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*Workshop: **The Political Uses of Narrative***

*Paper Title: **True Fictions: Truth, Reconciliation, and the Narrativisation of Identity***

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**True Fictions:  
Truth, Reconciliation, and the Narrativisation of Identity**

*Man is always a storyteller! He lives surrounded by his and others' myths.  
With them he sees everything in his life, no matter what befalls him.  
And he seeks to live his life as though he were telling it.  
- Jean Paul Sartre<sup>1</sup>*

This paper examines the role played by narrative in the discursive (re)constitution of the nation during or following transition. It assumes that the nation is, to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, an 'imagined community' to which individuals affiliate themselves. This imagined community is subject to, and produced by, a continuous performance of its 'presence', and narrative constitutes one of the performative dimensions of this articulation.<sup>2</sup> This paper looks in particular at the way in which state-driven truth commissions narrate the 'divided' nation as a coherent entity during or following transitions from civil conflict to peace, or from authoritarian to more democratic regimes. It examines various sites of identity construction paying close attention to personal testimonies and official reports, and to individual and group resistance to truth and reconciliation narratives. The Argentinian, Chilean, and South African commissions are drawn upon to illustrate this discussion.

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An examination of the narrative constitution of the nation suggests that nations are not natural, pre-discursive subjects, but are constantly in the process of enunciation. Narrative, as a discursive code, operates performatively to try to stabilise and fix the identity of the nation. Through a performative understanding of narrative, it is possible to demonstrate the way in which the nation 'materialises' as a product of its narration.<sup>3</sup> Performativity is primarily concerned with 'the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes'.<sup>4</sup> Viewed in this way, the nation can be understood to emerge as an effect or product of such citational processes as narrative. The ontological status of the nation is brought into question once this claim is made, as citational processes do not reflect or represent something pre-given, but constitute their

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman eds., *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, State University of New York Press, 1997, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Other performative articulations of the nation include practices of remembrance such as ceremonies and monuments.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is influenced by Judith Butler's work on performativity in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, London, 1993, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, London, 1997, and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1990. For other readings of similar arguments in international relations see David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992; Cynthia Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, and R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 2.

subjects and, however briefly, bring them 'into being'. However, citational processes invoke and approximate, rather than truly fulfil, the concepts we cite. In view of this, the nation is perhaps best understood as being subject to a constant process of iteration and re-iteration in its making and re-making. It is elusive, and illusory at best.

This paper attempts to come to terms with the performative effects of one such citational process: the narrative of truth and reconciliation. The performative effects of truth and reconciliation narratives convey the presumed securities of a continuous national community in two ways: firstly by featuring a linear representation of time in which past, present, and future are represented sequentially. This feature of narrative communicates the idea that revelations of the 'truth' about the past lead to 'reconciliation' in the present, and that this sequence is somehow 'natural' and inevitable. Secondly, through the notion of 'reconciliation', implying a sense of prior national unity, the 'return' to which is facilitated by the investigations of the commissions.

The state-led Argentinian, Chilean, and South African truth commissions gathered individual testimonies from both victims and perpetrators of human rights abuses, culminating in an officially sanctioned history of the 'disinterred' period of the nation's past. As agents of transition, these truth commissions constituted overarching narrative structures that defined and constrained the testimonies of individuals produced at the behest of each commission. A nation divided into 'victims' and 'perpetrators' was, through the process of storytelling, 'reconciled' through the production of a collective memory of the historical events under consideration.<sup>5</sup> This common understanding was guided by the themes of 'truth' and 'reconciliation' through which the citational processes of oral testimonies and written histories were mediated. As a result, these commissions constituted a strategy of identification and 'discursive address that function in the name of... the nation', making it the 'immanent subject' of a narrative of transition.<sup>6</sup>

### *time and the nation*

A narrative is a discursive code which organises experience and makes sense of the world in which we live. In particular, it constitutes and mediates temporality. Paul Ricoeur states:

... narrativity and temporality are closely related - as closely as, in Wittgenstein's terms, a language game and a form of life. Indeed, I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This characterisation of the 'divided' nation as a nation of victims and perpetrators is perhaps sharpest in the South African case, although there is some discussion in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report about the dangers of making such clear distinctions where some individuals may be considered to be both victim and perpetrator at one and the same time.

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation', in Homi Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. 292.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 165. I would go further to suggest that narrative does not reflect, but *constitutes* temporality as a structure.

