*not* mingled with the sickly stench of roasting human flesh"(212), a kind of repression? In this instance, the community which cannot mourn loss is a dysfunctional one that is trapped in a repression and repetition compulsion.

The novel's precarious conclusion illustrates one of the most problematic aspects of the critical valorization of melancholia: its uncomfortably close link with a rapture over the traumatic symptom which ostensibly registers the alterity of loss and

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<sup>199</sup> Mervis, 46.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

refuses to subsume it into a restitutive narrative. I have already discussed the ways in which this refusal might be desirably, particularly as a resistance to the assimilation of stories of loss into nationalist narratives. At the same time, I have argued that Toloki's improvisational mourning enacts a similar resistance while still initiating a process of working through loss in more provisional ways. This process asks us to understand mourning as something which recognizes alterity too; or doesn't simply enact an easy closure; or as LaCapra has suggested, something that might "counteract compulsiveness – especially the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes of violence – by re-petitioning in ways that allow for a measure of critical distance, change, resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal."<sup>201</sup> It may seem here that in arguing that *Ways of Dying's* unusually abrupt, consolatory ending stages a critique of the potential erasure of the past initiated by mourning, that I am aligning my own argument with these theorists of melancholia who see an inability to mourn as staging an open interrogation of the past, and issuing a demand that the memory of atrocities be an open wound. It would therefore seem contradictory to also suggest that the novel's portrayal of a dysfunctional community caught in a repetition compulsion problematizes the valorization of traumatic repetition. But fundamentally, there is something very important in the novel's suggestion of the possibility of improvisation – an improvisation which *does* bring a kind of resolution to Toloki and Noria, if not the community as a whole, a resolution in which mourning means neither forgetting nor ceaseless acting out.

Current work that addresses the function of improvisation in *Ways of Dying* focuses on the ostensibly didactic message the novel offers about the need for poor, urban communities to invent constantly evolving ways of coping with disenfranchisement and poverty. For instance, Barnard has linked the presence of

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<sup>201</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 66.

improvisation in the novel to the innovation necessitated by total lack of resources and support, so that it becomes another valence of the types of ingenuity we see throughout the text, such as the capacity of the urban poor to continually rebuild the settlements after they are bulldozed by the government. For Barnard, the novel illustrates how “[in] situations where the usual benefits of urban life such as employment, legality, and shelter cannot be relied on, a capacity for continual self-invention becomes an essential skill.”<sup>202</sup> I want to extend a similar argument to the way that the novel suggests the possibility of working through traumatic experience through the spontaneous and continuous invention of ways of coping. If trauma constitutes a radical break in the psyche, we might ask whether it precludes the possibility of complete innovation or whether it necessitates it. Durrant makes the argument for the latter when he suggests that post-apartheid literature has invented new forms of mourning that might offer a way for individual stories to resist incorporation into nationalized narratives of healing and reconciliation. In his account,

[it] is precisely because colonialism often involves both the destruction of traditional communities and the traditions by which those communities are remembered that literature becomes a crucial site not simply for the *recovery* of communal traditions of remembrance but for the *reinvention* of memorial practices and thus the reinvention of community.<sup>203</sup>

The suggestion here that the novel reinvents memorial practices rather than recovering them speaks to my broader argument about the futility of a recovery-based approach, particularly the nostalgic yearning for a time of successful mourning.

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<sup>202</sup> Barnard, “On Laughter,” 281.

<sup>203</sup> Sam Durrant, “The Invention of Mourning in Post-Apartheid Literature,” *Third World Quarterly* 2.3 (2005): 441

The critique of the implicitly recuperative gesture of an anti-elegiac impulse in Euromodernism is also relevant when thinking about the critical attempt to recuperate ‘African’ rituals of mourning – something that several of the novel’s readers attempt to do.<sup>204</sup> One of the reasons that it is important in the first place “to speak of the constant reinvention of traditions of mourning” in South Africa is because “it is almost impossible to speak of authentic, indigenous African mourning rites.”<sup>205</sup> Durrant highlights the futility of this kind of recuperation, pointing out how these indigenous mourning rites have been lost or subsumed throughout the history of colonization in South Africa by the “spread of Christianity in its many European and Africanised forms, and more specifically, the creation during the apartheid era of the artificial homelands and the resultant informal and multiethnic urban settlements.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> See in particular Moslund, 98-9. Moslund suggests the novel’s emphasis on productive “ways of living” is “often intricately associated with an attempt to reconnect themselves with a humanist value system that, to a large extent, is rooted in the African tradition they were born into,” and suggests that the settlement community embodies “a version of the Ubuntu philosophy” in the way it “is surviving history on mutual caring and assistance, generosity and selflessness.” While this is a useful point which productively highlights the importance of “traditional” philosophy and form (particularly the novel’s use of a collective voice that invokes the importance of oral storytelling), it runs the risk of situating a homogeneous “African” tradition (exemplified by Ubuntu) against a Europeanized one, which Moslund implies is the selfish, individualistic death-dealing attitudes of the settlement community that the return to “African” traditions and ways of relating to people compassionately overcomes.

<sup>205</sup> Durrant, “The Invention of Mourning,” 442.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. Also see Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murphy, “Of Funeral Rites and Community Memory: Ways of Living in *Ways of Dying*”, *Ways of Writing*, 91-114. Focusing on an analysis of the urban environment, Courau and Murphy address the “split location of the country and the city”(92) in the novel, highlighting the importance of the city as an ambiguous space, a locus of collective remembrance, as well as a source of spiraling inhumanity, where despair, death and moral decay have intensified”(92). For Courau and Murphy, Mda’s decision to leave the city unnamed and the time unspecified relates to his deliberate emphasis on a particular “urban milieu”(93) rather than a historically specific event. Their argument for a similar reinvention of community comes across in their analysis of the way new geographies of the urban environment both separate characters from traditional modes of working

I want to pause here to consider the ways in which Mda's novel appeals to the continued existence of indigenous modes of understanding and responding to death, while at the same time problematizing readings that see the novel as revival of indigenous African rites. Mda has commented on his reticence to use the word "revival" with regard to the recuperation of indigenous philosophy and art precisely because "[it] implies 'going back' to the archive to reinvent culture and reclaim a pre-colonial authenticity that is lost."<sup>207</sup> While the total recovery of this cultural past is impossible, Mda suggests instead that they can be "rediscovered." This rediscovery might take place in the appeal to the formal history of African oral literature which Mda invokes in *Ways of Dying*. In an interview, Mda elaborates on his interest in the work of Ghanaian writer, Ayi Kweyi Armah, "who said that African oral literature has always been a conversation between the living and the fourth dimension and by fourth dimension, of course, we are not only talking about the dead, but we are also talking about the unborn."<sup>208</sup> In the appeal to "that other world of those who have left us and those who have not joined us yet,"<sup>209</sup> Mda hints to a coequality of the dead, the living, and the unborn in a way that would challenge the return of the dead as a pathological

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through loss and enable types of community to form. In *Ways of Dying* the patterns of mourning are themselves part of tradition, yet... they take on a new life within the urban context, with its apparently dehistoricised subject, and provide a sense of continuity and potential for the characters and the community as a whole"(95). While this argument dovetails with my own, I disagree with Courau and Murphy's suggestion that, ultimately, "Toloki represents the sense of belonging, or even imagined community that is created through sorrow; he carries and conveys the weight of collective grief"(102-3). They only cursorily mention that for most of the novel, particularly when he is performing the rituals they describe, Toloki is a total outsider to the community who effectively dupes the bereaved and "mooches" off of their food. Their reading is also problematic given my understanding of the novel as a self-consciously stylized moment of closure that belies the irresolution of the plot.

<sup>207</sup> Sarah Nuttall, ed., *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>208</sup> John B. Kachuba, "An interview with Zakes Mda," *Tin House* 20 (2005), [http://www.tinhouse.com/mag/back\\_issues/archive/issues/issue\\_20/interview.html](http://www.tinhouse.com/mag/back_issues/archive/issues/issue_20/interview.html).

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

return of the repressed. Then again, while *Ways of Dying* does break into this “fourth dimension” when it brings back to ghost of Jwara, it is important to note that this haunting is framed within the novel in a way that is immediately recognizable to readers of European literature as a ghost who figures some kind of unfinished business; Jwara returns because “he could not rest in peace in his grave, or join the world of the ancestors, unless the figurines were given to Toloki”(206). In reading Jwara’s return as something of a hybrid ghosts who, on one hand, appears as an anomaly in the world of the living as a testimony to unresolved things, and on the other hand, as a normative instance of magic in a text where other “supernatural” occurrences are rendered unremarkable (such as the reincarnation of Noria’s son, who dies for the first time from starvation when his father kidnaps and then abandons him), we can begin to theorize how *Ways of Dying* participates in the process of “rediscovery” without nostalgia for a pure revival. It is important to consider how the novel sits somewhere between these two readings, a claim which applies equally to the appeal to African-based understandings of community to which readers like Moslund refer. On one hand, the novel seems to embrace an Ubuntu philosophy and turn to tradition that involves some kind of rehumanization of its characters and recovery from past wrongs. This ostensible turn to traditional modes departs from the psychoanalytically-derived sense of closure and plays up to the fact that, as Wole Soyinka points out, “most African traditional societies have established modalities that guarantee the restoration of harmony after serious infractions.”<sup>210</sup> On the other hand,

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<sup>210</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13. This is worth mentioning precisely because I am arguing that the novel wraps up in an overly simplistic way in which closure is miraculously achieved. It is worth considering how my reading might be rendered problematic if the book is playing into a predefined traditional mode of storytelling in which a seemingly contrived restoration is part of the very formula of addressing “serious infractions” in creative renderings.

this reading doesn't quite fit in either of those senses because of the way the mechanisms for exclusion are still in place at the end of the novel.

While it is important to think about the ways in which mourning in Mda's novel is inflected with African narrative forms, or understandings of death, I am concerned about the way that the impulse to recover "traditional" modes of mourning is implicated in the same fantasy of successful mourning I have taken issue with throughout this project. In this sense, the anti-elegiac impulse might also underlie the idea that ritual has been exhausted or at least attenuated in secularized "Western" funeral ceremony, the assumption that religious or spiritual people work through loss more "successfully," and finally, the potential fetishization of "non-western" cultures and their relationships with the dead. Rather than falling into this trap, I want to take Durrant's discussion about "invention" and "improvisation," and amplify the importance of improvisation with regard to thinking about how one might re-envision possible responses to trauma. Improvisation is suggestive because it is not pure creation *ex nihilo* but, rather, plays off existing forms or traditions. Arguably, in its basis in spontaneity, it evinces a suggestive model of grief work that is not based in narrative memory, but in the present expression of the feelings that memory has produced.

