

Documenting the Trauma of Apartheid: *Long Night's  
Journey into Day* and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation  
Commission

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On 21<sup>st</sup> March 2003, retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu officially ended the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by handing over the body's final report to President Thabo Mbeki. This date, the anniversary of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, when South African police fired into a crowd of peaceful protesters, was a particularly resonant one for the TRC to conclude its seven-year-long investigation into human rights violations committed during the era of strict racial segregation known as apartheid. Established in a last-minute codicil to the interim constitution that was drafted as part of the multi-party negotiations preceding South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, the TRC heard the testimony of more than 21,000 victims of apartheid-era violence and their relatives in a series of emotionally charged public hearings. In addition to recording the harrowing words of these witnesses to atrocity, commissioners also examined amnesty applications from perpetrators of human rights violations, and sought, more broadly, to promote reconciliation between the races in the new, democratic South Africa. While other institutional innovations such as the final drafting of a new constitution may prove to have a more dramatic impact on South Africa's future, the TRC's hearings were among the most gripping public events of the post-apartheid era.<sup>1</sup> After decades in which a racist regime systematically silenced and brutalized them, victims of violence and their relatives appeared before the TRC in order to express their grief and rage. As a result of this process, the stories of ordinary people brutalized by apartheid were officially recognized and recorded by the new state. The TRC has, as a result, been widely perceived as drafting the first inclusive public history for a democratic South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the broad public dissemination of the TRC proceeding by television and film raise particularly thorny aesthetic and

political questions. One such representation, the film *Long Night's Journey Into Day*, provides the focal point for this essay. To what extent, this documentary forces us to ask, can representations of the TRC capture the tremendous emotional and at times cathartic power of the hearings while also refusing easy closure of the stories of violation and loss presented during testimony.<sup>3</sup>

Because of its unprecedented focus on the testimonies of ordinary people who were victimized by apartheid, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has become an exemplary organ of transitional justice for democratizing governments in regions such as Latin America and Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite this international success, the TRC has met with strong criticism and even outright antagonism from many in South Africa. The controversy over reparations for apartheid abuses is indicative of the reasons for such hostility. In its final report, the TRC recommended the creation of a 3 billion rand (approximately \$385m) compensation fund for the era's victims. This fund was to be financed in part by a 'wealth tax' on businesses that profited from apartheid while operating in South Africa. In his formal response to the final report on 15 April 2003, however, President Mbeki announced that the government would not introduce the wealth tax, proposing \$4,000 in state-funded compensation for each of the 21,000 or so victims rather than the roughly \$19,000 envisaged by the members of the TRC.<sup>5</sup> After waiting for years to receive compensation for injustices suffered during the apartheid era, and, in addition, seeing some of the perpetrators of such violence granted amnesty while they waited, victims had grounds for feeling anger when offered such meager reparations by the government. The inadequacy of the proposed compensation suggested that the suffering of apartheid-era victims was being subordinated on both a material and a

symbolic level to the harsh necessities of post-apartheid nation building. The TRC, in other words, does not simply recognize popular suffering during the apartheid era, but also confers legitimacy on a once discredited state and the bureaucratic elite who now control it by folding the sacrifices of the people into the narrative of the new nation. In spite of the popularity of Desmond Tutu's appeals for reconciliation, such self-sacrifice in the name of nation building is a bitter pill to swallow for those whose lives have been blighted by apartheid.

The 140 or so hearings of the TRC at which victims testified were held in different venues around South Africa in order to give members of the public as much access as possible. In addition, the sessions were also broadcast daily by South African radio and television stations. Media coverage of the hearings tended to follow the same script as is apparent in the government's stance on reparations: individual suffering should be sublimated for the sake of national reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps as a result of the TRC's broad exposure, a majority of South Africans feel that the hearings contributed positively to their new nation.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the hearings were preferable to the blanket amnesty originally called for by the National Party (NP), the architects and executors of apartheid. In addition, the TRC seemed to encapsulate the nation's miraculously peaceful transition to democracy, the common desire of South Africans to create a new society from the ashes of apartheid. Yet the TRC's emphasis on reconciliation imposed a narrative of healing and nation building that threatened to promote a kind of amnesia among South Africans. Not only did the model of "restorative justice" promoted by TRC spokespeople like Desmond Tutu displace victims' demands for retribution, but broader crimes of the apartheid era such as forced removals and relocations were suppressed from

the narrative of national suffering. The TRC thus narrowed the scope of historical memory to the acts of freedom fighters and regime assassins alone, eliding the suffering of average South Africans caught up in the quotidian forms of state and civilian injustice that characterized apartheid.