In *Time and Narrative* and in subsequent publications, Ricoeur designates narrative as presenting an illusion of chronology which constitutes our experience of time, and through which we present coherent stories which stress causality and connections between the recounted events, between past and present, and the occurrences of yesterday and today.<sup>8</sup> The performative effect of this illusion of chronology constitutes the narrative subject as a coherent, stable entity in which the past is placed in a line of continuous development. In reframing the past and providing the contexts for collective remembrance, truth commissions employ a teleology of 'progress' from truth revelation to reconciliation. Truth revelation in the present about atrocities committed in the past is assumed to prevent human rights violations from happening in the future. The *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation* states that 'the truth was considered as an absolute, unrenounceable value for many reasons... the truth also brings a measure of social catharsis and helps to prevent the past from reoccurring.'<sup>9</sup>

The narrative structuration of truth commissions employs the trajectory of the state from a condition of disorder and/or malpractice, to one of greater stability characterised by openness and a commitment to human rights. The transition between these states of affairs is marked by reflection upon and interrogation of the past which is aimed at instigating change in the future. Truth and reconciliation narratives deal with the reconstruction of specific events having taken place during a clearly delineated time period. The 'datable, public, and measurable nature' of linear time<sup>10</sup> functions in part to underscore a break with the past and to chart a trajectory of 'development' or 'growth' from the time under investigation to the present, in which 'national time becomes concrete and visible... from beginning to end'.<sup>11</sup>

Truth commissions stage a 'temporal gap' between past and future in order to serve the purposes of collective reflection and meditation upon the past. A linear representation of time operates in order to separate the identity of the state that committed human rights abuses in the past, from the state identity under construction. The foundational assumption of the process is that the revelation of the 'truth' about the past will prevent traumatic memories from disrupting peace in the present. The *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* of South Africa inaugurated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and claims to provide a 'historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence for all South Africans...' and that 'it is deemed necessary to establish the truth in relation to past events... and to make the findings known in order to prevent a repetition of such

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<sup>8</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volumes 1-3*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, and *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, 1992. Also note that whilst narratives share temporal features, it is not necessary for all narratives to depict time as having a linear trajectory. Equally, in spoken narratives it is common for narrators to switch from one time perspective to another in order to relate their tales.

<sup>9</sup> *The Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1993, Vol. 1, p. xxxi.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Narrative Time', in Mitchell ed., *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

acts in future...'<sup>12</sup> These statements invoke an image of temporal linearity, situating the process of reconciliation between past and future. The reflective gap between past and future bridged by the commission operates in order to mark a discontinuity with former political practices. It attempts to signal entry into different practices of governance characterised by openness, accountability, and the importance of human rights. In effect, the interstice marks a performative opportunity to narrate the trajectory of identity change.

The writing of national history in the form of official reports secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of a national subject evolving through time. Narration is the process through which the nation materialises as both the subject and product of the truth and reconciliation discourse, and constitutes an 'object of psychic identification'.<sup>13</sup> The reports objectify the nation as a unitary entity with a linear descent from truth to reconciliation, and attempt to provide continuity via a fusion of collective memory production and history writing in order to represent 'social cohesion'. Narrative chronology constructs the telling of a transition from a condition of disorder and disruption to a condition of greater stability, security, and control. A linear notion of time permits a particular 'way of worldmaking'<sup>14</sup> which emphasises causality and connexity between events, and designates past, present, and future as bounded yet connected entities. This constitutes a temporal unity, unidirectionality, and unidimensionality which underpins assumptions that we can, for example, 'bury' or 'close off' a traumatic past to effect a separation of past from present and construct the possibility of a future 'free from the torments of the past'.

### ***it's good to talk: the narrative construction of identity***

The ubiquity, if not the ontological status of narrative, is attested to by a number of theorists across a range of disciplines, some of whom claim that a world without narrative accounts is unimaginable.<sup>15</sup> These accounts include not only the written, visual, and musical modes, but also the spoken or conversational construction of stories about the self and others. If, as according to Sartre, stories are as much lived as told, then narrative is constitutive of identity at both the individual and collective levels, and it is in the *telling* of the tale that the narrative subject emerges.<sup>16</sup> The Argentinian, Chilean, and South African commissions all collected individual testimonies from both perpetrators and victims of human rights abuses as part of their investigations, and in doing so posited individual narrative accounts as central to the transitional process, and to 'rewriting' the

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<sup>12</sup> The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995, page 1.

<sup>13</sup> Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

<sup>14</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

<sup>15</sup> See Cristopher Nash ed., *Narrative in Culture: The Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy, and Literature*, Routledge, 1993. See also the variety of literature on narrative by Hannah Arendt, Roland Barthes, David Carr, Seymour Chatman, Nelson Goodman, Robert Kellog, Frank Kermode, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur, Roy Schafer, Robert Scholes, and Hayden White.

<sup>16</sup> See also Terrell Carver; "Lives are lived fictions, some borrowed and others invented; it is this self-created and collectively acted process that creates what should be of most interest to 'political scientists'", *Interpreting the Political: New Methodologies*, Routledge, 1997, p. 17.

past. The assumed importance of storytelling as a means of identity transformation reflects a platitude of some psychoanalytic approaches.