Kimberly Wedeven Segall's work on "collective mourning performances," based on her experiences directing a theater workshop for Xhosa victims of human rights violations in 2000 and 2001, offers a model for improvisational memory-work. Segall argues that staging performances for other members of a group allows traumatized individuals to assuage feelings of helplessness and alienation. These victims she worked with had all testified in front of the Commission but felt somewhat

limited by the context of the TRC and wanted to “perform their memories”<sup>211</sup> in a small workshop organized by the Trauma Center in Cape Town. Segall relates how this altered context played a significant part in recuperating a sense of agency for the victims by allowing them to reframe their stories in a way that emphasized other facets than victimhood:

After having attended many of the TRC hearings, I observed how the testimonies of victims of human rights violation offered a catharsis, a healing release of emotion, as a response to the public acknowledgement of their suffering by the commissioners and audience. Yet the stories solicited by the TRC focused only on the moment of victimization, and the survivors in the play also told how they survived, how they had political purpose, how they acted in a heroic, not just a victimized, fashion. These extended narratives along with the inclusion of song and improvisation created a very different context and form than the TRC.<sup>212</sup>

Using Paul Connerton’s distinction between habitual and cognitive remembering Segall argues that improvisational performances, which are adapted from popular forms and therefore based on habitual memory, tap into modes of memory different from the one responsible for traumatic repetition. Accordingly,

the physical processing of remembrances through specific songs and dances – varying from the cognitive processing, or more accurately, varying from the inability to process traumatic memories in the case of traumatic stress disorders – adds a new dimension to recollection. The well-known patterning of a song may interrupt, replace, or impede the traumatic images; thus these traumatic images are rendered less invasive, less

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<sup>211</sup> Kimberly Wedeven Segall, “Stories and Song in Iraq and South Africa: From Individual Trauma to Collective Mourning Performances,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.1 (2005): 144.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

likely to deaden other incoming senses.<sup>213</sup>

In figuring performance as a way to overcome grief, Segall still uses the stereotypical language of mourning-as-closure, suggesting that “once told, these presented memories allow the group to share grief, and the process of sharing grief offers a measure of closure because of the group’s acceptance of these narratives of mourning.”<sup>214</sup> But at the same time, her reference to *a measure of closure* registers a more complex process by which grief might be negotiated. As the above passage explains, the same cognitive processes one would use to work through trauma are often the processes that have been rendered unable to process those memories. According to Segall, “[the] embodied memory of well-known verses shifts out of the cognitive mode... to a physical, rhythmic release of tension, and the improvisation and spontaneity accompanying storytelling and singing – in juxtaposition to the helpless state of torture and terror – offers a measure of artistic choice and control.”<sup>215</sup>

The key to this process is the “measure of control” of narrative in a way that isn’t totalizing, but is still secure enough to counteract the process of ceaseless acting out. This control is important because it “helps reveal that the historical context of the past has changed or shifted;”<sup>216</sup> in other words, the trauma victim is able to recognize that he or she is neither in the past nor faced with the danger it presented. But perhaps more importantly, this performance of loss moves the victim “from individual trauma to collective mourning, and redefine[s] the present context through the embodied control of these cultural forms.”<sup>217</sup> Restaging traumatic memory through a medium that might access it through a different process simultaneously allows victims to plot

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 140-1. Also see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 144.

the narrative of the past differently, and establish “bonds with witnessing audiences.”<sup>218</sup> At first glance, this process might evoke certain aspects of the talking cure, particularly in the way it involves an almost free-associational narrative of events that ultimately leads to catharsis. However, the crucial differences involve the narrative template of traditional songs, and the fact that the process takes place in a group instead of between individuals. For Segall, reclaiming the event is all about re-staging it in a way that reinserts the victim into some kind of community based not simply on the articulation of similar or shared experiences of suffering, but the shared process of “witnessing each other’s acts of mourning” that “defines the performing group’s identity and reaffirms its members’ common social bonds of witnessed suffering.”<sup>219</sup> The centrality of the fact that the shared experience is the *retelling* rather than the past trauma means that a connection is made to the past that places loss firmly *in the past* and therefore allows for a present and future oriented critical and emotional process of working through.

The improvisation of these “rites” functions at the level of individual and collective. For the individual it enables a kind of vocalization of a subjective experience of grief (in unscripted ways, but mapped onto the medium of traditional song) and therefore forms part of an individual process for narrating and working through trauma. But the fact that it involves an audience who engages with the performance in ways that do not seem extensively scripted lends to the process an element of collective engagement with the past. Finally, it transfers the sense of performative replication of the past from one of an isolating, melancholic acting out – in which “the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 139.

repressed” – to a more provisional concept of collective mourning that exemplifies what LaCapra calls “a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present – simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life.”<sup>220</sup>

Throughout this dissertation I have taken issue with a critical tendency to frame melancholia as a deliberate, politically powerful response to the ossifying, normalizing, or normative movements of mourning. Successful mourning, these scholars argue, subsumes difference and renders the meaning of past events frozen in some kind of permanent archival fixity in which they are resolutely declared over and done with. Recuperating melancholia, recent criticism has affirmed endless grieving as something that has the capacity to produce inventive new modes of expression, to produce opportunities for an ethical interaction with otherness and, finally, to become a condition for contemporary life inasmuch as it solidifies a community that around a common experience of foundational trauma or loss. It is this particular facet of the trend of valorizing melancholia that I have also taken issue with in this chapter – that is, the suggestion that loss should never be overcome on the grounds that its foundational violence solidifies community bonds that would ostensibly dissolve were that loss ever fully worked through. Recalling Judith Butler’s revision of loss as an “oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” locus for group identification, this chapter further explores the implications of valorizing a melancholic attachment to the past by looking at Mda’s portrayal of a community living the aftermath of unspeakable personal loss and historical trauma. Butler argues that in a “paradoxically productive” sense, loss “becomes the condition and necessity for a certain sense of community... where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as a

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<sup>220</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 70.

community.”<sup>221</sup> Accordingly, a common-sense loss might succeed in cohering a disenfranchised, disposed community which otherwise belongs nowhere. But as Graham’s reservations about the workings of national memory and myth-making imply, similar arguments for the productive possibility of foundational violence have been made within national contexts with the explicit result of more strictly delineating those national boundaries. My concern here is to question this potential productivity of foundational violence based on two undesirable possibilities: the first has addressed the dangerous ways it might end up functioning to exclude others; the second has highlighted the pitfalls of a model of endless melancholia, particularly the trouble with privileging a traumatized community which can only act out the traumas of the past.

*Ways of Dying* portrays one possible iteration of such a community, one that is unable to break out of the traumatic repetition of past losses. At the same time, its suggestion of the possibility of a community based on the shared process of improvising rites – processes which are continually mutable and therefore enable the past to be continually reconfigured – points to the potential for non-totalizing modes of working through loss that might define a community in similarly non-totalizing ways. This collective engagement is something that comes from Toloki and Noria’s present-day attempts to listen to each other’s stories of grief, communicating trauma in terms of inviting a shared participation in mourning rites that opens up the boundaries of community in unexpected ways.<sup>222</sup> The emphasis on *improvisational* modes of

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<sup>221</sup> Butler, “Afterword,” 468.

<sup>222</sup> We might recall here both Charles S. Maier’s and LaCapra’s critique of a melancholic fixation on foundational trauma – trauma which potentially serves as a locus for group identification: Maier’s critique of how the “surfeit of memory” in the social domain produces a “new focus on narrow ethnicity” (Maier, 150), instead of inclusive modes of community, and LaCapra’s emphasis on the troubling way that traumas “become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity” (LaCapra, *WHWT*, 23). Both arguments refute a notion of group melancholia as a community building force and figure its exclusionary possibilities for

working through raises further questions about the possibility of conventional narrative responses to traumatic histories and their role in mediating the experience of groups whose members are provisionally oriented around them. If the fundamental problem of the post-traumatic is trauma's status as a complete rupture or shattering, working through loss arguably necessitates a kind of improvisational imagination of ways to deal with the past. We might ask, however, if the novel suggests radical improvisation is necessary for dealing with historical trauma, whether or not it delivers this improvisation at the level of its own form, or whether the structure of the plot forces more than just a "measure" of control.

Significantly, the question of form and its relationship to an anti-elegiac stance is steeped in an valorization of modernist fragmentation. With regard to poetry, Ramazani's suggestion that only the melancholic mourning of the *modern* elegist's anti-elegy can "[give] utterance to the wayward and contradictory impulses of grief" celebrates melancholia as a force which can account for the particular difficulties we face when expressing and representing loss. His avowal of the anti-elegiac is based on his contention that its "fractured speech" and "memorably puzzlings"<sup>223</sup> are more appropriate than the consolatory maxims of the traditional, pre-modernist, elegy. This claim tangentially evokes a reoccurring argument amongst devotees of modernist form that modernism *as a form* is somehow more capable than other forms of accounting for the fragmented modern experience. Here we might recall similar arguments that claim that nineteenth century realist narratives participate in a kind of fetishization of

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shutting down other categories of belonging. For LaCapra, "Maier's critique serves as a reminder that another kind of memory is more desirable, memory requiring the kind of memory-work Freud related to working through the past" (*History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 16), but according to a non-totalizing understanding of working through that I have also attempted to describe here. See Charles S. Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholia and Denial," *History and Memory* 5.2 (Fall/Winter 1993)

<sup>223</sup> Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, ix.

closure and organize sometimes traumatically fragmented stories into linear narratives with a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end. This type of narrative theoretically stands opposed to the modernist kind – particularly narrative which is fragmented, or portrays the speaker’s stream of consciousness in real time, with all its interruptions and diversions, which is somehow *truer* to experience.<sup>224</sup> Such arguments seem to be the basis for the idea of enactment, that is, the notion that the text is performative and enacts – or perhaps “acts out” – the disjointedness of its content. However, according to this train of thought, modernist aesthetics are arguably seen as a remedy for the problems historiographers encounter in trying to recount traumatic events that seem to surpass the limits of our understanding. The argument that modernist aesthetics account for the fragmented experience of modernity seems to be an unsatisfying justification as to why “conventional” critical prose or realist description cannot account for ostensibly unaccountable events, and problematically excludes novels that *do not* look like Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* or in some other way employ a mimetic aesthetic that “mimics” the disjointedness of traumatic experience.<sup>225</sup>

An analysis of the narrative structure of Mda’s novel would be easily privileged by proponents of a mimetic understanding of traumatic narrative. The

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<sup>224</sup> See Hayden White, “The Modernist Event” in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, ed. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 39-345.

<sup>225</sup> Also see Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004). Whitehead’s classification and analysis of the genre of “trauma novels” suggests that trauma fiction simultaneously registers the need to represent specific traumas as fully as possible, and the need to convey the shock and dislocation of traumatic experience. Her designation of the former as “theme” and the latter as “style” is complicated precisely because it implicitly prescribes certain stylistic techniques as apt for conveying the “theme” of trauma. I have tried to avoid this distinction here, but given that trauma has largely been conceived as a thematic arena of literary study (inasmuch as attention to the form or “style” of trauma reinforces certain stereotypical ideas about what form is “appropriate” for conveying a disjointed theme), this might be unavoidable. Questioning whether or not is an important task for future work in trauma studies, but is beyond the scope of this current project.

novel begins in the aftermath of violence at the funeral of Noria's son, and works backwards (with occasional fragmented jumps between the very distant and very recent pasts) as the characters piece together the events leading up to Vutha's traumatic death. Immediately after his death is narrated, the novel wraps up; in this way, it easily, albeit superficially, conforms to the form of the "talking cure" as the characters must narrate past events in order to overcome them. I have suggested, however, that Mda's apparent subscription to this format is decidedly tongue-in-cheek and, ultimately, toys with our perceptions regarding the ways that "trauma novels" are seemingly obliged to narrate the violent events at their core.

Problematizing both a model of cathartic closure and idea that narrative can and should secondarily traumatize its readers by mimicking the shock and dislocation of traumatic experience, Mda's novel lends itself to the improvised creation of new spaces and modes of grieving by ironizing the issue of traumatic articulation through Toloki's ostensibly meaningless noises. Positioned within the novel's formal strategy of superficial, stylized closure, Toloki stands out as a figure who most clearly ironizes the relationship between narrative and nonsensical sound. I have suggested, on the one hand, that Toloki's improvised wails constitute an attempt to respond to loss in a new way, one that is not circumscribed by the ostensibly exhausted rituals of the past. But Toloki's noises are also suggestive because, as nonsensical wails of grief, they are arguably situated between acting out and working through. As part of a funerary rite, they are geared toward mourning and commemorating the loss, but as senseless sound they evoke, in particular, Kristeva's melancholic who has refused the inevitable break from the semiotic and acceptance of the symbolic and, as a result, has descended into psychosis or aphasia.

Toloki's repetition of sound might helpfully be analogized in the repeated "o-o-o" sound elicited by Freud's grandson, the child from *Beyond the Pleasure*

*Principle* who “[stages] the disappearance and return of objects within his reach”<sup>226</sup> in order to come to terms with his mother’s daily departures. The child’s “cultural achievement,” for Freud, is the way he stages a temporary absence (the loss of the wooden reel, which he throws over the side of his cot) in order to gain something more permanent, the game itself. Staging the loss and return of the object leads not only to a sense of mastery over loss, but also to the creation of a substitute in the form of the “fort-da” game. Not unlike the poetic substitute for loss occasioned by elegy, the child’s game seems to stand in as a consolation for his inability to control the temporary loss of his mother. Just as the conventional elegy recuperates and supplants the loss of the mourned object, the game seems to evince a recuperation of the object that it comes to represent (the child’s mother). In Toloki’s case, the sounds become acts of creation and creativity, and might similarly be construed as the “cultural achievement” of creative mastery.