Given the complicity of the media in the promotion of this detachment from the past, a central question now that the TRC has completed its work is whether representations of the hearings can preserve an ethical space for the voices of those oppressed by apartheid. If apartheid has had an enduring impact on victims of human rights violations specifically and on South Africans in general, aesthetic representations of the TRC need to resist a facile conciliatory narrative that would elide such abuses. How, for example, can filmic accounts of the TRC avoid focusing simply on the spectacle of violent incidents on which the commission's hearings tended to focus, thereby marginalizing the long-term effects of violent trauma?<sup>8</sup> Can aesthetic work on the TRC challenge the media's chronically short attention span and tendency to present sentimental stories with hopeful endings? And, finally, to what extent can representations of the TRC capture the mixed desires for purgation of the past and retribution for that past that animated many South Africans during the early years of democracy?

Made by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann of the United States, the documentary *Long Night's Journey Into Day: South Africa's Search for Truth and Reconciliation* (2000) is the most ambitious effort to date to record and disseminate the many aspects of the TRC's investigations to a broad international audience.<sup>9</sup> Reid and Hoffmann's film probes the relation of subaltern voices to the process of nation building

by focusing primarily on the words of those who testified before the TRC. The film thereby departs from conventional documentary practice, in which interviewee testimony is subordinated to an expository discourse sustained through means such as the commentary of a disembodied narrator. Challenging the meta-narrative of reconciliation, *Long Night's Journey Into Day* foregrounds the fragmentary and elliptical narratives of the victims of apartheid. This focus on witness testimony highlights the tensions within the putatively reconciliatory space of the TRC hearings. The film achieves this end using a variety of dialectical representational strategies. For example, through the juxtaposition of victims and perpetrators' voices, *Long Night's Journey Into Day* demonstrates the contested nature of both truth and reconciliation in the new South Africa. While the film subscribes to a certain extent to the ideology of healing articulated so powerfully by Desmond Tutu, its strategy of weaving together individuals' testimony during TRC hearings with interviews conducted in other settings reveals the structural social inequalities and racial animus that catalyzed apartheid-era abuses. The film thereby works against the spectacular images of violence disseminated by mainstream media coverage. Finally, by documenting the tearful silences, cries of agony, and sheer physical presence of witnesses both before the TRC and in the townships and suburbs where they live, *Long Night's Journey Into Day* helps contest the seamless absorption of such witnessing into nation-building narratives.

#### Documentary Form and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Documentary filmmaking has recently taken a turn towards greater self-reflexivity. Seeking to make sense of this shift in representing 'the real', Bill Nichols

typology of documentary filmmaking identifies the following discrete modes: the **expository**, which is typified by its use of authoritative voice over; the **observational**, a.k.a. direct cinema or *cinéma vérité*; the **interactive**, in which filmmakers engage in dialogue with interviewees; the **reflexive**, where the act of filmmaking itself becomes the subject of documentation; and the **performative**, in which the filmmaker becomes a performer in his or her own film.<sup>10</sup> For Nichols, the former two modes are problematic since they perpetuate the illusion of an 'objective' and wholly authentic representation of reality. Consequently, the recent trend towards highly reflexive and performative documentary practice by filmmakers such as Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield is seen by Nichols as a welcome development. This turn towards reflexivity has also been apparent in South African documentary work, where the end of apartheid has provided filmmakers with the opportunity to engage with more personal forms of representation than was in general the practice during the years of highly committed anti-apartheid aesthetics in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> This trend in documentary filmmaking may be seen as part of a broader move away from the agit-prop realism of the apartheid era. Increasingly self-reflexive forms of representation are coming to dominate post-apartheid South African aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> Underlying this shift is a reexamination of claims to truth in representation, an issue highlighted not simply by current aesthetic practice but by broader social discourses around nation building of which the TRC is exemplary.

Although there is much to be gained from questioning the transparency of representation, Nichols' rather inflexible typology tends to impose an avant-gardist teleology on documentary practice. There are a number of significant problems with this approach. First of all, films that are not formally experimental or self-reflexive are

regarded as under-evolved and politically suspect in a replay of the debates concerning the ideological role of film that took place in film studies during the late 1970s.<sup>13</sup> In a South African context, this tends not only to discredit the *engagé* cinema of the apartheid era but also many films made by emerging black filmmakers today. Rather than employing the deconstructive style of much experimental cinema from the developed world, young South African directors tend to draw on the aesthetics of film genres popular in the townships, including Hong Kong *kung fu* films, Mexican *telenovelas*, and Nigerian videos. South African filmmakers' adaptations of popular film form from other locations in the global South need to be seen as creative appropriations of globalized media rather than simply as a form of empty mimicry that fails to meet Euro-American avant-gardist standards. This trend, in other words, works in tandem with the turn to self-reflexivity rather than militating against it. Nichols' typology, which is founded on a naïve, formalist assessment of audience response, encourages (predominantly white) critics versed in the history of the international avant-garde to pontificate about the lack of a critical South African filmmaking style in a highly condescending manner. According to this formalist ethos, realist films encourage passive consumption among audiences, whereas pastiche cinema creates critical thought. This model ignores accounts of the complexity of audience reception that have become standard fare in cultural studies.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the assumptions that underlie Nichols' argument about audience reception seem particularly problematic in a South African milieu, where the majority of the public viewed state representations of events in realist formats such as television news in highly skeptical terms. Finally, Nichols' emphasis on highly reflexive modes of

filmmaking may cause critics to understate if not ignore the complexity of codes in putatively traditional observationalist modes of documentary work.<sup>15</sup>