Elisabeth Lira, a psychologist working with the Guatemalan truth commission, describes the process of uncovering the truth as an exercise in 'breaking the silence', something she considers essential to the construction of a collective memory of the past that acknowledges not only repression and abuses, but also the work of resistance movements.<sup>17</sup> She also comments that it is necessary to provide the frameworks for recollection that allow the 'wounds' of memory to close. In Lira's view, the contexts for recollection operate in order to 'connect' the individual to society, and the solicitation of testimony allows the entry of previously denied narratives into the 'public consciousness'. Lira states that the restoration of the link between the individual's grief and their collective experience is vital as it helps to provide some sense of what happened 'whether as a way of understanding the past, or of projecting into the future'.<sup>18</sup> Remembering takes on a double significance. In the first instance, the official acknowledgement of previously denied truths permits individuals to narrate their 'hidden pasts' and provide the basis for continuity between past and present. At the same time, collective memory is facilitated by the commission which 're-members' the nation by providing a frame of intelligibility through which to mediate and harmonise previously discordant narratives.<sup>19</sup> According to Homi Bhabha, 'the very act of narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of narrative subjects'.<sup>20</sup>

Individual narratives are not 'freely' produced. Both internal and external constraints distort and fix the narrative subject by constructing an illusion of coherence and unity. Identity is conveyed and constituted through the dynamic unity of a linear temporal structure which generates meaning by establishing connections and causality between the recounted events. Robert Scholes, a literary theorist, claims that the linearisation of the past is an ineluctable aspect of self-constitution and that 'our need for chronological and causal connection defines and limits all of us - helps to make us what we are'.<sup>21</sup> However, narrative production is not just constrained by its internal linear temporality. Once personal narratives are related to others, or enter into a public realm, other constraints produce, limit and define the boundaries of narratives of the self. In spoken narratives the interactional nature of conversation results in a type of co-authorship of narratives where not only 'tellers' but 'audiences' influence the direction of the story through interjections, questions, and non-verbal signals.<sup>22</sup> Narrative production is not freely determined by the teller, but limited and directed by the expectations and interruptions of others:

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<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Lira, 'Guatemala: uncovering the past, recovering the future', *Development Practice*, Volume 7, Number 4, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Lira, *op. cit.*, p. 398.

<sup>19</sup> 'An inclusive remembering of painful truths about the past is crucial to the creation of national unity and transcending the divisions of the past', *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, vol. 1, ch. 5, paras. 51 to 52.

<sup>20</sup> Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Scholes, 'Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative', in Mitchell ed., *op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> For a study of the teller-listener dynamic in the context of the courtroom see Michael Lynch and David Bogen, *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text, and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1996.

The interactional production of narrative maintains and transforms persons and relationships. How we think about ourselves and others is influenced by both the message content of jointly told narratives and the experience of working together to construct a coherent narrative.<sup>23</sup>

The co-construction of narrative identities is achieved by the constant exposure of an individual narrative to those of others, where 'one does not acquire a "true self" but a potential for communicating that such a state is possessed.'<sup>24</sup> There is no prior individual narrative, but narratives of the self are constantly reconstituted by the exposure to, and incorporation of other stories. The resulting reformulation and adjustment of self-narratives suggest the instability of this type of identity construction. Ricoeur has commented upon the instability of narrative identity due to its constant transformations and reinterpretations of the past.<sup>25</sup> If the past is narrated in the light of the present then the past is forever subject to reconstruction. Ricoeur offers a temporalised notion of the self that depicts a structure of human relationships through which 'reflexivity becomes a permanent labour of dispersion, forgetting and retrieval, enacted through the narration of self-identity'.<sup>26</sup> He posits the notion of the 'detour' through 'other minds' as the process of narrative identity construction which the encounter with other histories constitutes.

However, individual narrative production is less agent-driven than the depiction I have drawn so far would appear to indicate. Personal stories largely respond to presiding fictions that frame the boundaries of interaction. Where though, do these narratives originate? Narrative frameworks or frames of intelligibility are primarily located in cultural contexts, at both local and global levels, which determine the parameters of individual stories.<sup>27</sup> As an example, on the local level, legal narratives provide a number of stories that are 'permissible' to tell.<sup>28</sup> An example on the global level is provided by discourses on human rights and democratisation that serve as important governing discourses for states making the transition to more democratic systems. This particular narrative has been primarily responsible for the reflective context of truth commissions.