However, Freud problematizes this reading when he mentions that “the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending.”<sup>227</sup> Offering two possible justifications for the way the first part of the game occurs with such frequency, one having to do with an attempt to master the unpleasant sensation of loss, and one having to do with seeking revenge on the object that comes to represent his mother, punishing her for leaving, Freud comes to the indefinite conclusion that something “*beyond* the pleasure principle” governs this repetition of unpleasurable experience. What emerges unresolved from this analysis is the precise role of the sound. The child, of course, never says, *fort*; instead, he “[gives] vent to a loud, long-drawn-out

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<sup>226</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 14.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

‘o-o-o-o’<sup>228</sup> that Freud only confirms as the German word for “gone” after the child adapts the game with the wooden reel and starts saying, “da” – “there.” The child’s sound emerges, then, not as a simple tool of mastery, but as a figure for a simultaneously inarticulate grief that characterizes Freud’s language of traumatic experience. Crucially, it is the “o-o-o-o” sound that gets picked up in Freud’s own footnote explaining that a few years later the child’s mother (Freud’s own daughter) died and “[now] that she was really ‘gone’ (‘o-o-o’) the little boy showed no signs of grief.”<sup>229</sup> This analogy is relevant because it also involves the performance of a provisional process of mourning, a process that similarly comes across in Toloki’s attempt to articulate grief and to articulate mutable processes by which that grief might be provisionally expressed.

Toloki’s attempt to articulate new mourning rituals counters the fixation on the modern “abbreviation, objectification, and bureaucratic regulation of mortuary rites,”<sup>230</sup> as well as the sense that “a range of cataclysmic social events, including the slaughter of war, modernization of culture, and the disappearance of God and tradition”<sup>231</sup> which have ostensibly made mourning impossible and “utterly outmoded.”<sup>232</sup> As I have suggested, this argument is unwittingly caught up in a fantasy about a lost moment of plenitude for mourning rites, when mourning somehow

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 16. fn 7. Cathy Caruth has interpreted this repetition of the “o-o-o-“ sound as the production of a language that carries with it the mother’s silence. For Caruth, what gets repeated here is absolute loss; the trauma of the mother’s loss that gets represented as a failed return. By returning his focus to the “o-o-o-o” sound rather than the word, *fort*, Caruth believes that Freud deliberately ends chapter two of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* depicting an incomprehensible child precisely at his moment of incomprehension. The story that the child cannot tell (the story of the mother’s loss) is then passed on to Freud’s language inasmuch as he replicates the sound in his footnote. See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 65-6 and 133-4.

<sup>230</sup> Ramazani, “Afterword,” 291.

<sup>231</sup> Clewell, 1.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

succeeded in ways that are not viable today. Mda's novel stages a compelling counter-possibility – that is, the potential for the articulation of new rites in the present that would both destabilize the opposition between mourning as totalizing and melancholia as radically open, and avoid slipping into an impossible recuperation of lost myths and modes of grief work.<sup>233</sup> I reiterate this point in closing, because inasmuch as Mda's novel constitutes something of an elegiac narrative – a text which stages what it means to mourn the dead, a text which is anti-elegiac in its mockery of simplistic or artistic closure, its embrace of improvisation, of improvised modes of working through individual and historical trauma – it neither perpetuates a myth of a golden age of mourning nor completely mitigates or assimilates the otherness of the dead. Parodic, cynical, cutting though it may be, the novel ultimately brings our focus back to rites and suggests that mourning rites might also be a site of relation, of creativity, of a real ethics of otherness which recognizes the living other of another community as an empathetic neighbor who may have experienced a different loss, or experienced loss differently, but experienced it nonetheless; of a community which might to some viable extent overcome loss and still maintain its sense of community because it has ultimately created something future-driven, a working-through of trauma that forges community bonds based on the shared inauguration and performance of rites (as well as other forms of social and political action) rather than simply a common experience of loss.

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<sup>233</sup> Shane Graham's reading of Mda's play, *The Bells of Amersfoort*, is relevant to this discussion because Graham understands the play as similarly rejecting "attempts at totalizing closure"(68) through its attempt at "forging new modes of constructing and interacting with social space"(70). I came across Graham's essay as I was in the process of completing this dissertation, and found a number of overlaps in the way Graham talks about Mda's plays. In particular, he argues that Mda refuses the "totalizing narratives of the past" while simultaneously "[rejecting] a naïve faith in the ability of art and narrative to restore people and the land to some harmonious pre-lapsarian wholeness"(70). See Graham, "Mapping Memory, Healing the Land: *The Bells of Amersfoort*" in *Ways of Writing*, 57-72.

## CHAPTER 5

### TEMPORALITY OF CARE: J. M. COETZEE AND THE THREAT OF FUTURE LOSS

J. M. Coetzee's most recent novel, *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (2009), ends with a moment of forestalled care in which the character, John, of the novel's final "untitled fragment," reacts ambivalently to the prospect of caring for his father after a laryngectomy:

One of the ambulancemen hands him a cyclostyled sheet of instructions titled *Laryngectomy – Care of Patients*, and a card with a schedule of time when the clinic is open. He glances over the sheet. There is an outline sketch of a human head with a dark circle low in the throat. *Care of Wound*, it says.

He draws back. 'I can't do this,' he says. The ambulancemen exchange glances, shrug. It is not their business, taking care of the wound, taking care of the patient. Their business is to convey the patient to his or her place of residence. After that it is the patient's business, or the patient's family's business, or else no one's business.

It used to be that he, John, had too little employment. Now that is about to change. Now he will have as much employment as he can handle, as much and more. He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night, I am going to abandon you. Goodbye. One or the other: there is no third way.*<sup>234</sup>

John's choice – to care for or "minister to" his father, or to abandon him to his voiceless suffering – frames my analysis of the work of mourning in Coetzee's writing

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<sup>234</sup> Coetzee, *Summertime* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), 265-266.

and, in particular, my suggestion that Coetzee's novels problematize the rigid opposition between mourning and melancholia that sees mourning as radically totalizing. As evidenced by this final passage in *Summertime*, however, Coetzee does this by staging an indeterminable choice between complete faithfulness and total neglect, between the ostensible polarities of care and abandonment that loosely align with the decision to keep possession of a potential loss, or to completely release it. While, in this sense, *Summertime* might be seen to solidify the same opposition between mourning and melancholia that I have attempted to destabilize, I will examine how the very possibility of a "third way" emerges in the novel precisely through its apparent exclusion.

While this chapter primarily addresses what I call the *suspension of mourning* in *Summertime* (2009), it challenges the fourth and final facet of the recent critical valorization of melancholia: an interest in the preservation of "otherness" which motivates what Sam Durrant in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* has called a "a deconstructive, anti-historicist ethics of remembrance."<sup>235</sup> Durrant's project, like mine, attempts to trace the links between colonial loss or trauma, and postcolonial remembrance; in many ways his work has provided a jumping off point for my own, particularly in the way it brings together Anglophone texts from different regions of the world to explore the common ways they address the history of colonialism. However, Durrant problematically embraces the same idealized notion of mourning as totalizing closure that I have resisted throughout this project, propping up an opposition between history (as totalizing narrative, and thus related to completed mourning) and a certain excess (one might say, a melancholic excess) that is beyond representation or at least resists the easy translation into memorialization. Taking into account Durrant's reading of Coetzee's early novels as texts that manifest this form of

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<sup>235</sup> Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 7.

melancholic remembrance in order to remain “inconsolable before history,”<sup>236</sup> this chapter examines whether or not Coetzee’s work really allows for a generalizing, prescriptive theory of melancholic resistance. In other words, does Coetzee advocate a generalized ethics of remembrance in which consolation over loss is revealed as the wrong way to respond to it?

In particular, I am interested in how the ostensibly unmournable suffering that Durrant locates at the heart of Coetzee’s refusal to fully represent history has manifested in the author’s later novels, like *Summertime*, where the objects cared for, or “mourned,” become more and more disembodied until, ultimately, they include those objects that *will be* lost one day, and, accordingly, invite a kind of preemptive melancholia. If we embrace Durrant’s notion of mourning – less as a grieving process of responding to loss and more of task of historical recuperation and reconciliation – how have acts of *care*, which necessarily involve an attempt to prolong the life that may be lost, enabled a suspension of mourning in the later Coetzee novels? Ultimately, I want to suggest that thinking about care as suspended mourning might allow us to tread a more provisional route between a rigid binary opposition of mourning as closure and melancholia as openness. It is my contention that mourning emerges precisely (and preemptively) in Coetzee’s novels in the form of acts of *care*, in which one individual physically cares for another or appears on the verge of a decision to care or not to care. As Coetzee is undoubtedly aware, “to care” is an outmoded use of the word, “to mourn.”<sup>237</sup> It seems odd, then, that Durrant, the scholar who has written the most extensively about Coetzee’s writing as a work of mourning,

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>237</sup> To date I have not located any interview or essay in which Coetzee discusses this etymological link between care and mourning, but given his perennial fascination with etymologies (which often manifests in the novels as a protagonist’s preoccupation with wordplay and word origins), I do not think it is misguided to suggest that he is surely aware of the connection.

has chosen to apply a metaphorical idea of mourning as “coming to terms with history” as opposed to analyzing the barely concealed mournfulness of Coetzee’s focus on care – a focus which might be construed as putting “mourning” under erasure, or at least suspending it in a way that makes it impossible to complete. Taking this into account, I want to ask the following: does care as suspended mourning constitute a refusal to work through loss, or does it transcend a stereotypical notion of working through?

While generally overlooked in scholarship, the concept of care has always been a concern in Coetzee’s novels, but one that has traditionally been understood in terms of charity, hospitality, or responsibility to an other.<sup>238</sup> In the early novels, conventional scenes of administering care take place between humans, typically in a dynamic in which the powerful administer to the powerless – the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl, the doctor and Michael K, Susan Barton and Cruso, and later, Susan Barton and Friday. In the later novels, however, I would argue that the objects of care

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<sup>238</sup> Mike Marais briefly identifies the etymological link between care and mourning in his *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*, acknowledging that “[to] care, as the root of the word ‘care’, *kaera*, signifies, is precisely to lament,” however his work is concerned with a Derridean understanding of hospitality in Coetzee’s work, not mourning. See Mike Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 61-2. For a reading of care and charity, see Carrol Clarkson’s essay, which partially focuses on the etymology of the word “care” in *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*. See Carrol Clarkson, “Responses to Space and Spaces of Response in J. M. Coetzee” in *J. M. Coetzee’s Austerities*, ed. Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 43-55. In it, she focuses on both novels’ repeated use of the phrase, “take care of,” and the ways in which the main characters, Elizabeth Curren and Rayment, fixate over the meanings of the word, “care.” Clarkson ultimately argues that these “etymological forays” continually miss the mark regarding what they’re actually trying to describe, and that the connotations certain words have for people (for instance, Elizabeth Curren’s misguided link between the word, “care,” and the word, “charity”) testify to the fact that “the characters’ relation to the English language, rather than to a physical geographic location...dictates the boundary between the native and the foreign”(Clarkson, 53). However, nowhere does she identify the etymological links between caring and mourning.

have recently expanded, pushing the limits of the earlier novels' conventional interactions. We might recall David Lurie's care for the dead dogs in *Disgrace*, in which "he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves,"<sup>239</sup> or Marijana's care of Paul Rayment's amputated leg in *Slow Man*, which Rayment believes was carelessly discarded without his consent, and without, in a sense, being mourned. (His repeated grievance is not only that the leg was amputated without his permission, but that it was carelessly disposed of; throughout the novel he regards the hypocrisy of his doctor's attempt to teach him how to care for the "stump," as Rayment later calls it: "*You anaesthetized me and hacked off my leg and dropped it in the refuse for someone to collect and toss into the fire. How can you stand there talking about care of my leg?*"<sup>240</sup> Arguably, the fact that in these later novels "the other" becomes a dead non-human animal and a severed body part puts pressure on the idea of what constitutes a grievable life (to borrow Judith Butler's term) or object. If the early novels suggest that some kind of acknowledgement of woundedness might take place through an empathic identification with the suffering other, Coetzee's later books certainly problematize this potential for identification by rendering the objects of care more abstract or elusive, particularly in *Summertime* where one of the predominant "objects" that is mourned is the very threat of future loss or suffering.