*Long Night's Journey into Day* demonstrates the elisions in a tightly compartmentalized typology of documentary films. Reid and Hoffmann's film almost completely eschews the expository mode, allowing interviewees to speak with relatively little apparent mediation. Yet its predominant use of an observational style does not suggest, following Nichols's schema, a naïve mode of representation that claims to present the unvarnished truth. Given the multiple definitions of truth in circulation during the TRC's hearings and the political stakes at play behind such definitions, such a naïve stance would be untenable. Thus, the stylistic approach of *Long Night's Journey into Day* is influenced not simply by the truth-telling codes that condition audience consumption of documentaries, but also by the moral imperatives of the TRC.<sup>16</sup> A highly disjunctive and self-reflexive mode of documenting the TRC would be likely to shirk the ethical responsibility implicit in representing the testimonials of apartheid-era victims to both a domestic and an international audience. Instead of pursuing a highly reflexive strategy, Reid and Hoffmann therefore adapt the relatively orthodox observationalist mode of filmmaking to their documentation of the TRC. Yet *Long Night's Journey into Day* deploys this mode in the context of a dialectical narrative structure that emphasizes the clashing and at times contradictory viewpoints of testimonials delivered before the TRC. Like Sergei Eisenstein's theory and practice of montage, this dialectical strategy stirs up contradictions within the spectator's mind, encouraging her or him to unravel the broader social conflicts behind the testimony of individual victims.<sup>17</sup> *Long Night's*

*Journey into Day* thereby works to challenge the significant lacunae in accounts of the TRC as a vehicle of reconciliation.

Reid and Hoffmann divide their film into four equal sections, each documenting a single appearance by an individual or group of people before the TRC. These different segments contrast one another strongly, reinforcing, in some cases, the image of heroic popular resistance to apartheid while directly challenging that image in others. Segment one, for example, focuses on the amnesty hearing of Mongezi Manquina, one of the killers of Amy Biehl, a young American student activist.<sup>18</sup> This account is juxtaposed with the film's second section, which examines the case of the Cradock 4, a group of black anti-apartheid activists who were murdered by security forces in the Eastern Cape during the 1980s. Manquina's shockingly affectless deposition about his murder of Biehl challenges hagiographic representations of popular resistance to apartheid, even while the following segment makes a case for precisely such celebratory accounts.<sup>19</sup> The film thereby excavates both the heroism as well as the rough realities of township justice during the late years of apartheid, practices whose existence the TRC tended to play down significantly.<sup>20</sup> The film follows this juxtaposition with the story of Robert McBride, an anti-apartheid guerrilla who bombed a nightclub on the Durban waterfront, killing a number of civilians as well as members of the apartheid security forces. The film's final segment focuses on the testimony offered by mothers of the Guguletu 7, a group of young men who were lured into a trap by undercover police officers and then gunned down in cold blood. Like the first two segments, these sections of *Long Night's Journey into Day* play off one another to suggest the significant disjunction between

official accounts of the TRC as a process of reconciliation and popular desires for retributive justice.

Each segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day* is further divided into interviews with victims of violence and with the perpetrators of that violence. Like the segmented narrative macro-structure of the film, this division of each segment into interviews with perpetrators and victims offers discordant versions of events and their causes that the film's viewer must carefully parse. In addition, each interview is broken up into testimony delivered before the TRC and ancillary conversations conducted in far less formal, domestic settings. This split structure in *Long Night's Journey into Day* highlights the performative dimension of TRC hearings, showing how witnesses adopt a persona for public appearances that is often very different from that in evidence in more informal circumstances. For example, as we witness women break into tears as they tell stories of their lost family members while sitting in the private spaces of their homes, we come to understand the immense emotional effort involved in their more resolute, dignified testimony in the public venues of the TRC. In many cases, the more elliptical commentary advanced during the ancillary interviews also offers important insights into the motivations behind individual acts and testimony. Interpolated throughout these four segments are brief interviews with members of the TRC such as Desmond Tutu and Mary Burton. While these interviews are usually couched as expository commentary on the segments in which they are embedded, the comments of interviewees within each of the segments establish a critical dialogue with the authoritative utterances of TRC icons such as Tutu within the film. Rapid cuts between contrasting interviews and montage shots throughout the film often expand these different levels of dialectical structure. Using this

multi-tiered strategy of critical juxtaposition, *Long Night's Journey into Day* documents the power of embodied witnessing that the TRC facilitated while also uncovering the many forms of mendacity and inequality that germinated in the rank soil of apartheid.