Individual and group identities are constrained by the number of socially available narratives.<sup>29</sup> It has even been argued that literary narratives inform the range of socially available plot-lines to which we have access. In *The Morphology of the Folktale* completed in 1928, Vladimir Propp offered a structural analysis of the folklore genre, and was particularly concerned with the norms governing narrative structures and the content

<sup>23</sup> Elinor Ochs, 'Narrative', in Teun A. Van Dijk, *Discourse as Structure and Process*, Sage Publications, 1997, p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, 'Narratives of the Self' in Hinchman and Hinchman, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Volume 3 and Oneself as Another*.

<sup>26</sup> Lois Macnay, *Radical Philosophy*, March/April 1998, pp 48-49.

<sup>27</sup> George C Rosenwald, and Richard L Oehberg, eds., *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992, p. 2

<sup>28</sup> For an example of narrative proscription and identity transformation see Catherine Kohler Reissman, 'Making Sense of Marital Violence: One Woman's Narrative' in Rosenwald and Oehberg, *op. cit.* The author describes the experience of a victim of marital rape. She encountered particular difficulties in relating her experience as was effectively deprived of a legal narrative framework through which to validate her story of abuse as the state in which she lived in the United States did not recognise rape within marriage.

<sup>29</sup> See Gergen and Gergen, *op. cit.*

of folk tales.<sup>30</sup> Propp maintained that the formal organisation of the folkloric text displayed a linear sequence that reflected a chronological understanding of time. For example, if a tale is comprised of features A-Z, the structure of the tale is defined in terms of this sequential ordering. He detailed the historical background and classification of types of fairytale, identified the methods of charting the type of story, outlined the functions of the characters in relation to the events related, their attributes and significance, and then looked at the teleological operations of the whole tale.

Although Propp examined folk or fairy tales, he inspired other studies, most notably those of Claude Levi-Strauss.<sup>31</sup> Levi-Strauss identified a pattern underlying texts which organised aspects according to their schematic import. For him, thematic oppositions such as life/death, male/female are mediated by the text and although the linear sequential structure is the manifest content, the schematic structure carries important latent content, or hidden transmissions such as moral codes. Structural analysis, according to Levi-Strauss, sought to see through the structure to the underlying patterns. He understood these underlying patterns to carry a universal import based upon binary oppositions. The main difference between these two types of structural analysis is in the concern, or lack of concern with social and historical contexts. Propp's 'pure formalism' designates the folk tale as an autonomous art form which bears no relation to the conditions of its production. However, Levi-Strauss relates the paradigm to stories and myths at play in the world, proposing that stories must ultimately relate to the culture in which they are operative.<sup>32</sup>

But how does Propp's argument relate to a discussion of the availability of plot-lines beyond the literary text? And to what extent is the structure of the fairy tale related to the structure of narrative in culture? Terence Hawkes claims that like myth, 'the fairy tale ranks as an important prototype of all narrative'.<sup>33</sup> We can add to this the claim made by Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen that individual narratives are guided and maintained by socially available narratives in much the same way that a limited number of story-lines define the trajectories of folk tales. Larger, or 'macro-narratives' operative in the social order have a stake in the construction of personal narratives and therefore in the routes taken to constitute self-identity:

Our micronarratives are typically 'nested' within, and inseparable from, cultural macronarratives that shape their possible outcomes and meanings. Inevitably, a certain degree of social negotiation is required as individuals struggle to craft personal narratives that are consistent, believable, and flattering, both in their own eyes and those of others. To avoid 'ontological abandonment', individuals

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<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*. University of Texas Press, 1968.

<sup>31</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Penguin Books, 1972.

<sup>32</sup> The structural and hermeneutic traditions may appear to be incompatible as methods. My own reason for twinning the methodologies in this discussion is to illuminate some of the 'internal' and 'external' pressures upon narrative production and therefore upon identity construction. Ricoeur himself acknowledged the complementary nature of the two approaches in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Northwestern University Press, 1974. He claims that structural or semiotic text interpretation is simply a special type of hermeneutics involving different levels of distanciation.

<sup>33</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, Methuen, London, p. 67.

must work out strategies enabling their self-narratives to dove-tail with those of others in their community.<sup>34</sup>

Individual and collective histories are largely governed by common narratives in order that the mutual intelligibility of stories may be upheld, and a sense of community imagined to be in existence. Where 'new' narratives are in the process of being crafted, individuals may be obliged to abandon the premises upon which their former narrative identities were based, and to reformulate collective historical identities, or risk being excluded from the new public narratives of transformation.