This speaks to a related question regarding the critical appropriation of loss as a locus for identification (particularly a melancholic relationship with loss). In what ways does care gesture to a mode of empathizing with another's suffering in a way that does not involve subsuming his or her place? Durrant's analysis links empathy to a totalizing mourning by claiming that "the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine

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<sup>239</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999), 146.

<sup>240</sup> Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2005), 10.

the other as the same, as another version of the self.”<sup>241</sup> However, I take issue with his claim that, as a result, “Coetzee’s novels implicitly argue that to transcend the other’s alterity is to efface that alterity,”<sup>242</sup> and that in general, the act of empathy is *always* tantamount to imagining oneself in the other’s place. Ultimately, the fact that Coetzee’s narrators cannot relate to the Other for whom they care is for Durrant a testimony to the impossibility of mourning. In line with Durrant’s reading, incomprehension relates to the impossibility of testimony, to the impossibility of mourning (which would only codify loss in a fixed history and assimilate the other and his/her loss to the self-same), and finally, to the ethical necessity of *not* mourning and therefore refusing to assimilate alterity. But what if we interpret the failure of empathy, instead, as relating to the way the texts stage this particular conflation of empathy and identification? I suggest that what Durrant interprets as a refusal to mourn might be understood instead as a refusal to permit the troubling conflation of identification and empathy. I do not disagree that Coetzee’s novels always slip empathy into identification, which necessarily leads to the failure of empathetic relation. However, I would argue that this move does not implicitly make an “argument” that this slippage is *always* the case; rather, the novels stage the failure of relation on these particular grounds. While Durrant interprets the resulting inability to ever fully access the other as the novels’ refusal to mourn, I suggest that we might understand it as their commentary on the problem of conflating empathy and identification. Ultimately, the novels do not generally “refuse to mourn” as much as they frame a particular type of relation to the other as problematic.

While this analysis of empathy and identification is somewhat tangential to my overall discussion of mourning in this chapter, it comes back to care inasmuch as care

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<sup>241</sup> Durrant, 27.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

might offer a new way of thinking of an empathic relationship without identification. If empathy is often based on a fantasy of complete recognition (to the point of occupying that position oneself), Coetzee's focus on care arguably involves a gesture to that other that isn't predicated on the fullness of identification. Simultaneously, my focus on care reveals certain cracks or omissions in the language trauma studies has used to describe possible reactions to loss. Ultimately, the novel's elevation of care over mourning has led me to question care's omission from both trauma and memory studies. I would argue that theorizing care is an important addition to trauma theory's focus on the belatedness of traumatic experience. Like the recognition of traumatization, care is something that also comes too soon and too late. It comes too soon in that it preempts the final loss of the other, and it comes too late in the sense that the need for care is generally predicated on some kind of injury; one is only in need of care after one has been hurt or threatened in some way. In terms of temporality, care appeals to the future perfect tense; care is based on sustaining the object that *will have been*. We care for an object that threatens to be lost. Accordingly care seems implicated in mechanisms of repression and denial as it involves a refusal of that threat of loss. Like the first stages of mourning that Freud outlines, in which the psyche defies reality by imagining the lost object back into existence, care temporarily preserves the object that *will have been lost*, representing a dutiful prolongation of the life of the other. Care, then, seems intimately bound up with the structures of time that trauma studies conventionally appeals to, particularly the branch of trauma studies that valorizes silence, aporia, and a refusal to mourn.

This branch of trauma studies is epitomized in Durrant's interest in melancholia, which joins with numerous discussions of loss that have become bound up with questions of faithfulness to an other at constant risk of being elided. In these readings, the urge to valorize melancholia is based on a notion of "the melancholic's

absolute refusal to relinquish the other – to forfeit alterity – at any costs.”<sup>243</sup> I have already charted how according to the general trend, mourning becomes an act of foreclosure, an exercise in positivism, or a symptom of essentializing discourse. But in this particular sense, mourning constitutes an act of betrayal in which both the “otherness” of the lost object and the shock of death are deadened or made familiar. Resisting this betrayal, Durrant pursues an ethical line of thought in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, linking the same attachment to melancholia to an ethics of otherness where mourning must never finish, and where, “like mourning, the attempt to redraw the boundaries of community must remain incomplete, unsuccessful; its success is measured precisely by its failure to complete itself, its capacity to remain perpetually open to the difference of the other, to the possibility of different others and not yet imagined modes of being.”<sup>244</sup> While in earlier chapters I have similarly emphasized the constant redrawing of community boundaries in order to avoid certain exclusionary practices, I find Durrant’s conflation of radical openness with an impossible mourning that somehow transcends all attempts to narrate loss problematic because of the reliance on an opposition between language and some unverbalizable “beyond” that closes down possibilities for working through loss, instead of focusing on the otherness of loss as something that defies all representation. This distinction, as Durrant has formulated it, extends to include not just a certain structural condition of language but the way that the language one has to address the

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<sup>243</sup> David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia” in *Loss: the Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 364.

<sup>244</sup> Durrant, 111. Also see R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature*. Spargo acknowledges a debt to Derrida’s depiction of mourning as a “most deadly infidelity,” that “would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us” (*Memoires*, 6). He also picks up this trend which imbues melancholia with an ethical potential, claiming that “a resistant and incomplete mourning stands for an ethical acknowledgement of – or perhaps a ceding to – the radical alterity of the other whom one mourns”(13).

experience of trauma can *only* do so in a way that codifies, fixes, and assimilates its otherness. As Durrant's primary concern is not language but history (and also that which resists being made into a historical narrative), I am interested here in the way that his suggestion that mourning (which he links with the narrativization of history) should never achieve completion is also based on an understanding of the alterity of loss as something which should not – indeed, something which *could* not – ever be fully subsumed.

Echoing Durrant's argument in this regard, R. Clifton Spargo's *The Ethics of Mourning* is concerned "with an aspect of dissent that is proper to mourning."<sup>245</sup> He suggests that endless mourning becomes a locus of giving oneself over to otherness; melancholia becomes "an ethical concern for the other elaborated by the mourner's objections to the cultural practices presiding over grief."<sup>246</sup> Most importantly, melancholy is understood as "a dedication to the time and realm of the other":

Even when it seems to emanate from the esoteric subjective grievances of a specific mourner, melancholia interrogates the symbolic social structures that contain and reduce the meaning of the other who is being lamented. Thus it is on the threshold of symbolic meaning that every melancholic mourner stands again as

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<sup>245</sup> Spargo, 6.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Admittedly, Spargo is wary about getting too carried away with his vision of unchecked grief as an site of ethical meaning. He acknowledges that "[to] mourn ethically would be to mourn in such a way that the survivor's grief... would extend only to the point where grief does not prevent the resumption of normal relationships among the living or to the point where the work of mourning can be conceived as a useful act of commemoration, putting the memory of the other in service of the general good, or morality"(19). This claim takes into account the counterargument that melancholic acting out entails a withdrawal from the present, inasmuch as the "present" in which the victim lives is the repeated past. As in his reference to "the consolations of language," however, Spargo views mourning in terms of a return to "normal relationships" and "a useful act of commemoration," reinforcing the conventional idea of mourning central to unqualified affirmations of melancholia and foreclosing a relation between mourning and potential social change.

for the first time when she refuses the consolations of language.<sup>247</sup>

Here, Spargo's emphasis on "the consolations of language" evokes a conventional notion of the elegiac as something that consoles the reader through and with words, while also placing an emphasis on a Kristevan understanding of the entry into language as a conciliatory substitution for the originary traumatic loss.<sup>248</sup> For both Spargo and Durrant, however, it is not simply a question of the inability to represent that loss as it is the ethical imperative not to do so.

Durrant's argument evokes a Derridean understanding of mourning in which the impossibility of mourning becomes an exercise in fidelity to the lost other who must remain totally other. According to this understanding, the process of successful mourning can only succeed in its denial of alterity, and the only truly "successful" mourning – mourning that does not assimilate the other – must be a failed task. If mourning leaves no space for otherness, "impossible mourning" succeeds in "leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). For Kristeva, all language is based on rupture that takes place as part of the subject's entry into the symbolic order from the semiotic. This entry happens when the subject *negates* the foundational trauma of that rupture, which coincides with the loss of the object (in this case, the maternal other), and accepts language and its restorative promise. In this sense, the other is not lost precisely because it can be recuperated in a language that, while it never fully succeeds in recovering that loss (the semiotic), continues to bear its traces. This process is arguably a more provisional model for the 'successful mourning' I have been discussing so far, inasmuch as the mourner accepts that foundational loss by also accepting language, but does so in a way that registers that the acceptance of language only comes about because the subject has no other choice. The Kristevan melancholic, on the other hand, denies the negation of the foundational loss that would bring him/her into language; this denial makes it impossible to recognize or accept the loss, which then becomes an object of paralyzing fixation. In refusing the separation from the semiotic (and therefore, refusing to accept language as a replacement for the semiotic), the melancholic is bound to the inarticulate Thing, unable to mourn because he or she does not accept the need to mourn.

incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism.”<sup>249</sup> The process of integration that takes place in successful mourning – mourning that *works through* loss – necessarily fails in its assimilation of alterity. As Derrida explains in “Death Penalties,”

Mourning *must* be impossible. Successful mourning is failed mourning. In successful mourning, I incorporate the one who has died, I assimilate him to myself, I reconcile myself with death, and consequently I deny death and the alterity of the dead other and of death as other. I am therefore unfaithful. Where the introjection of mourning succeeds, mourning annuls the other. I take him upon me, and consequently I negate or delimit his infinite alterity.<sup>250</sup>

Faithfulness to the dead in this case does not involve a moral choice between mourning and melancholia but instead involves a simultaneity of two opposites – the need to mourn and the impossibility of mourning that constitutes a double bind:

Faithfulness prescribes to me at once the necessity and the impossibility of mourning. It enjoins me to take the other within me, to make him live in me, to idealize him, to internalize him, but it also enjoins me not to succeed

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<sup>249</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>250</sup> Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 159-160. It is crucial to note that Derrida does not offer a clear prescription for mourning here (despite the way in which the fact and threat of assimilation has been taken up by recent theorists as what one *ought not* to do); he merely outlines a certain paradox inherent to mourning in which faithfulness to the dead means both being faithful through mourning, and being faithful in spite of mourning. Derrida, however, does not produce a clear interdiction on mourning; he articulates a paradox in which “[s]peaking is impossible, but so too would be silence...or a refusal to share one’s sadness.” (See Derrida, “In Memorium: Of the Soul” in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascalle-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 72.) While the moral obligation *not* to work through loss is not explicit, however, his argument still seems to remain on a quasi-transcendental level in which a grieving individual is entirely cut off from society and history.

in the work of mourning: the other must remain the other.<sup>251</sup>

Durrant, in turn, aligns this perceived annulment of otherness with the narrative procedures of historical memory which, in aiming to “successfully” work through the loss of the other and thus “move beyond” it, ends up assimilating the unassimilable and alleviating the otherness of death itself. For Durrant, this “deconstructive” ethics of mourning is related to a cogent, historicist narrative of the past which, as Eng and Kazanjian also imply, declares the past closed. His understanding of a community of “not yet imagined modes of being,” then, is based on the same problematic notion of a community centered around a past which has not and, according to this viewpoint, should not be worked through.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 160. Admittedly, Derrida’s reliance on terms that connote the absolute and the infinite in relation to alterity have been seen by some as marking a theological turn, one which might coincide with a valorization of impossible mourning as well as of the aporia that one cannot work through. See in particular John D. Caputo’s *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). For a refutation of Caputo’s argument, see Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). Hägglund has argued convincingly against this perceived theological turn in Derrida’s work, however, it is important to note that his reading of Derrida’s work on mourning still offers a structural model in which “actual mourning” “is an intensification of the possible mourning that is at work from the first inception of desire.” The experience of mourning, in Hägglund’s reading of Derrida, underscores the “double bind of mortal being” which every passing moment is an irrecoverable loss. Hägglund goes on to argue that to “preclude mourning” would be to deny the very basis of desire, in which “every slightest movement of desire is shadowed by the risk of loss”(109).