#### Political Violence and Post-Apartheid Dissonance:

Although human rights discourse has tended to assume a universalistic, transhistorical guise during the period of liberal hegemony that followed the various political transitions around the globe after 1990, *Long Night's Journey Into Day* emphasizes the need to place questions of rights and justice in South Africa in historical perspective. During the apartheid era, a bifurcated legal system was systematically created that meted out justice in transparently unequal, racialized terms. The result, as Richard Wilson emphasizes in his discussion of the TRC, was the *de facto* institution of legal pluralism in South Africa.<sup>21</sup> Resisting the attempts of the apartheid state to control and centralize the dispensation of justice, urban Africans in many cases retained local institutions of justice from the rural, pre-industrial social order from which they had been displaced by the apartheid system. The evolution of autonomous, intransigent township social movements was, of course, one of the central factors that led to the downfall of apartheid. It is precisely such independent institutions, however, that render human rights discourse relatively marginal among a significant percentage of South Africa's population today. Despite a proliferation of national institutions dedicated to fostering human rights, local groups continued to insist on their right to administer social order autonomously during the transition to democracy in the late 1990s. This attitude was hardened by the massive crime wave that affected post-apartheid South Africa, highly

skeptical popular views concerning the institutions of criminal justice, and deepening economic inequality despite the end of official apartheid. The upshot, as Wilson puts it, was that “enclaves of revenge controlled by militarized youth and punitive elders continued to shape the character of justice in the townships of South Africa” in the face of the official, state-centered discourse of reconciliation.<sup>22</sup>

The initial segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day* offers an overview of precisely such autonomous enclaves of revenge in its investigation of the murder of Amy Biehl by Mongezi Manquina and a group of young comrades in the townships outside Cape Town. Frantz Fanon's central claim in his study of colonial society – that the colonized person liberates her or himself in and through violence – is borne out in this opening segment of the film.<sup>23</sup> This segment is particularly important since, contrary to what one might expect, eighty percent of the TRC's amnesty applicants were members of the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's principal anti-apartheid organization. As Mahmood Mamdani has argued, the apartheid system was based on the colonial relationship of settler to native, a relationship that was secured through systematic violence.<sup>24</sup> Like Fanon's colonized subjects, young comrades such as Manquina sought to rupture this colonial relationship by turning the violence that oppressed them back against the whites of South Africa. Reid and Hoffmann use archival footage and dramatic recreation of police attacks on township youths to back up statements by Manquina and his comrades concerning the politicization of youth during the 1980s in reaction to the apartheid regime's systematic violence in the townships. These young people explicitly conceive of their acts as anti-colonial violence, a Fanonian assertion of the self in the face of apartheid's negation. Such violence is not, therefore, a

product of primitive barbarism, but rather belongs, as Mamdani puts it, to the script of progress and modernity.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as Fanon and commentators such as Sartre were aware, this violence is always derivative. In order to dismantle the colonial relationship, victims became killers. Trapped in the political stalemate of the late apartheid era, youths like Manquina ended up reproducing the violence of the regime.

While providing Manquina space to articulate his political motivations in killing Biehl, *Long Night's Journey into Day* also explores the loss of humanity involved in this transformation of victim into killer by focusing on Manquina's mother, Evelyn. During her son's trial, Evelyn Manquina recorded a video letter in which she apologized to Biehl's parents for their daughter's murder. Reid and Hoffmann's film includes excerpts from this letter as well as an interview with Evelyn Manquina in which she explains that as a mother she identifies with the agony the Biehls must have felt over the death of their child. This portion of the film closes the gap of human identification that yawned so wide during the young comrades' testimony. Despite this admission of sympathy, this segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day* concludes with a brief interview with Mongezi Manquina's fellow amnesty applicant, Easy Nofemela. Nofemela repeats the words of his friend's mother, saying that the Biehls' forgiveness is truly miraculous given the loss of their only child. Nofemela thereby offers an apparently ideal example of restorative justice. In particular, Nofemela's identity as a killer shaped by the systematic violence of the apartheid system appears to have been transcended. However, near the close of the segment he also comments that he and his friends got the wrong person when they killed Amy Biehl. This aside suggests that Nofemela feels little remorse for the general policy of attacking whites in the context of apartheid violence.