As an example of a presiding fiction of transition, truth and reconciliation narratives increasingly appear to shape the concerns of states in the process of the construction of new political identities. Since the example of El Salvador in which a truth commission was instigated as part of the peace accords signalling an end to the civil war in 1992, truth commissions have more commonly been recognised as part of the solution to intractable instances of intra-state conflict, or to facilitate transition from one government to the next. Argentina and Chile carried out what were to prove to be widely emulated commissions in 1983 and 1990 respectively and it is possible to identify a significant number of truth commissions in operation between the mid-1970's and the present, set up by national governments, the UN, or non-governmental organisations.<sup>35</sup> Truth commissions have been a feature of transition primarily in Latin America and Africa, and those states that have conducted this type of investigation include Uganda, Bolivia, Uruguay, El Salvador, Rwanda, Honduras, Guatemala and South Africa. Two current examples include the investigations of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ended in July 1998, and one in Guatemala that was initially scheduled for a six month programme of investigations starting in November 1997, although this has been extended. We may understand the evident popularity of truth and reconciliation as the main concerns of narratives of transition in terms of Propp's paradigmatic narrative structures. Quite simply, truth commissions provide the thematic framework for one of a number of socially available narratives, and it is possible to perceive a pattern of emulation throughout, in particular, Latin American and African states. These narratives of transformation attempt to mark a break with past practices of governance, or periods of violent conflict through a reflection upon, and a reckoning with the past.<sup>36</sup> Central to the transformation of state identity is the discourse represented by the international discourse on human rights and democracy. This process of change involves a separation of the past identity of the state, or the question of 'who [we] were', from aspirations about 'who to become'. That is to say that although truth commissions concentrate on abuses perpetrated during a specific or 'unique' time period in the past, on a symbolic level they construct a version of the past that is appropriate to the narrative of transformation and 'becoming'.

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<sup>34</sup> Hinchman and Hinchman, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> See Priscilla Haynor, '15 Truth Commissions - 1974 to 1994: A Comparative Study', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Volume 16, Number 4.

<sup>36</sup> State-sponsored commissions include Uganda, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Chad, and South Africa. The El Salvadoran and Guatemalan commissions involved UN participation. In Brazil and Rwanda NGO's conducted investigations into abuses. Some of these investigations reflected upon human rights abuses committed under previous regimes, and others investigated atrocities perpetrated during periods of civil conflict.

One level of narrative enclosure is provided by the international context. Another level of constraint upon individual accounts is framed by the themes of the truth commission itself. Individual stories are subordinate to the state-driven narrative of truth and reconciliation. Truth commissions generate narratives that are directed primarily towards two things: the shoring up of community and the reconstitution of political identity. The realisation of these objectives is pursued through a powerful constellation of elements aimed at the conscious reconstruction of collective memory as a means of cohering radically disparate experiences of the recent past. This paper takes the view that 'truth' and 'reconciliation' are discursive formations that are not predetermined entities immune from contestation or negotiation. However, as a discourse of transition, these themes provide powerful narrative frameworks for states and individuals. Reconciliation narratives construct boundaries around what is to be narrated in the name of 'truth' and what is to remain uninterrogated. The example of the Chilean commission that investigated only cases of abuse leading to death or disappearance presents a powerful example of inclusions and exclusions constructed by the process.<sup>37</sup> The mandate of the commission draws parameters around what is to be disinterred, and what will remain uninvestigated, that is, what aspects of the past are to be incorporated into the narrative of transition.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is founded on the premise that a common understanding of the past constructed through the incorporation and official acknowledgement of previously denied narratives can begin to transform collective identity through the reconstruction of historical memory. One commentator remarked that:

If nothing else, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has made it impossible for white South Africans to pretend that the old regime was anything but vile. By offering amnesty to the perpetrators of politically motivated crimes in return for full confessions, the commission has tempted hordes of brutes to come clean, and added a stack of gory pages to the history books.<sup>38</sup>

The kind of publicly sanctioned history authored by the commission serve to reorientate and perpetuate a new historical identity and is directed towards an more inclusive remembering of the past, and towards narrowing the 'range of permissible lies'.<sup>39</sup> Where different experiences and interpretations of the past were seen to serve the perpetuation of conflict, the bringing together of concealed narratives and 'truths' is levelled at reconciliation. The case of South Africa provided the most exhaustive operation of the investigation of individual stories, and many of these were made in public testimonials. There were around 20,000 hearings and 7,000 amnesty applications. Nowhere have the dramatic performative dynamics been more apparent than in the televised hearings staged in South Africa, where 'emotional participation' is afforded not only to those directly involved, but also to those tuning in to the latest instalment. The narrative element of the hearings has made for compelling viewing where victims were encouraged to relate tales

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<sup>37</sup> See *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> 'South Africa's Hurtful Truth', *The Economist*, August 1st, 1998, p. 49.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Ignatieff, 'Articles of faith', in *Index on Censorship*, vol. 5, 1996, p. 111.