<sup>252</sup> It is important to note that Durrant’s opposition between history and that which exceeds historical representation or narrative memorialization is mapped onto a theoretical opposition he sees between psychoanalysis and deconstruction which he understands as a choice between “[coming] to terms with loss and [moving] on” and a “commitment to the other, to that which ‘unhinges’ the subject, urges us to learn to live with ghosts”(9). At times, however, the distinction collapses in ways that exceeds Durrant’s oppositional closure and openness, healing and endless grief. For instance, when he argues that “the basic impulse to narrate the past would suggest that postcolonial narrative seeks to perform some kind of therapy, even in the absence of retrieving history”(8), he signals the potential existence of the more provisional idea of

The central question of this chapter is whether or not Coetzee's work allows for the kind of abstracted and prescriptive theory of resistant mourning that Durrant endorses, particularly in his account of the ways in which Coetzee's 1980s novels stage a deliberate refusal to narrativize suffering, and thus refuse to represent trauma as a cogent historical narrative. Evoking a more affective relationship between reader and text, he suggests that "[r]ather than providing a direct relation of the history of apartheid, Coetzee's narratives instead provide a way of relating *to* such a history."<sup>253</sup> According to this model, Coetzee's novels participate in an "ceaseless labor of remembrance"<sup>254</sup> in which the completion of representation (which Durrant parallels with mourning) would problematically verbalize "an unverbalizable history."<sup>255</sup> This "labor of remembrance" takes place in two ways: at the level of the text which enacts this resistance to representation stylistically and philosophically, and at the level of its characters who "embody" it.<sup>256</sup> In the first case, which I briefly described above, the

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mourning I am working toward, one which might alleviate some of the pain of the past without subscribing to the fantasy of absolute recuperation. Though at one point he overtly suggests that postcolonial narrative's relation to the past is one that struggles between psychoanalysis and deconstruction, "caught between these two commitments... to summon the dead and to lay them to rest"(8), these distinctions are also complicated by his prescriptive claim that the *individual* "melancholic's refusal to recognize an end to the time of mourning seems to preclude the possibility of the future" while the *collective* "commitment never to forget seems precisely to be a way of looking to the future, a way of ensuring that history does not repeat itself"(9). In other words, the valorization of melancholia, which might remain pathological at the level of the individual, is rendered unproblematic on the collective scale. For Durrant, the process of writing (and reading) takes place on this collective level where writers do not unwittingly repeat the past but deliberately narrate it, and therefore, deliberately enact a mode of working through. Again, this is another instance in which Durrant's distinction between a totalizing historicism and a (melancholic) refusal to subsume whatever resists history is rendered more permeable than it does at other times in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*.

<sup>253</sup> Durrant, 5.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>256</sup> Though Durrant tries to differentiate the way this resistance occurs at the level of text and at the level of character, he never posits a connection between the two based

novels refuse to fully render suffering, trauma, or loss into an ostensibly recuperative historical narrative which would also lead to psychological closure; in Durrant's words, "the true work of the novel consists not in the factual recovery *of* history, nor yet in the psychological recovery *from* history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable *before* history."<sup>257</sup> In the second case, Durrant positions mourning (or rather, melancholia) as central to Coetzee's project based on the construction of characters who "remain radically incommensurable with the narratives in which they find themselves."<sup>258</sup> He reads figures like *Foe's* rewritten Friday (who appears as a tongueless corrective to Defoe's character), the barbarian girl and Michael K from *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, respectively, as "unhomely figures of and for alterity [who] *embody* precisely that material history of suffering that the narrative is unable to *represent*."<sup>259</sup> Echoing the unmournable suffering at the heart of the novel's refusal to fully represent history, these characters are unrepresentable for Durrant because they "illustrate the impossibility of speaking."<sup>260</sup> This claim, however, is complicated by Coetzee's later novels, in which the suffering objects of care or "mourned" have become at first dehumanized and, finally in *Summertime*, completely disembodied.

Comprised of excerpts from the notebooks of the recently deceased Nobel Prize winning author, J. M. Coetzee, along with transcriptions of interviews conducted by a fictional biographer, Mr. Vincent, who is in the process of writing a biography of the dead novelist, *Summertime* portrays a version of the author's early life in 1970s

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on a heightened textuality of Coetzee's characters. One might recall here Lucy's complaint in *Disgrace* that David keeps "misreading" her, or consider the way in which the post-Nobel novels in particular (and Coetzee's "autobiographies," *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*) render his own authorial persona into a shifting fiction.

<sup>257</sup> Durrant, 24.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

South Africa through the testimonies of five acquaintances and a compilation of his unpublished notebooks. These fragmentary notes, which most aptly embody the titular “Scenes from Provincial Life,” are the place where both the history of the author and the political climate in South Africa in the 1970s come closest to being represented; they contain, among other things, brief accounts of an Afrikaner vigilante attack on a black residential area detailed in an issue of the *Sunday Times*; a description of Pollsmoor prison, a “South African *gulag*” that “[protrudes] so obscenely into white suburbia;”<sup>261</sup> an account of a white man sharing a rundown house with his infirmed father, making the decision to lay his own concrete in defiance of what he sees as a taboo on manual labor enabled by Apartheid. While Vincent’s interviews later confirm these stories as autobiographically based, the testimonies only reveal Coetzee as an main object of obsession that constantly defies understanding. Inasmuch as the novelist himself emerges as the silent object of other people’s interpretive attempts, he is most closely aligned with resiliently uncommunicative figures like the Barbarian girl, Michael K, and Friday.

In *Summertime*, the history Coetzee refuses to represent is his own – firstly in the sense that each of the five testimonies brings us no closer to the inner thoughts of the author but focuses more prominently on each individual’s impressions of him, and secondly because of the overt fictionalization of certain well known aspects of his life. The ostensibly autobiographical text (the third in a memoir-based trilogy following *Boyhood* and *Youth*) has notable factual discrepancies, including the omission of Coetzee’s real-life wife and children who are left out of the story in favor of an unflattering self-portrait of the writer as an unsympathetic loner – “Socially inept. Repressed, in the wider sense of the word”<sup>262</sup> – and a fictionalized death of the

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<sup>261</sup> Coetzee, *Summertime*, 15.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

author's mother, who in actuality died over ten years later than she does in *Summertime*.<sup>263</sup> Of course, the most overt form of fictionalization that occurs in the story is the omission of Coetzee, himself; in the book, Coetzee has already died (sometime in early 2007) and *Summertime* stages a look back at the life of the deceased author through the impressions of seemingly random people chosen by a biographer who never met him.

These testimonies, some of which are direct transcripts of interviews, and some of which are rendered into Coetzee's characteristic third-person present tense free indirect style, are bookended by the narrative fragments in which the reader has the closest access to the deceased author's own voice. The first, dated between 1972 and 1975, appear as diary entries commenting on events in contemporary South Africa. The latter set appear as ideas for unwritten novels; for instance, one of the "undated fragments" mentions an idea for a story about a diary of bad days – what in the "real" Coetzee's life would become *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008), but which the character Coetzee ostensibly dies before writing. This intertextual reference is mirrored in the earlier novel, in its protagonist, Señor C's, diary entry, which posits "[an] intriguing idea: to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died...whose every moment is coloured with grief."<sup>264</sup> Indeed, *Summertime* is colored from beginning to end with grief, but less tangible grief for the man who has died than abstracted sadness over lost homeland, depleted youth, and unrealized potential. Described by his cousin, Margot, as "a melancholy type,"<sup>265</sup> even John, the novel's primary object of loss – the

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<sup>263</sup> Patrick Denman Flanery, "J. M. Coetzee's autre-biography," review of *Summertime*, by J. M. Coetzee, *The Times*, September 9, 2009, The Times Literary Supplement, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/the\\_tls/article6827190.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article6827190.ece).

<sup>264</sup> Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (New York: Viking, 2007), 158.

<sup>265</sup> Coetzee, *Summertime*, 137.

dead man around whom the testimonies circulate – is the figure through which the novel’s most melancholy feelings are projected. Fresh from his return from graduate school in the United States, a job in England, and the publication of his first (apparently failed) novel, *Dusklands*, John cannot reconcile his deep nostalgia for the South African Karoo, where his extended family live, with his repudiation of the country’s politics. Described in all five testimonies as a figure who never “fit in” South Africa, John recapitulates his own experience of irrecoverable loss of homeland when he asks his cousin, “what future do I have in this country, where I have never fitted in?” Alienated from his Afrikaner family by his adoption of the English language and cut off from his birthplace by his experiences abroad, John answers his own question, suggesting that “[p]erhaps a clean break would have been better after all. Cut yourself free of what you love and hope that the wound heals.”<sup>266</sup>

John’s return to South Africa is marked only by a heightened sense of alienation, a simultaneous discomfort with and desire for lost origins. His conclusion that it is “best not to haunt old sites and come away from them mourning what is for ever gone”<sup>267</sup> reverses a traditional ghost story trope in such a way that the living, ghostly in their capacity to return, haunt the places of their past and forever mourn the things they have lost, unable to ever recuperate depleted time. This sense of unresolvable melancholia also permeates the novel’s stories of more tangible losses. Even Adriana, the Brazilian refuge from Angola whose daughter Coetzee tutors in English, transposes her grief over her husband’s death onto an abstract loss of homeland. Throughout her testimony she makes brief references to the loss of her husband, who was brutally attacked by robbers shortly after emigrating to South Africa, but her focus turns to her family’s exile from Brazil: “Formally I may not

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 133.

have been a widow, yet as far as I was concerned I was already in mourning, for him and for all of us, stranded and helpless in this cruel land.”<sup>268</sup> Adriana’s comment is significant for two reasons. In the first place, her claim that she is in mourning “for him and for all of us” frames her and her daughters as already lost too, already their own objects of mourning. Like the living John who sees himself as the specter haunting the meaningful places of his childhood, the living are recast as the very dead whom they, themselves, mourn. In the second place, Adriana’s grief for her husband evokes the same preemptive melancholy present in the novel’s final passage. Her husband is kept alive for months on life support, albeit in a vegetative state; accordingly, she is not “formally” a widow, but is “already in mourning” for his impending loss, a loss that will be fulfilled in the near future.

The novel’s focus on expected loss culminates in John’s concern with his own legacy, one that is obviously refracted through the real Coetzee’s staging of his futurely posthumous biography. Within the novel, the concern with the way an author lives on, will live on, has lived on, will be and will have been remembered permeates the text. When John tells his lover, Julia, that a book should be “[a] gesture of refusal in the face of time. A bid for immortality,”<sup>269</sup> he classifies his own acts of novel-writing as refusal of chronological submission. The novels are substitutions for the dead, replacements for their lost bodies and thoughts that might allow the living to “speak with the dead. Who otherwise...are cast out into everlasting silence.”<sup>270</sup> Channeling a grief-stricken anxiety about his potential failure to live on, John explains that the knowledge that people might read his work after he is dead “affords [him] some consolation.”<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 62.