Brief comments such as this one reveal the lack of a unitary definition of justice in contemporary South Africa. National discourses of human rights and reconciliation appear to have made relatively little impact on members of township vigilante groups such as Manquina and Nofemela. They continue to view retributive justice against whites as a valid response to apartheid. Since the TRC effectively undermined the possibility for state dispensation of such retributive justice, the young comrades' grudging reaction to the amnesty hearings is not entirely surprising. While the Biko family's refusal to participate in the TRC process offered perhaps the most famous challenge to the TRC's framework, this segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day* suggests that resistance to the TRC's definitions of human rights and justice was widespread among significant sectors of South African society.<sup>1</sup>

Dissent created by the TRC's definition of human rights infractions and, by extension, of justice, is rendered even more explicit in the third segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day*. This portion of the film dramatizes the ANC's indignant reaction to the suggestion, published in the first five-volume installment of the TRC's report in 1998, of moral equivalence between its own human rights violations and those of the apartheid regime.<sup>26</sup> In an interview conducted after his TRC hearing, Robert McBride, a member of the ANC's military wing whose bomb killed a number of civilians, is quick to note the hypocrisy of the outrage expressed by supporters of the apartheid regime in reaction to the ANC's guerrilla activities. Nonetheless, his position makes it clear that the resistance

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Bantu Biko was the founder of South Africa's Black Consciousness movement. He died in 1977 while in police custody, becoming an anti-apartheid martyr and international hero despite government attempts to cover up his murder. The Biko family have been outspoken critics of the closure effected by the TRC process on criminal prosecution of the perpetrators of apartheid-era violence.

movement's turn towards proportionate attacks on civilians is debatable on both humanitarian and strategic grounds. Strategically speaking, it quickly became clear that the liberation movement stood no chance of overthrowing the apartheid regime using military means.<sup>27</sup> Violence against civilians simply undermined the ANC's moral standing both within South Africa and internationally. The human cost of the ANC's doctrine of 'proportional response' in the context of a just war against apartheid is made evident when the directors of *Long Night's Journey into Day* incorporate footage of a witness before the TRC describing flesh hanging from the walls after McBride's bomb exploded.

But what right do the beneficiaries of the apartheid system, who tacitly condoned the violent actions of the regime, have to indict someone like Robert McBride? This segment of the film confronts this question directly by juxtaposing McBride's perspective with that of Sharon Welgemoed, the sister of one of his victims. The filmmakers cut from McBride's expression of remorse directly to an interview with Welgemoed, who stands in the lush garden of her suburban home in Durban while a black gardener works in the background. Throughout this segment, she attacks ANC accounts of McBride as a hero, and, by extension, the movement's policy of guerrilla warfare against civilians. Reid and Hoffmann allow Welgemoed to express her anger at McBride's killing of her sister with no overt comment. Yet Welgemoed's words are always subtly qualified by the blithe arrogance with which she speaks and acts. For example, the *mise-en-scène* of her initial interview subtly communicates the affluence of apartheid's white beneficiaries, contrasting strongly with shots of township exteriors like Guguletu in other segments of the film. Later in the segment, the filmmakers include a scene in which, forced to

undergo a body search before entering the courthouse at Durban for the TRC hearing, Welgemoed kicks up a fuss, saying she wants to see McBride being searched as well. The blustering tone of command that she adopts as she confronts the black security guards in this scene speaks volumes about the inequality of social relations during and after apartheid. As Truth Commissioner Mary Burton comments, it's still very painful for whites such as Welgemoed to recognize how they benefited from apartheid. Indeed, near the end of this segment, Welgemoed states that she cannot be held responsible for all the atrocities of apartheid simply because she's white. By refusing to recognize the systematic character of apartheid's injustices and the culpability of beneficiaries such as herself, Welgemoed dramatizes the flaws inherent in the TRC's limited definition of human rights violations. While offering an indictment of the ANC's policies by one of its own cadres, this segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day* also demonstrates the challenge of creating a genuinely reciprocal ethical space for reconciliation among beneficiaries and victims of apartheid in South Africa today.

### Subaltern History and National Reconciliation

What does it mean, *Long Night's Journey into Day* asks, to seek the truth in the wake of apartheid's systematic destruction of the potential for human interaction? Like the differing definitions of justice that collided during the hearings, the TRC also brought incommensurable narratives of history before the public. Focusing on the case of the Guguletu 7, a group of black youths who died in a firefight with the police during the 1980s, the final segment of *Long Night's Journey into Day* explores the apartheid regime's control of truth within the public sphere. Yet it also demonstrates the existence

of subaltern public spheres, some of which were associated with the liberation movement and some of which existed in complete autonomy from organized political factions. As Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman argue, such alternative public spheres allow the articulation and dissemination of experiences silenced by officially sanctioned narratives.<sup>28</sup> Yet what happens during a negotiated transition such as that experienced in South Africa, when only certain aspects of the alternative public sphere are memorialized? How can truth and the voice with which to speak it be recovered under such circumstances? *Long Night's Journey into Day* explores this question by focusing on the mothers of the Guguletu 7, who were told by the apartheid bureaucracy that their sons were communist insurgents who died while seeking to ambush members of the security forces. This final segment of the film is divided into roughly three sections, each of which juxtaposes two different versions of the truth. Although the mothers ultimately glean a satisfactory understanding of their children's fate with the help of the TRC, their highly varied reactions to this knowledge suggests that the TRC's hearings do not necessarily bring closure to those traumatized by apartheid.