of pain and suffering, often in religious terms, which, given that notions of 'truth' and 'reconciliation' are informed by wider religious narratives, is unsurprising.<sup>40</sup> However, the assumption that victims must be permitted to narrate their previously denied stories is widespread, and has proved to be fundamental to this particular reconstruction of historical identity. Albie Sachs, a Constitutional Court Judge who survived a car bomb attack commented that:

We need to feel that basically we did right, that we did not deserve what was inflicted upon us. This gives us a sense of rightness to the world, not just to us but to the future.<sup>41</sup>

He describes a process of identity transformation from that of a perpetually vilified member of the community, to someone who has been granted a role in the national narrative. Isabel Cilliers, an interpreter working on many of the hearings in South Africa, also attested to the cathartic process of testifying. She commented upon the conduct of a group of mothers of victims of police violence.<sup>42</sup> Cilliers stated that on the first hearing of the case the women reacted violently to the witnesses' statements and to a police video that was shown. However, during the police officers' amnesty hearings almost a year later, the women were 'completely different', and behaved in a 'composed' and 'dignified' manner. Ms Cilliers' interpretation of the transformation was as follows; 'I do not think it was about forgiveness so much as the fact that they had simply been allowed to tell their stories'.<sup>43</sup>

Storytelling is considered to be important, particularly if publicly conducted, because it is a significant process through which the experiences of victims, perpetrators and others may begin to construct an understanding of the plurality of narratives about the past. Ricoeur claims that because self-narrativisation involves a constant process of interaction with other narratives, it offers the possibility of an open interpretation of national identity.<sup>44</sup> Encounters with previously excluded narratives is central to the reinterpretation of the past, and the construction of a new historical identity. In the absence of a certain future, the construction of community through the attempt to recover universal values is orientated around the identification of moral 'absolutes'.<sup>45</sup> Underpinning this is the assumption that a past equated with shame cannot be used as a source of inspiration or legitimisation, but the process of excavating or disinterring the past can be manifest as a recovery of absolute values. The 'truth' is what truth commissions hope to recover from

<sup>40</sup> Lyn Graybill, 'South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Ethical and Theological Perspectives' in *Ethics and International Affairs*, Volume 12, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Graybill, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> The case in question was that of the Guguletu Seven hearings. The victims were political activists aged between 16 and 23 who were shot dead in the Cape Flats township in 1986 by the hitsquad, Vlakplaas.

<sup>43</sup> 'I did not know the extent of what people with my skin colour were doing', *The Guardian*, August 1st 1998, p. 15. 'Forgiveness' is a key concept in the South African case, and is connected to the decision against having criminal trials, and for the 'truth for amnesty' bargain in a bid to uncover information about the past.

<sup>44</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, 'Reflections on a new ethos for Europe', in Richard Kearney ed., *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, Sage, 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Frank Furedi, *Mythical Past, Elusive Future: History and Society in an Anxious Age*, Pluto Press, 1992, Chapter 5.

the past, in order to provide a sense of continuity between past and present, and, it is hoped, sustain aspirations for the future. This attempt to recover the 'truth about the past' is an operation in reconnecting past and present, and in addressing social cleavages borne out of the experience of civil war, large-scale human rights abuses, or repressive regimes. Truth commissions represent an attempt to 'invent' a community based on what are assumed to be fundamental values shared by all in the absence of common histories, experience and narratives. Truth is presented as a foundation for a new moral order by which to 'mobilise the past through imagination...' in order to 'recreate the moral unity of no longer existing organic communities'.<sup>46</sup> The Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation states that:

the truth was considered as an absolute, unrenounceable value... the unity of a nation depends on a shared identity, which, in turn, depends largely on a shared memory... the truth also brings a measure of social catharsis and helps to prevent the past from recurring'.<sup>47</sup>

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Final Report renders an anthropomorphised view of the nation, and is shot through with metaphors of sickness and healing which mediate the discursive reconstitution of the national community:

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'.<sup>48</sup>

The metaphor of the 'wounded' nation is central to the discourse of the report. The evocation of the nation as a 'body in pain' is a key trope which performatively produces the assumption that a nation 'made sick' by lies can be 'healed' by disinterring the past.

### ***running away with the plot: some conclusions***

Despite the drive to coherence central to narrative activity, narrative identities are marked by disruption and discontinuity. Further to Ricoeur's claim that narrative identity is unstable due to the constant recasting of the past, an additional instability on the collective level is caused by those who do not follow the given plot-lines. These individuals and groups might be described as characters in search of more adequate story-lines. They are, in effect, running away with the plot, and creating marginal narratives that dispute the central themes of truth and reconciliation. Because memory, like the nation, is never unitary, there are always subnarratives which run counter to, and contest the dominance of, presiding fictions:

Collectivities are involved in a constant process of selection among various narrative options... marked by discontinuities, subnarratives, backlash narratives, and subsidiary narratives'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>47</sup> *The Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. xxxi.