The notion of care as a simultaneous preparation-for and refusal-of the threat of future loss is arguably thematized in *Summertime*'s hyperawareness of legacies and the passage of time, something that resonates with my decision to classify it as part of an elegiac tradition. In the elegiac convention, literature is elevated because it partially enacts the consolation of "living on" in art. The mourned object is figuratively put to rest and the text stands in as a substitution through which the object paradoxically lives on. Poetry, or prose fiction, in the case of Coetzee, is the very medium and mode of preservation, continuation, and endless suspension of a life. In a text where the dead author himself goes formally unmourned, his own posthumously available fragments for stories and diary entries become a site for him to meditate on his writing as something which will survive him. For the character-Coetzee, the threat of his own death looms large in his desire to leave something that will "outlast" him. In one of the early journal-like fragments, as he is reconstructing his father's rundown house, he finds the work pleasurable because "the slabs he is laying will outlast his tenancy of the house, may even outlast his spell on earth; in which case he will in a certain sense have cheated death."<sup>272</sup> Questioning his own persistence "in inscribing marks on paper, in the faint hope that people not yet born will take the trouble to decipher them," he suggests that "[i]mmortality of a kind, a limited immortality, is not so hard to achieve after all."<sup>273</sup>

Echoing a simultaneously monumental and anti-monumental model of remembrance, literature here is figured as no more than "marks on paper," equivalent in the long term to laying slabs of stone that future witnesses might come across. The interplay of inscriptions in stone vs. marks on paper might be read two ways: as a revelation that the monumental medium of stone is nothing more than ephemeral

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<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

paper in the grand scheme of history, evoking Shelley's "Ozymandias," or as an elevation of novel-writing as somehow indelible, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact of the "real" Coetzee's continued survival, even as he has killed himself off in semi-autobiographical fiction. Later, in one of the undated fragments, this theory of writing is revised as a failed poet character determines that prose would just as easily suffice to "perform the same cleansing trick as poetry," and expresses doubts about prose-writing because it presupposes and necessitates the author's extended survival: "Prose, in his experience, calls for many more words than poetry. There is no point on embarking on prose if one lacks confidence that one will be alive the next day to carry on with the task."<sup>274</sup> The very act of prose-writing, then, is overshadowed by an anxiety about death and incompleteness.

Ultimately, Coetzee's preoccupation with his own death, coupled with the continual attempts to work through that future, again registers the anxiety of the future perfect – the time when one will have been. The melancholy the Coetzee character experiences is, in a sense, a preemptive melancholy for future loss. In this case, the very process that would "perform the same cleansing trick" of identifying his malaise is the thing that produces it. Here, the narrative challenges the notion of writing as a memorializing project that is first and foremost about the recuperation of history and suggests instead that it preemptively memorializes its own author's death, a death that the narrative cannot possibly represent because it hasn't yet occurred. *Summertime* stages a mourning that, in a sense, does not wait for its object.

These objects are suspended, waiting to be lost in a future that has yet to arrive, just as the novel's final act of care is stalled or suspended in the final words: "*I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night, I am going to abandon you. Goodbye. One or the other: there is no third way.*" But what does this hesitation over

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 261.

the “*Care of Patient*” and “*Care of Wound*” entail with regard to the way Coetzee’s fiction has registered traumatic loss, working through, or resistant mourning? Is “care,” a valance of resistant melancholy? If care is based on sustaining the object that threatens to be lost, does it constitute a refusal to “let go” in the way that melancholic attachment preserves the object? The concluding section of *Summertime* offers a poignant point of entry into these kinds of questions if we read care as a term that supersedes mourning. While the plot involves the momentary cessation of the work of care (or the work of mourning), the oddly utilitarian focus of the passage’s repeated word choices evokes that very work. The presence of instructions, schedules, business, employment, and projects dominates the last short paragraphs, implicitly asking, whose business, whose employment, whose *work* is the work of mourning?

The passage evokes memorable moments from Coetzee’s other novels in which care is administered: John’s revulsion from the wound recalls the Magistrate’s reaction to the “caterpillar” of a scar by the barbarian girl’s eye, or Susan Barton’s revulsion at the void of Friday’s absent tongue. Of course, the “outline sketch of a human head with a dark circle low in the throat” invokes Friday, as well, referencing the “thick stub at the back of the mouth,”<sup>275</sup> echoing the aporetic violence in *Foe* – the unarticulated trauma Susan imagines Friday has undergone at the hands of slavers. Significantly, the removal of the larynx renders John’s father speechless, like Friday, so John’s revulsion is prompted as much by the fact that he’ll have to “minister to” the wound, but will ostensibly have to mediate between a speechless figure and the rest of the world. The most overt commonality is arguably with Lurie’s treatment of the dogs in *Disgrace*, in which he adopts the role as “a dog undertaker” because of an obligation he feels to “his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels

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<sup>275</sup> Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 119.

to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.”<sup>276</sup> In a way, *Summertime* ends with the suspension of a choice that concludes the earlier novel. In *Disgrace*, Lurie can keep his favorite dog alive for another week, or he can in that moment give him up to be euthanized; the decision is between care and abandonment and the decision is made in Lurie’s final line, “Yes, I am giving him up.”<sup>277</sup> *Summertime*, on the other hand, ends with the stalled choice between care and abandonment or, framed another way, perhaps, between holding on and letting go.

If we are to parallel this ostensible binary of “holding on” vs. “letting go” with melancholia vs. mourning, does the novel’s proposal of care constitute a possible third way, or just another iteration of “ministering to the other”? The either/or dynamic of *Summertime*’s final moment of stalled care echoes a choice Durrant sets up between a dedication to endless grief which would ostensibly prevent the assimilation of traumatic history into something manageable and, therefore forgettable, and a closure which would do exactly the opposite. But does this reading make room for a possible “third way” that literary writing might traverse?

Earlier, I suggested that a theorization of care dovetails with trauma theory’s focus on the belatedness of traumatic experience; like trauma, care, too, comes too soon and too late. Care can only be administered too soon as it fails to preserve the lost other at the moment of death. Simultaneously, care is belatedly administered only to those who have already been injured in some way. But care necessitates a temporal

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<sup>276</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 146.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 220. For a contrary reading of this ending, see Mark Sanders, “Disgrace,” *Interventions* 4.3 (2002), 371. Sanders argues that when Bev Shaw asks Lurie the question, “Are you giving him up?,” it is not certain as to whether or not the act of giving up the dog is completed because Lurie’s reply (‘Yes, I am giving him up’) is focalized in the present progressive tense and is therefore suspended half-way between the anticipation of giving up the dog and the actuality of that event. Subsequently, Sanders concludes, there is the possibility that the novel’s final words do not, in fact, constitute a definitive ending or choice.

model that projects loss into the future. Much like trauma, which will only be cognized in future repetitions and iterations, care protects and projects the work of mourning into a future that has not yet happened. At the same time that it marks a state of preparation for loss, care sustains the potentially lost object, thus refusing loss in an attempt to postpone it.

Significantly, the time of care resonates with one of trauma studies' archetypal narratives: Freud's reading of the dream of the burning child as wish fulfillment, in which the living child of the dream temporarily defies the reality of the father's loss. Caruth has responded to both this and Lacan's reading of the dream, in which the child is paradoxically alive for the first time as the father (for the first time) bears witness to his suffering, as a moment when care comes too late: "Awakening, in Lacan's reading of the dream, is itself the site of trauma, the trauma of the necessity and the impossibility of responding to another's death."<sup>278</sup> Care, like the recognition of trauma in Freud's archetypal story, always comes too late. Care is belated because the other is only in need of care after being somehow victimized, immobilized, or threatened. Susan Barton cares for Friday only after he has had his tongue cut out; the Magistrate cares for the barbarian girl only after she has been tortured by Colonel Joll (something he might have actually stopped from happening); Lurie's care of the dog corpses comes only after he's failed to prevent the living dogs from being euthanized; the care of the "stump" in *Slow Man* only necessitated by Paul Rayment's bicycle accident and the amputation of his leg. Coetzee's postponement of care in *Summertime*, finally, constitutes a clear recognition of the way care intervenes too late. Building on this idea, I would argue that care offers a more provisional model of mourning inasmuch as it also contains within it the desire to undo the loss or the trauma, to go both backward *and* forward in time – back to stop the disaster that happened and forward to

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<sup>278</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 100.

prevent the one that is impending.

The refusal of a possible “third way” echoes another opposition in the passage, one that has less to do with the time of care and more to do with the space of care. I am referring here to the paragraph that specifies that care “is the patient’s business, or the patient’s family’s business, or else no one’s business.” In this sense, the possibility of relating is actually restricted to two options: the victim himself, and those who are immediate or local (the family). The third option is *no one*. This passage evokes the way in which care is circumscribed or predetermined by space, by the spaces in which care can traditionally be administered: hospitals, homes, deathbeds, etc. Furthermore, in this passage, the potential for care is circumscribed by blood relations; John has a duty to care for his father precisely because he is his father. Though Coetzee’s later novels have implicitly questioned what constitutes a mournable life by rendering their objects of care into abstraction, they urgently beg the question of how one might cope with the spatial and conceptual limits of what constitutes a mournable life. If mourning is necessarily circumscribed by these limits, how might acts of mourning enable a space where one might ethically, affectively, or otherwise respond to the alterity of another’s loss, or the loss of another?

If care figures a gesture to that “third way” of responding to loss, a provisional space between a totalizing mourning and a radically open melancholia, it also offers a new way of thinking about empathy as a potential response to another’s loss or trauma, an experience that by definition defies understanding. It would not be misleading to suggest that all of J. M. Coetzee’s novels have in some way dealt with the relationship between a subject determined to make meaning out of another’s experience and the way that experience resists understanding.<sup>279</sup> However, I would

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<sup>279</sup> Durrant has also argued this with regard to Coetzee’s earlier novels in which “the reader is invited to identify with the narrator’s inability to identify with the other”(27).

argue that the resilient silence that Durrant identifies points to much more than just the impossibility of speaking trauma. The fact that the story of the elision of the other is told *through* a process of eliding otherness brings the very problem of identification to the foreground. These scenes which depicted the forestalled moment of comprehension – Susan Barton’s attempt to learn about Friday’s past, the Magistrate’s attempt to access the barbarian girl’s experience of torture, and in Coetzee’s later novel, *Disgrace*, David Lurie’s attempts to get his daughter, Lucy, to recount the story of her rape – the narrative is always focalized through someone trying to understand something that is ostensibly impossible to understand. Taking into account these scenes which feature so prominently in the novels, scenes which in Durrant’s argument exemplify a character-based embodiment of unrepresentable material history, I would like to briefly examine how they might contribute to a different understanding of the possibility of empathic relation.

In these scenes, Coetzee’s novels dare the reader to identify, but in their refusal they are also always challenging the potential conflation of identification and empathy. Durrant also argues that the novels portray empathy as something which always involves a questionable identification with the other; in his understanding, “Coetzee’s novels implicitly argue that to transcend the other’s alterity is to efface that alterity, that the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine the other as the same, as another version of the self.”<sup>280</sup> The problem with Durrant’s argument, however, is that it comes close to valorizing traumatization, or at least abjection, when it claims that in Coetzee’s novels,

the possibility of reconciliation lies not in our ability to *empathize* with the other but rather in an experience of *abjection*, which, instead of gaining imaginative access to the experience of another subject, one experiences a

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<sup>280</sup> Durrant, 27.

radical loss of subjectivity, an “experience” (if one can speak of experience in the absence of a subject) that approximates...the experience of being other.<sup>281</sup>

Durrant’s characterization of this warped “act of empathy” as an act that propels the subject temporarily into an “underworld of suffering” from which “it becomes momentarily possible to witness, if not to participate in, the ‘true grief’ of the other”<sup>282</sup> sounds eerily like an advocacy of secondary traumatization that itself involves a process of identification. This is confirmed by Durrant’s claim that the “gap between privileged narrator and oppressed other is perhaps at its narrowest in *Waiting for the Barbarians* where “it is the Magistrate who comes closest...to experiencing himself as other” during his own experience of torture which, according to Durrant, negates his own subjectivity.<sup>283</sup> In a similar formulation, silence bears witness to silence, so

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 49. This is also how Durrant links the novel with apartheid South Africa, suggesting that “[as] a way of bearing witness to the negation of subjectivity at the heart of apartheid, Coetzee incorporates foreign bodies into his narratives, bodies that remain obdurately unfamiliar despite the close attentions of his narrators”(17-18). Durrant has suggested that *Waiting for the Barbarians* “dramatizes the question of how to address oneself to a history that remains inaccessible even in the very moment of its occurrence”(42), linking it to contemporary South African history in its refusal of direct representation. For Durrant, “a realist account of apartheid would turn it into a digestible historical narrative, allowing us to mourn and move on”(50) while “Coetzee’s novels resist this process of verbalization and relentlessly force us to confront...the suffering engendered by apartheid”(50). This reading attempts to justify Coetzee’s presumed use of allegory on the grounds that representing South Africa realistically would constitute the same historicist move that successfully mourns the past and forgets it. Durrant’s understanding of Coetzee’s use of allegory is complex and somewhat contradictory. On one hand, in making these kinds of claims about the resistance to understanding, Durrant is writing against a critical tendency to read Coetzee’s works as simple allegories that “recover” South African history under apartheid. In this way, the sense that the novels resist an easy recuperation of history might be seen as their resistance to allegorical reading that says they are “about” South Africa when Coetzee’s work has always problematized this kind of one-to-one allegorical reading. See Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). However, the very fact that Durrant reads the novels as a resistance to historical representation

according to Durrant's analysis of *Foe*, "by positioning Friday's story as a hole in her own narrative, Susan allows the emptiness of her own narrative to bear witness to Friday's loss of history – and to the wider history of loss to which the 'fact' of his mut(e)ilation itself bears witness."<sup>284</sup>