Like the film *Shoah*, this section of *Long Night's Journey into Day* offers a reenactment of events that exposes the unbearable grief of victims in public.<sup>29</sup> The pain and anger that have been totally erased by apartheid become, in the public recitation of loss offered by the mothers of the Guguletu 7, iconic symbols of the nation's suppressed history. As Desmond Tutu comments during this bitterly painful scene, 'we want our children to remember these stories, that we paid a price to be free today.' His words represent the death of the women's sons as a sacrifice that has helped give birth to the new South Africa. Scenes of the massive funeral demonstrations for the Guguletu 7 back

up this point. Like the death of Maki Skosana, a woman necklaced in the townships for being a suspected informer, the violent deaths of the Guguletu 7 and their mothers' grief are represented as key components in the narrative of national becoming.<sup>2</sup> The televised coverage of the TRC hearing into Skosana's death focused on the moment when, after describing the gruesome details of her death and mutilation, her sister was cut off by the commissioners, who asked for a minute of silence to salute Skosana's heroic martyrdom. According to Steve Robins, this silencing of the witness demonstrates how the TRC and the media manufacture a new nationalism from the lacerating personal memories and broken bodies of apartheid-era victims.<sup>30</sup> In addition to imposing such meta-narratives, media coverage of the hearings tended to foster a pornography of violence, in which mutilated bodies were paraded before viewers in a spectacle bereft of historical analysis.<sup>31</sup> Stories of ordinary people's grief, the alternative public sphere of the apartheid era, are thus symbolically constituted as central to the democratic South Africa.

However, *Long Night's Journey into Day* does not examine narrative alone. The film also focuses on the truths embodied in the suffering physical presence of the Guguletu 7 mothers. For instance, the women were given permission to attend a screening of a film made by the police involved in the incident. This video was intended by the police to demonstrate their efficiency to members of the government and thereby secure increased funding for their branch. The women sit directly behind the nine police officers subpoenaed by the TRC while the film is screened. Watching the film, in which the police pose next to the slain youths as if they were animal carcasses, the women lose

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<sup>2</sup> 'Necklacing' was a practice developed to punish suspected informers in the townships during the 1980s. The 'necklace' consisted of a gasoline-filled automobile tire that was

control of their emotions and break out into screams of pain and wild gesticulations. The police are escorted from the room looking visibly shaken. No commentary is offered to anneal the pain of the women. The version of events represented in the police video is utterly discredited on an emotional level by this scene. In addition, although the TRC's final report subordinated narrative to forensic truth, this scene prioritizes the truth of the mothers' experience, expressed through the complete breakdown of language under the burden of unbearable pain.<sup>32</sup> If the TRC was sometimes seen as giving language back to such shattering cries through its collection of objective statistics, *Long Night's Journey into Day* focuses on the raw truth of these exclamations and gesticulations.

There is a strong element of catharsis in this scene, which offers a highly theatrical spectacle in which the repressed memories of the apartheid era are reawakened and purged. By focusing on these images of catharsis, Reid and Hoffmann place the suffering of the most marginal South Africans at the center of a new national history. To what extent does this transmutation of individual grief into public narrative constitute, as Steve Robins argues concerning Maki Skosana, a form of silencing? Although *Long Night's Journey into Day* focuses on the emotions of the Guguletu 7 mothers as they discover and reckon with the truth concerning their sons, it does not conclude its account of the TRC with this moment of catharsis. This portion of the film investigates the extent to which the TRC has led to a real institutional transformation that might offer some concrete recompense for the suffering of mothers like Cynthia Ngewu. The last scene of *Long Night's Journey into Day* focuses on a meeting between Thapelo Mbelo, an informer whose forthright testimony concerning the homicidal instructions he was given