<sup>48</sup> *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Vol. 1, ch. 1, para. 27.

I would venture, however, that this process of 'selection' among narrative options is less arbitrary than this comment seems to suggest. The process of narrative 'selection' is framed by particular concerns which limit the boundaries of narrative trajectories. There is always more than one story to tell, but historical, social, cultural, and political conditions may favour the selection of one narrative over another. For example, the South African transitional government decided against the path of criminal trials as a way of dealing with apartheid's legacy of violence. Several important reasons were given for this: firstly, it was considered that 'neither side in the struggle (the state nor the liberation movements) had defeated the other and hence no party was in a position to enforce so-called victor's justice'.<sup>50</sup> Secondly, the report speculates that the security establishment may have frustrated the terms of the negotiated settlement with the prospect of criminal trials ahead, making a peaceful transition from apartheid less likely. Thirdly, limited time, money, and personnel resources were cited as restrictions on its operations, in addition to the prospect of long, drawn-out trials which might serve to sustain 'old hatreds' rather than further reconciliation. Fourthly, in dealing with the history and legacy of the past, the commission aimed primarily to uncover 'the truth' about the past. In attempting to achieve this, an 'amnesty for truth' bargain was offered in order to provide incentives to perpetrators of abuse to deliver accounts in the context of public hearings. To those charges claiming that amnesty was akin to impunity,<sup>51</sup> the report replies 'the amnesty applicant has to admit responsibility for the act for which amnesty is being sought... furthermore... the amnesty is dealt with in a public hearing... public disclosure results in public shaming... amnesty is not meant for nice people. It is intended for perpetrators'.<sup>52</sup> Given that ascertaining the 'truth' about the past was considered fundamental for peaceful transition and social change, the truth and reconciliation narrative reflected these concerns in a way that a narrative of transition incorporating criminal trials could not.

Individual and group narratives which run counter to state-led truth and reconciliation narratives are not uncommon. However peripheral their complaint may have seemed at the time, the resistance towards the Argentinian truth commission findings by the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* has gained momentum since the end of the investigations in 1984.<sup>53</sup> The group has campaigned consistently since the publication of the official report *Nunca Mas* by the *CONADEP* (Comision Nacional para la Desaparicion de Personas, or National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons). Their efforts to resist closing off the past, and to sustain publicly the memories of their disappeared relatives include a refusal to accept any financial compensation. They interpret financial reparations as an example of the state attempting to 'buy their silence' and understand that to accept monetary reparations would be to accept the integrity of the investigations carried out by

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<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Introduction: Memory and the Nation - Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations', in *Social Science History*, Vol. 22 No. 4, p. 382.

<sup>50</sup> *The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Volume 1, ch. 1, para. 21.

<sup>51</sup> The report states that at the time of publication only 150 out of 7000 applications for amnesty had been granted. The work of the Amnesty Committee continues at the time of writing and its findings will form a sixth volume of the Final Report.

<sup>52</sup> *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Vol. 1, ch. 1, paras 35 and 49.

<sup>53</sup> Also known as the 'Mothers of the Disappeared'. The 'Comision Nacional para la Desaparicion de Personas' (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) operated from 1983-1984, and investigated cases of disappearance during the period of military rule from 1973-1983.

the truth commission, and the version of the 'truth' produced by the report.<sup>54</sup> Reparations and forgiveness signal a closure on a period of the past they do not wish to forget or bury. The *Madres* continue their resistance to the findings of the report with a call for investigations into children born in detention centres who were forcibly removed from their birth mothers and adopted usually within days of being born. The *Madres* are involved in a continuous attempt to recover the identities of their grandchildren. This narrative of resistance has more recently been appropriated by a group called *Hijos* ('Children for Identity and Justice and Against Forgetting and Silence'). The group carries out demonstrations exposing the homes and detention centres of those who ran and co-ordinated the detention centres, and campaigns for information regarding the estimated five hundred children either kidnapped or born in captivity and handed over to adoptive parents.<sup>55</sup> Around ten per cent of identities have been established to date. The appropriation of the *Madres* narrative of resistance by the *Hijos* in the last year means that the contestation over official memory will be sustained. A popular candidate for the succession of Carlos Menem in the Argentinian presidential elections in 1999, Graciela Fernandez Meijilde, is the mother of one of the 'disappeared' whose fate was never established. In a news report her candidacy is described as commanding automatic stature 'from her painful personal experience which reflects so much of Argentina's history', and further that 'she does not look scripted for the part of president' but 'projects an image that reflects the suffering of her past'.<sup>56</sup> Fernandez Meijilde's body is thus constituted as a site of national memory and mourning, a metonymic expression of the nation's 'wounds' through which memory contestation is incorporated into the official narrative despite being a product of social contestation.<sup>57</sup>