I have tried throughout this project to move away from a model of silence as a mode of testimony and ethical transmission of traumatic experience. With this in mind, I want to focus in particular on the claim that the Magistrate's loss of subjectivity is the closest a character comes "to experiencing himself as other," and ostensibly achieving some kind of sympathetic understanding. Rather than sum up Durrant's account of how this takes place in Coetzee's early novels, I will briefly examine how *Disgrace* sets up (and complicates) this problem by staging two instances of its protagonist, David Lurie's, attempt to relate to the suffering of others. In the first case, he tries again and again to reconstruct the exact events of his daughter's rape, which he could neither prevent nor witness because the assailants locked him in another room. Faced with her refusal to discuss it, along with her unsettling decision to remain on the farm after striking a deal with the same man who might have set the attack in motion, Lurie's task throughout the novel seems to involve his development of personal mechanisms for identification that would ostensibly allow him to relate. When Bev Shaw accuses him of not being capable of identifying on the grounds that "*You don't understand, you weren't there,*"<sup>285</sup> David begins a process of attempting to "be the woman," which culminates in his ability to recognize the crime he committed at the beginning of the novel, for which he

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reaffirms his understanding of their allegorical nature, inserting them into a framework where it is the *characters* whose impermeability figures the "negation of subjectivity at the heart of apartheid." In this sense, Durrant reaffirms the allegorical reading that his interpretation subtly contests.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>285</sup> Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 160.

continually refuses to “repent.” In this way, it is easy to imagine the novel, which opens with Lurie’s own seduction, arguably any ambiguous rape, of one of his students proceeds in a way that allows Lurie to hone his potential for identifying with the victim by imagining himself in her place. It seems at first glance to suggest that it is only once he has “been there” and been the victim of an attack himself that he can begin to identify with others.

However, if the novel implies that, through identifying with Lucy and Melanie, Lurie is able to come to terms with two of the novel’s “disgraces” – his sexual relationship with Melanie, and Lucy’s rape – it stops this process of “successful” identification short when it structurally parallels Lurie’s ostensible understanding of Lucy’s experience with his work in Bev Shaw’s clinic where he attempts to ameliorate the disgraceful way in which the dead dogs are cremated. Lurie adopts the role as “a dog undertaker” because of an obligation he feels to “his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.”<sup>286</sup> When questioning the sense of urgency he feels to perform this role, however, he acknowledges overtly that it is *not* “for the sake of the dogs” because “the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?”<sup>287</sup> Lurie’s important recognition of the *difference* between his own desire and moral obligation and that of the dead dogs (whose feelings about their way of burial he cannot know) demonstrates how his own ostensible empathy for the dogs exists at the level of identification; he experiences an obligation to handle the bodies “honorably” because it is how he would expect to be handled. Similarly, when he eventually leaves the farm, he understands his abandonment of the position of “dog undertaker” as a betrayal: “From Monday onward the dogs released from life within the walls of the

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

clinic will be tossed into the fire unmarked, unmourned.”<sup>288</sup> The fact that Lurie’s empathy for the dog corpses remains at the level of projective identification – in the sense that he imagines himself in their place, and relates in that sense to an anxiety about being “released from life” and then “unmarked, unmourned” – parallels his identification with Lucy and reveals the flaws in the way his act of empathy for her is set up as “successful.”

Inasmuch as this reading reveals the failure of *all* of the novel’s acts of empathy as mere identification, this would presumably be consistent with Durrant’s reading of the ways in which, in Coetzee’s novels, “the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine the other as the same, as another version of the self.”<sup>289</sup> But rather than lingering on the undecidability of Coetzee’s characters who, Durrant argues, bear witness to a history that defies understanding, I suggest that Coetzee stages moments of potential empathy that always slip into identification as a way to problematize one way of relating to otherness. The way Durrant sets up an opposition between preserving alterity and eliding it involves an understanding of empathy as identification in which self is conflated with other. However, other modes of empathetic response exist. For instance, against a dubious model of identification in which the secondary witness assumes the subject position of the victim, LaCapra posits empathy as “a kind of virtual experience” in which one relates to the other without “making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject position.”<sup>290</sup> This virtual surrogacy is something that I have been attempting to trace in the texts of the three writers I have so far dealt with in this project, particularly as an effect of what Michael Rothberg has termed “multidirectional memory.” In this sense, legitimate empathy would not involve a conflation of self and other but would

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<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>289</sup> Durrant, 27.

<sup>290</sup> LaCapra, *WHWT*, 78.

involve, rather, a process of temporarily “[putting] oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place.”<sup>291</sup> It would involve recognizing this difference while at the same time acknowledging convergences between histories and experiences, allowing the kind of analogic thinking that necessarily informs comparative trauma studies in processing histories in a way that doesn’t render them equivalent. Analogic thinking, after all, need not involve projective identification or the facile conflation of two different events.

However, I want to suggest that Coetzee’s work is concerned with a conflation of identification and empathy, and that the way in which he constantly foregrounds this conflation allows his novels to articulate a different kind of resistance to mourning than the one that Durrant describes. As I have already shown, one way Coetzee problematizes this conflation of identification and empathy is precisely through the staging of unreadability that is so central to Durrant’s reading. Most acts of potential empathy in the novels involve the more powerful figure (the Magistrate, the doctor in *Michael K*, David Lurie, etc.) attempting to imagine himself in the other’s place but finding all attempts to do so inadequate. This trend is consistent in the later novels; in *Disgrace* it comes across in Lurie’s attempt to imagine himself in the place of his daughter and the dogs he cremates, and in *Summertime* it emerges through the biographer’s attempt to know something of John Coetzee. The narratives of *Summertime*, of course, purport to be “about” the late Coetzee, but the testimonies shed no light on his inner thoughts. Each character Vincent interviews merely expresses discontent or confusion about a figure that was impervious and difficult to relate to. In this way, Coetzee himself becomes the main object of obsession that the narrative resists representing.

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

While Durrant reads this resistance as part of Coetzee's interest in staging "the impossible task of relating to the other as other,"<sup>292</sup> I am also interested in the way this resistance to identification – or rather, the continued portrayal of figures that are irrecuperable, impenetrable, an affront to understanding – frames the problem of the "specificity" of traumatic experience. Arguably, because there is no possibility for finding some sense of commonality, there is no possibility for relation in Coetzee's novels. But at the same time, the failure of this kind of "empathy" which subsumes otherness points to a resistance in the novels against allowing this problematic identification to take place. Building on Durrant's argument, I would suggest that the novels *must* resist this because the possibility of fully identifying with a suffering other problematically promotes a false sense of the possibility for collective mourning based on an impossibly complete identification. Furthermore, if there could be a universalizing means of imagining empathy – if the trauma the empathetic witness imagines could be rendered somehow equal to the lived experience of that other's trauma – then a "successful" collective mourning could materialize, but only in a way that utterly effaced the differences between individuals. Paradoxically, the latter is intimated in Durrant's own seeming affirmation of secondary traumatization that requires identification.

The resistance to identification in Coetzee's novels ultimately suggests that any universal model of empathy is suspect. While we might understand Durrant's quasi-deconstructive focus on otherness as a paradoxically abstract dedication to specificity, it forms part of a general theory of how one should ethically relate to radically heterogeneous other. I have already explained how in Durrant's argument, the impetus to depathologize melancholia is connected to an acceptance of ghosts, in which the subject comes to understand the experience of being haunted as an ethical

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<sup>292</sup> Durrant, 27.

resistance to closure. The conflation of melancholia with a historical materialist understanding of the past implies that giving up the ghost is an act of totalization, historicism, fixing the unfixable, representing the unrepresentable. At the same time, the whole idea of its political and moral efficacy seems centered on a ceaseless, “ethical” devotion to undecidability that actually elides all specificity. It is important to mention that Durrant explicitly argues for a need to differentiate between “the Other” of radical heterogeneity and “the Other” of racism, sexism, and homophobia, what he calls “the material history of othering, the violent negation or foreclosure of subjectivity that characterizes the history of racism.”<sup>293</sup> However, I would argue that his rigid distinction between history and that which resists historical representation risks conflating the two.

One of the problems that arises is how to reconcile an argument against the simple identification with the other with my argument against the valorization of melancholia, one facet of which is dedicated to the preservation of the alterity of the other (and therefore, implicitly, the foreclosure of identification). I suggested earlier that Coetzee’s work constantly foregrounds the problematic conflation of empathy with identification and, in doing so, alludes to a different kind of resistance to mourning – mourning based on imagining oneself in the other’s place and, in that sense, mourning one’s own perceived experience of loss instead of the other’s. In this model, one experience of loss becomes a simple allegory for another. Taking into account the ways in which Coetzee’s novels stage this dilemma, we might ask if they also propose the possibility of mourning without identification and without usurping the place of the other. Do the novels suggest an alternative mode of relation instead of simply highlighting the pitfalls of this one?

*Summertime* offers an answer to this question through its focus on *care* rather

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 14.

than empathy as a mode of response to another's suffering. Coetzee's work has from the beginning been concerned with a conflation of identification and empathy, and that the way in which he constantly foregrounds this conflation allows his novels to articulate a different kind of resistance to mourning than the one that Durrant describes. This resistance has less to do with resisting assimilating the alterity of death or loss than it does with a simple identification with the victim that becomes a disembodied wound, one which the witness has not experienced but nonetheless identifies with. But this does not mean that Coetzee's novels reject mourning flat-out; rather, they reject a model of mourning based on identification. In response to this, I suggest that Coetzee offers an alternative mode of relation in place of this foreclosing identification, and it takes place through the suspended mourning that occurs through the novels' acts of care. If empathy is based on a fantasy of recognition, care, as I have suggested, involves a gesture to that other that not predicated on the fullness of identification.

The either/or dynamic of *Summertime*'s final moment of stalled care echoes a choice Durrant sets up between a dedication to endless grief which would ostensibly prevent the assimilation of traumatic history into something manageable and, therefore forgettable, and a closure which would do exactly the opposite:

Should postcolonial novelists follow the example of psychoanalysis and seek to transform melancholia in to mourning, or should they allow the endlessness of grief to overwhelm the literary work? Should their work offer some form of healing or closure or continue to testify to the disproportionate memories of racial oppression by somehow transgressing the limits of their own composition?"<sup>294</sup>

But does Durrant's reading make room for a possible "third way" that postcolonial

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 10.

writing might go? This dissertation has attempted to suggest other ways this resistance might take place, while also maintaining an interest in a critique of fixity in its urge to destabilize ostensibly stable notions of identity, culture, and nation. While other critics have suggested this destabilization might take place from an excess of loss that necessitates a dialogic relationship to the past, I have attempted to do so in a way that says mourning, not melancholia might provide the dialogic basis for that relationship, but a reimagined process of mourning that would not conflate self with other, and while recognizing similarity, would not assimilate difference into equivalence.