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slung around the neck of the suspected informer and then set alight, burning the

helped puncture the credibility of the police version of events in Guguletu, and the mothers of the youths he helped kill. There is no institutional mechanism for such a meeting; instead, the encounter takes place at Mbelo's request so that he can apologize in person to the women. At the conclusion of this excruciatingly painful scene, Cynthia Ngewu says that holding on to her anger is useless and that she therefore forgives Mbelo. The rhetoric of Christianity and absolution employed by Desmond Tutu plays an important role in Ngewu's absolution of Mbelo. While this scene of forgiveness is the last one we are shown by the film, prior to this we hear other mothers expressing their anger at their sons' killer. In one particularly powerful image, one of them stands up to display her emaciated body, saying that she has wasted away because of the suffering associated with her son's death. How, she asks Mbelo, can you make this right? Another mother complains that they have no jobs, no material possessions to fall back on, and no sons to support them in their old age. Thus, despite the conclusion of the scene with Ngewu's forgiveness of Mbelo, the feelings of anger and discontent the other women articulate indict not simply Mbelo but the entire process of national reconciliation embodied in the TRC. The TRC controversially lacked a mechanism to secure not simply material recompense but psychological counseling for those who, like the mothers of the Guguletu 7 and Nomonde Calata of the film's second segment, remain wounded by the violence of the apartheid era.<sup>33</sup> The sustained focus of *Long Night's Journey into Day* on victims suggests that the TRC too easily neglected the enduring character of suffering even while it memorialized the heroic sacrifices of the past.<sup>34</sup> Although *Long Night's Journey into Day* closes on a note of reconciliation, the directors incorporate comments

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individual to death.

from the mothers that offer significant dissent from the meta-narrative of nation building. Their cathartic expressions of pain may have been instrumentalized as part of a narrative of national reconciliation by the ANC, but *Long Night's Journey into Day* tells us that the suffering and the inequalities of the apartheid era endure in the new South Africa.

### Conclusion

Hoffman and Reid's film inverts the title of Eugene O'Neill's modernist play of familial alienation and decay. Implicit in this inversion is a teleological view of South Africa's transformation during the recent democratic era. A highly contested and contradictory process of negotiation is thereby represented in patently optimistic and perhaps even romantic terms.<sup>35</sup> Does the film's focus on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission lead it to elide many elements of apartheid's legacy that continue to impact South Africans? Discriminatory racial classifications, pass laws, massive forced removals, and the denial of education, democracy, and adequate living standards to the majority of the nation's population, among other apartheid-era injustices, were not the focus of the TRC. Instead, the commissioners were charged to investigate only brutal abuses such as torture, kidnapping, and assassination, crimes that were illegal even under apartheid laws.

This, Mahmood Mamdani has forcefully argued, was the fundamental flaw of the body. By focusing exclusively on 'gross human rights violations', the TRC failed to indict the principal injustices of apartheid. Indeed, the body tacitly accepted the racist legal framework of the apartheid era. According to Mamdani, 'the TRC's version of truth was established through narrow lenses, crafted to reflect the experience of a tiny

minority: on the one hand, perpetrators, being state-agents; and, on the other, victims, being political activists.<sup>36</sup> The TRC, Mamdani argues, was based on a faulty analogy with Latin American experiences, one that obscured the colonial character of apartheid. South Africa's apartheid system was not simply based, as were the Latin American dictatorships, on the retention of dictatorial power through orchestrated terror. Under apartheid, state power was intimately linked with more broadly experienced racialized privilege through the systematic dispossession and exploitation of the non-white majority of the population. As a result of the 'narrow lenses' through which the TRC viewed South African history, this legacy of systematic injustice – one that long predates the official era of apartheid – was written out of the official discourse of the new South Africa. Indeed, the TRC was ordered to investigate crimes committed solely between 1960 to 1994. This severely circumscribed historical period elides the first twelve years of the apartheid regime, not to mention the four hundred years of colonial power that preceded it.

Is it possible to promote genuine reconciliation when the systematic injustices of the apartheid past and the post-apartheid present have yet to be confronted? Both the TRC and accounts of that process such as *Long Night's Journey into Day* raise this difficult question. Historians have argued that, by focusing exclusively on gross human rights violations, the TRC helped erase the oppressive quotidian experience of South Africa's majority from the historical record, thereby tacitly legitimating the continued inequality of an economically and socially polarized nation.<sup>37</sup> As an aesthetic work, however, *Long Night's Journey into Day* mobilizes processes of identification that check this tendency to elide subaltern history. Focusing on the testimony of both victims and

perpetrators before the TRC, the film creates a dialectical interplay that challenges preconceptions of an easy resolution to the legacy of apartheid. The film thereby helps insert the highly contested and uneven character of South Africa's transition to democracy in the historical archives. Although Reid and Hoffmann do not use their film to investigate the broad systemic inequalities of apartheid, their focus on the conditions that led to human rights violations in South Africa situates state violence within a social context. By documenting the tensions and compromises within the TRC, *Long Night's Journey into Day* offers a powerful record of the contradictions in South Africa's celebrated transition to democracy.