Individual narratives that are resistant to the larger schematic import are not uncommon in South Africa. The most famous case of resistance being that of P.W. Botha who consistently evaded calls for him to testify at the commission and still insists that 'apartheid, or the more euphemistic "separate development", was nothing more than "good neighbourliness"'.<sup>58</sup> Adriaan Vlok is the only former government minister to apply for amnesty, thereby recognising the truth and reconciliation narrative and preparing to enter its construction. However, one commentator remarked that Vlok was forced to apply to the amnesty committee under threat of prosecution rather than offering evidence in a 'spirit of reconciliation and accord'.<sup>59</sup> Even F.W. de Klerk, a joint architect of the transitional government, claims that those responsible for torture and abuse were acting of their own accord rather than operating within a systematic campaign of violence.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the CoMadres in El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA movement in Guatemala see Jennifer Schirmer, 'The Seeking of Truth and the Gendering of Consciousness' in S. Radcliffe and S. Westwood eds., *VIVA: Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*, Routledge, 1993. Schirmer examines what she describes as the 'motherist/widowist' resistance groups in Latin America.

<sup>55</sup> The official report of the Argentinian Commission, *Nunca Mas: Argentina's National Commission on Disappeared People*, Faber, London, 1986, features testimonies from mothers who gave birth in detention centres, and other eye-witness accounts in part two of the report.

<sup>56</sup> 'Argentine Vote-Getter: Mother With a Bitter Past', *Latinolink*, <http://www.latinolink.com/news98>

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of official attempts to 'normalise' the past see Jeffrey K. Olick, 'What Does It Mean to Normalise the Past? Official Memory in German Politics since 1989', *Social Science History*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

<sup>58</sup> 'Truth at the End of the Rainbow', *The Independent on Sunday*, 14th June, 1998.

<sup>59</sup> Patrick Laurence, 'What the TRC won't tell you', *Focus*, Number 11, July 1998, p. 5.

Eleventh hour contestations over what was to be included and excluded in the final report by both de Klerk and ANC representatives meant that de Klerk managed to secure the deletion of allegations against him. In the 'Findings and Conclusions' section of the final report underneath a subtitle 'Finding on former State President F. W. de Klerk', a black box stands where an assessment of his culpability had previously featured.<sup>60</sup> This 'narrative omission' or silence, speaks louder than any litany of condemnations could.

There is also evidence to suggest that the majority of the white population have all but rejected the narrative framework of the commission.<sup>61</sup> This clash of narratives is likely to have ramifications for the efforts of the commission that perhaps cannot as yet be foreseen. 'Permission to narrate', it has been claimed, is not granted to all:

Narrative activity allows members of communities to represent and reflect upon events, thoughts and emotions, but this opportunity may be asymmetrically allocated, granting reflective rights to some more than to others. Crucial to the construction of a self, an other, and a society, co-narration crafts biographies and histories: yet the meaning of experience and existence - what is possible, actual, reasonable, desirable - tends to be defined by some more than others.<sup>62</sup>

Clearly, the political stakes in memory construction are high, and the political uses of narrative reflect a struggle over the past which is 'not to achieve already constituted interests, but to constitute those interests in the first place'.<sup>63</sup> The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been accused of bias in favour of granting amnesty to former ANC activists as against their 'counterparts' in the former regime, and this accusation has been largely responsible for the resistance to the commissions' investigations demonstrated by former government ministers. Of the seventeen serving commissioners, not a single representative of either the National Party nor the Inkhata Freedom Party participated in the organisation of the procedures, compared with the Chilean commission which comprised of four commissioners from the military regime and four from the new government. One of the seventeen commissioners, a former member of the National Party, Wynand Malan, withdrew from the plenary sessions and prepared a 'minority position' as a post-script to the final report claiming that 'various findings appear to me to display, if not a lack of understanding of, then certainly a lack of empathy with certain groups living within traditional or nationalistic value systems who were party to the conflict'.<sup>64</sup> Malan provides a critique of the concepts central to the commission's proceedings, 'truth', 'reconciliation', 'amnesty', and states that 'our understanding of history must accommodate all interpretations of the past. If we fail in this regard, we will fail to be a nation'. Malan's aim, and by implication that of the commission, is to facilitate a debate about the past 'with the aim of further promoting the overarching goal of national unity'.

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<sup>60</sup> *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Volume 5, Chapter 6.

<sup>61</sup> 'Truth at the End of the Rainbow', *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Ochs, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Introduction: Memory, and the Nation - Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations', *op. cit.*, p. 381.

<sup>64</sup> *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, Volume 5, Chapter 9. Malan left the National Party in 1987.