The question remains as to whether Durrant's account articulates a specific "postcolonial" work of mourning, or whether his presumed particularity of interest in postcolonial questions is not subsumed by a more general theory about the writing of any history. While Durrant implies that these approaches are central to postcolonial thought, there is the sense that the anti-historicist remembrance he advocates could apply to anything, not just the way (some) postcolonial literature have tended to foreground encounters with otherness that cannot be subsumed. When attempting to provisionally represent or rendering into narrative a story about colonial trauma, is this "anti-historicist, deconstructive ethics of remembrance" the *only* possible way to resist the kind of totalizing representation of the past attributed to the fixity of monumentalization? If the broad concern motivating recent critical work on melancholia is how to supersede a work of mourning that assimilates and therefore subsumes otherness, perhaps the critical decision to replace empathy with *care* offers a way out of the fantasy of full identification and the related concept of full assimilation. Mike Marais's work on hospitality in Coetzee's fiction is worth mentioning here because it aligns with Durrant's argument in its concern with the impossibility of narrating history without foreclosing it. Adopting a similar opposition between

history and an otherness that is “beyond” or “in excess of” it, Marais contends that,

“[if] the writer is responsible for what is other than history, but to which history is refractory, s/he is faced with an impossible, because always still to be completed, task. If [...] the other cannot be accommodated, the writer’s task is never done. The other exceeds and constantly interrupts what has been written, thereby signaling the work’s incompleteness and inadequacy while at the same time requiring, indeed, demanding, that more be written.”<sup>295</sup>

While mourning is not the explicit focus of Marais’s argument, his understanding of the way that mastery is interrupted by an always uncompleted attempt to accommodate another’s story of pain is relevant. But Marais’s argument is also of interest because of care’s potential relation to and difference from hospitality. If care is necessarily circumscribed by certain spatial and conceptual limits, it differs fundamentally from hospitality’s unconditional opening to the absolute stranger. Ultimately, Coetzee’s recent fiction forces us to ask whether or not care as mourning really enables a space where one might ethically, affectively, or otherwise respond to radical alterity.

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<sup>295</sup> Marais, xiv. Marais briefly identifies the etymological link between care and mourning; however, mourning does not play an important role in his analysis. Instead, Marais’s book offers a sustained analysis of the reoccurring figure of the “damaged child and the theme of betrayal in Coetzee’s writing”(xiv) that is worth mentioning here because it dovetails with Durrant’s understanding of Coetzee’s refusal of the fullness of historical representation. Marais argues that Coetzee’s work is fixated on an otherness that “is figured as being absolute in its irreducibility”(xiii); the writer’s attempt, in turn, to master this otherness and bring it into narrative results in a double bind in which the writer is simultaneously bound to what Marais calls, “the invisible” – a metaphor he uses to describe an otherness that is “beyond us”(xiii) – and the realization that “to render visible the invisible is to destroy the invisible”(xiv). The lost or deformed child stands for this invisibility that can never be made visible, but nonetheless makes an ethical demand on the writer; the writer must accommodate the otherness of the invisible/the child, but to do so fully would be to deface or betray it.

Arguably, the necessity of ongoing interaction is suggested by the very definition of care. In addition to its connection to “utterance of sorrow; lamentation, mourning,”<sup>296</sup> care etymologically concatenates preservation and rejection, holding on and letting go. It simultaneously means, “[c]harge; oversight with a view to protection, preservation, or guidance” and “[t]o look after; to deal with, provide for, dispose of.” The simultaneity of preservation and disposal, maintenance and “laying to rest” registers the way Coetzee implicitly complicates a prescription of resistant mourning, paradoxically enough, through a prescription of care on a “cyclostyled sheet” detailing the correct treatment of wounds.

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<sup>296</sup> All definitions are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This project has looked to trauma studies as a potential comparative framework that perhaps can lead to a non-instrumental, relational understanding of different events, experiences, and identities. In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth suggests that “in a catastrophic age... trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures.”<sup>297</sup> This claim has been frequently cited by postcolonial scholars attempting to justify the intersection of trauma studies and the postcolonial. As a form of theoretical or thematic “area” studies (in which we study “sites” of trauma), trauma as a critical framework arguably invites us to think of incommensurable experience as the unlikely basis for commensurability between cultures. However, how do we reconcile the application of trauma studies, which as a field is deeply rooted in European intellectual history and events, to postcolonial contexts? If trauma studies purports to theorize individual and collective trauma, does it do so in ways that sufficiently account for specific iterations in different scenarios? Does its inflection with universalizing scientific accounts of psychological stress make it incompatible with accounts of cultural difference? These are some of the questions I attempted to address by working toward a “transnational” reading of postcolonial trauma narratives.

The primary aim of this dissertation has been to show how the intersection of trauma theory with postcolonial contexts might help unravel certain problematic assumptions within the predominantly Eurocentric discipline of trauma studies, particularly an unguarded valorization of melancholia which has formed a recent trend

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<sup>297</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 11.

in the field. I prefaced this project with a description of the kinds of arguments made against the simple application of trauma studies to postcolonial contexts, citing the way that critics like Anne Whitehead have called for an analysis of alternative (postcolonial) notions of selfhood, community, and recovery that might challenge the Eurocentric privileging of “the individualist self” central to understanding the effects of psychological trauma. But my analysis has also sought to problematize Whitehead’s question about whether or not we can understand “the postcolonial text as a site for articulating local, non-western concepts of suffering, loss, and bereavement or alternatively of recovery and healing.”<sup>298</sup> While it is undoubtedly important to account for the ways contemporary understandings of trauma’s aftermath might differ across cultures, I want to draw attention to the problem of thinking in terms of a European/non-European, or “Western”/“non-Western” binary opposition when attempting to articulate a theory of colonial trauma. While we must resist the urge to import any theoretical model onto a context which might resist that model’s basic assumptions, I would argue that there is something paradoxical about attempting to imagine a completely non-Eurocentric theory of trauma – something which the urgent call to challenge trauma theory with “non-western” ideas of subjectivity, consciousness, and traumatization fail to account for. Simply put, the very colonial violence that one might call traumatic (in the terms established by European trauma theory) results from European and non-European cultural interactions and is therefore never entirely homogeneous. The paradox here is that a thorough approach to “postcolonial trauma studies” must strive to articulate a theory of colonial trauma which necessarily requires a repudiation of Eurocentric trauma theory at the same time that it resists the idea of a purely ‘non-European’ trauma.

I have tried to navigate this complex approach in two ways: firstly, by

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<sup>298</sup> Whitehead, 15.

recognizing the way that these texts challenge established ideas within trauma studies (whether they are “Eurocentric” or not), and secondly, by attempting to show how recent postcolonial writing is attempting to articulate new, relational mourning practices that extend across racial, national, or regional boundaries. In this way, my project picks up concerns that Michael Rothberg has raised in his recent *Multidirectional Memory*, which proposes the idea of “multidirectional memory” as a corrective to models of collective memory that assume “a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources”<sup>299</sup> in which the act of remembering one event effaces another. Like Rothberg, I am also interested to “rethink the conceptualization of collective memory in multicultural and transnational contexts,”<sup>300</sup> a task which is especially important in the context of colonial trauma because of the complex interrelation between specific theories of memory and traditions of mourning which are heterogeneous precisely because of colonization and globalization. This is not to say that we shouldn’t challenge trauma theory and its potentially “Eurocentric” ideas – for example the emphasis on individualism that underscores the basic assumptions of psychoanalysis – which render the discipline problematic in certain ways; rather, we must be careful in thinking that colonial memory or colonial trauma exists in a ‘purely’ colonial way, just as the way trauma operates in the former colonies is not accountable in terms of a ‘purely’ European mode of theorizing.

As I briefly explained in my introduction, Rothberg has alluded to the implicit interconnectedness of trauma studies and postcolonial studies in his comparative study of Holocaust memory and the memory of colonization and slavery in North Africa, North America, and the Caribbean; at the level of academic and broader cultural examination he explains how “the emergency of collective memory of the Nazi

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<sup>299</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 3.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

genocide in the 1950s and 1960s takes places in a punctual dialogue with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism.”<sup>301</sup> The implication, of course, is that what we currently know as “Eurocentric” trauma theory, which first proliferated around analysis of Holocaust memory, has always been motivated and influenced by an intellectually contemporary and politically visible process of the world “working through” the history of colonialism. This is another reason why a rigid distinction between the two fields, and between European and “non-European” areas of study is problematic.<sup>302</sup>

My project is smaller in scope than Rothberg’s as it concentrates solely on postcolonial texts from two regions, but it is also concerned with questioning the distinction between the universal and the particular, as well as making theoretical connections that transcend regional boundaries. I have suggested that imagining new, provisional acts of mourning based not in an ideal recuperation of past rituals, but the imagination of new ones (which often involve juxtaposing different contexts and bringing them together as what Rothberg has called “singular yet relational histories”<sup>303</sup>) might provide one opportunity to rethinking trauma studies. I have also

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>302</sup> At the same time, Rothberg has indicated elsewhere that “a decolonized trauma studies should attempt to demonstrate the internal heterogeneity of Europe, North America, and Australia at the same time that it draws attention to the frequent non-fit between the categories of colonizing nations and those of the societies they have colonized.” (See Rothberg, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies,” 228.) While the modes of analysis might be intricately interwoven, it is important to recognize the particularities of trauma in a colonial context; pointing to the intricacies of modes analysis should not collapse the distinction between perpetrator and victim, colonizer and colonized.

<sup>303</sup> Rothberg, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies: a response,” *Studies in the Novel* 40.1&2 (Spring & Summer 2008): 225. Here Rothberg has also usefully identified problems with conceptualizing “non-western” trauma on the grounds that the very terminology substantiates that which it attempts to undo: “Not only is the referent of the “West” highly elusive, but the use of the concept ends up confirming the racialized framework

claimed that tending to the way these new and heterogeneous modes of mourning create provisional ways of working through the past can challenge an unqualified valorization of a melancholic attachment to loss which has permeated recent theory. This is just one of the ways that bringing together different contexts of historical trauma and interpreting them as “singular yet relational histories” might reveal flaws in the conventional assumptions of trauma theory, not just in its applications to “nonwestern” contexts, but European ones as well.

Another way conventional models might be challenged is through what Rothberg calls an “extended” versus an “event” theory of trauma, something which I have implicitly done by focusing on extended histories of violence rather than single events. Taking into account arguments “that the category of trauma, as it has been developed by Caruth, Felman, Laub, and others, “cannot illuminate ‘non-Western’ trauma because it remains locked in a one-dimensional ‘event theory’ if trauma,”<sup>304</sup> Rothberg suggests that an event-centric theory of trauma based on temporal rupture might just as well fail in its application to European objects of study. After all, as he points out, “the ‘extended’ model of trauma and the rethinking of historical trauma are as relevant to a ‘western’ trauma such as the Holocaust (hardly a singular event) as they are to colonial and racial traumas.”<sup>305</sup> Thinking about the status of trauma as an event, a singular rupture in time, or a more gradual experience of the continuous violence which more aptly characterizes colonial trauma would be one other possible way of envisioning a postcolonial trauma studies, but one which has been subordinated to my attempts to look closely at the problem of mourning and, in

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it seems to mark and displace”(227). Furthermore, the binary opposition of West/non-West” does not account for certain postcolonial situations. Rothberg uses South Africa as an example of this, as well as “ongoing violence suffered by indigenous peoples *within* the “West””(228, my emphasis).

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 229.

particular, a on literature as a “memorializing project” that presents new options for memorializing rather than a resistance to mourning as such.

I have attempted to chart how these newly articulated modes of mourning, which challenge a stereotypical understanding of mourning as something that closes down one’s relationship with the past, might also point to new ways of thinking about the specificity of losses within a comparative framework which, by definition, attempts to articulate a general theory about responses to loss. Where Rothberg has chosen the term “multidirectional” to identify “an in-between space” that separates “a homogenizing universalism and nominalist particularism,”<sup>306</sup> I have picked up Glissant’s term, *Relation*, to emphasize the importance of delegitimizing “root causes” in favor of flow, circulation, and re-iteration. While Rothberg’s term is useful in rebutting the notion of “competitive memory,” thinking about the movement of memory in terms of *direction* still supposes a kind of telos. *Relation*, on the other hand, moves away from an end-driven narrative and allows for a more flexible account for the way responses to loss circulate and change. Most importantly, the repudiation of endpoints and origins, which one can only relate to in terms of a melancholic repetition or look back, can lead to new ways of countering ceaseless acting out, and new ways of theorizing acts of working through loss as the productive, provisional embodiment of such an “in-between space.”

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

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