Notes:

1. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, "Introduction", in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 1.

2. Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, "Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa", in Nuttall and Coetzee, p. 99.

3. For an analogous argument concerning the role of representations of the TRC as 'elegy', see Ingrid de Kok, 'Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition', in Nuttall and Coetzee, p. 61.

4. Priscilla Hayner, 'Same Species, Different Animal: How South Africa Compares To Truth Commissions Worldwide', in Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (eds.), *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* (London: Zed, 2000), p. 34.

5. 'Paying for the Past', *The Economist*, 15 April 2003, Lexis-Nexis, Columbia University Library, 27 April 2003, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com>.

6. For a critique of the analogous equation of popular anti-apartheid resistance with elite leadership in Video News Services' documentary history of the African National Congress, see Jacqueline Maingard, 'Television Broadcasting in a Democratic South Africa', *Screen* 38.3 (1997).

7. According to *Africa News*: 'Most black South Africans surveyed in 1998 believed that the TRC had been fair, as did a slim majority of English-speaking whites. White Afrikaners did not.' 'South Africa: The Bringing of Truth', *Africa News*, 21 March 2003, Lexis-Nexis, Columbia University Library, 28 April 2003, <http://web.lexis-nexis.com>.

8. For a discussion of the media's structural inability to represent the long-term effects of violent trauma, see Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, 'Introduction', in Veena Das et. al. (eds), *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery* (Berkeley, CA: U California Press, 2001), pp. 25-26.

9. *Long Night's Journey Into Day: South Africa's Search for Truth and Reconciliation* (Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann, Iris Films, US, 2000).

10. Summarized in John Izod and Richard Kilborn, 'The Documentary', in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds), *World Cinema: Critical Approaches* (New York: Oxford U P, 2000), pp. 45-48.

11. For an overview of recent documentary work in South Africa, consult the website of the South African International Documentary Film Festival at <http://www.bigworld.co.za/encounters>.

12. The turn towards autobiographical narratives in writing is discussed in Sarah Nuttall, 'Telling 'Free' Stories? Memory and Democracy in South African Autobiography Since 1994', in Nuttall and Coetzee, pp. 75-88.

13. For a summary of these debates, see Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), pp. 145-148.

14. See, for example, John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987).

15. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

16. John Corner, *The Art of Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary* (New York: Manchester UP, 1996).

17. See Sergei Eisenstein, 'A Dialectical Approach to Film Form', in Sergei Eisenstein and Jay Leda (eds), *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949).

18. While Reid and Hoffmann clearly employ the Biehl murder to engage an American audience, this segment of the film does not marginalize the lives of black South Africans as do the Hollywood films discussed by Rob Nixon in *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

19. For a discussion of the common tendency among historians opposed to apartheid to impose a model of subaltern resistance on popular culture, see Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, 'Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa', in Nuttall and Coetzee, pp. 94-95.

20. Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 50.

21. Wilson, xx.

22. Wilson, xx.

23. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963).

24. Mahmood Mamdani, 'A Diminished Truth,' in Wilmot James and Linda van de Vijver (eds), *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio U P, 2000), p. 59.

25. Mamdani, 'Making Sense', p. 25.

26. For a forceful critique of the TRC's policy of moral equivalence, see Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal, and Ronald Suresh Roberts, 'When the Assassin Cries Foul: The Modern Just War Doctrine', in Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd, pp. 86-98.
27. On the stand off between the ANC and the apartheid regime, see Harold Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (London: Currey, 1988).
28. Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, 'Introduction', in Das et. al., p. 3.
29. For analysis of *Shoah* as an alternative to conventional documentary representations of the Holocaust, see Bruzzi, pp. 105-113.
30. Steven Robins, 'Silence in My Father's House: Memory, Nationalism, and Narratives of the Body', in Nuttall and Coetzee, p. 138.
31. Rory Bester, 'Trauma and Truth', in Okwui Enwezor et. al. (eds), *Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 168.
32. For a discussion of the general insensitivity of commentators to the role of emotional breakdowns in illuminating the truth of witnesses' testimony, see Rustom Bharucha, 'Between Truth and Reconciliation', in Enwezor, p. 372.
33. Members of the TRC expressed frustration at the government's highly equivocal commitment to reparations and rehabilitation. Mary Burton, Personal Interview, 15 June 2000.
34. For a Derridean account of the partiality of the historical archive created by the TRC, see Colin Bundy, 'The Beast of the Past: History and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in James and van de Vijver, p. 15.

35. For an extremely critical political economy of the negotiated transition, see Hein Marais, *South Africa, Limits to Change: The Political Economy of Transition* (New York: Zed Books, 1998).

36. Mahmood Mamdani, 'A Diminished Truth', pp. 58-61.

37. Bundy, p. 11.