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Bearing Witness: Hope for the Unseen [post-print]

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For ere this the tribes of men lived on earth remote and free from ills and hard toil and heavy sickness which bring the Fates upon men; for in misery men grow old quickly. But the woman took off the great lid of the jar with her hands and scattered all these and her thought caused sorrow and mischief to men. Only Hope remained there in an unbreakable home within under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door... (Hesiod, *Works and Days* II: 90-100).¹

To try to make sense of one's life is to gather one's own and the community's memories in an attempt to produce some kind of fit, some kind of mutual accommodation. But this project is continually undone by the world, by deep, open attention to the world.²

In Hesiod's myth of Pandora, after she unwittingly unleashes a world of evil and suffering upon man (whom she was sent to companion³), one gift remains captive within the jar—ἐλπίς, or hope. At first glance, this would seem to be humanity's saving grace. However, within the commentary on Hesiod, there is some disagreement regarding just how we are to interpret this remaining gift. Is it kept in reserve *for* humankind as a comfort, or is it the last of the evils that is kept *from* humankind to prevent the idle indulgence in a blind expectation which will never be fulfilled?⁴

This ambiguity comes from the roots of the word: ἐλπίς comes from ἔλπομαι—to suppose or expect. Expectation is ambivalent; one might expect either good or evil to

¹ Hesiod. *Works and Days in Hesiod: Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Translated by: Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Loeb Classical Library), p. 57.

² Zwicky J. *Lyric, Narrative, Memory*. In: Finley R, Friesen P, Hunter A, Simpson A, Zwicky J, editors. *A Ragged Pen: Essays on Poetry and Memory* (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press; 2006), p. 94.

³ On this point, as well as the mythical connection with the fall of the human race and the introduction of evil into the world through the actions of a woman, there are obvious parallels with Genesis.

⁴ See Verdenius W. J.. *A Commentary on Hesiod: Works and Days* (Leiden: Brill; 1999). Verdenius tracks the debate about the meaning of the term ἐλπίς in this myth and presents four possibilities pursued by scholars over the years: 1) that it was a good preserved for the comfort of humans, 2) that it was a marker of the fact that humanity's blind hope is itself responsible for the release of all the other evils from the jar into the world, 3) that it was meant to be prevented from coming into contact with humanity because itself illusory—the human condition is objectively desperate, and hope can only ever be a subjective fallacy, and finally 4) it is of such an evil that Zeus, while determined to punish humans, could not in the end, unleash hope upon them too (Verdenius, p. 66-69). Of the four interpretative possibilities, only one posits 'hope' as a benevolent phenomenon.

occur and, it goes without saying, one's expectations are not always met precisely as hoped for. By the time the word 'hope' makes its way into English, this expectation has become more narrowly defined: hope refers to an "expectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation". Its secondary meaning is a "feeling of trust or confidence," presumably that what is desired by one will be fulfilled.⁵

The ambivalence about hope arises from the question of its impact on the one who hopes: does hope squash, or spur on, human agency? Is it a (falsely) comforting balm or an energizing irritant? Does it provoke quietism or political engagement? Another worry about hope is often expressed theologically: is there something inherently idolatrous in the expression of a subjective desire, which does not sufficiently trust in divine providence, but instead, demands the satisfaction or fulfillment of what "I" desire?⁶

Thus, our conception of hope contains within it two opposing threats. On the one hand, hope might encourage a passivity content to wait for a salvation (and a savior) to come from afar. On the other hand, hope must also guard against the idolatry of subjective projection; it cannot claim full control to dictate precisely what is the object for which we hope. Such a hope is unlikely to be met as expected. In the first case, the danger of hope is that its focus is too externalized and transcendent; whereas in the latter case, the risk is that hope might never escape the borders of an internalized subjectivity (whether the hope expresses the desire of an individual, a community, tribe, or nation). Thus the question before us is whether we can conceptualize a mode of hope that succumbs to neither danger. In order to arrive at such a vision of hope I suggest that an

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, Vol. VIII (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1989), p. 376.

⁶ As counter-intuitive as this last possibility seems, it is precisely the sentiment expressed in linguistic traditions which do not use the term hope in casual language—such as "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow," but say rather "God willing, it won't rain tomorrow," or "Insha' Allah".

analysis of a related action—that of bearing witness to an excessive event—will help by lending both a theoretical and conceptual framework for thinking hope and offering a concrete example of hope in action.

In this essay I expand on Ricoeur’s suggestive claim that hope is “the horizon of philosophical discourse,” which gives “rise to thought”.⁷ Specifically, I propose an analysis of the activity of *bearing witness to truth* as a way of thinking of hope as an activity that falls into neither the danger of the passivity of quietism nor that of the illusion of idolatry. The essay regards hope as a discipline, or, to use Hadot’s much-employed term, a “spiritual exercise”. I argue that practicing hope is both required for, and enacted in, the act of bearing witness.

Hope, seen through the lens of witnessing, entails a comportment of expectation; however, it is an expectation which is not limited by a person’s subjective desires, but instead, requires an active discipline of openness. As I will argue, this view of hope is not teleological—at least, it does not await a singular event/person (already perfectly specified and identified) to bring a perfect resolution—but rather necessitates an active and responsive attention to whatever is coming. Further, it enacts a responsible receptivity. Hope is neither passive expectation of a rescue from above nor the idolatrous, illusory expectation of the fulfillment of our own desires; rather hope is an act of preparation to bear witness to truth in a response that is always political, open, dynamic, and ongoing. It is desirous of the truth, it seeks the truth passionately, but with the conscious self-discipline of refusing any pretension that it might arrive at, or fully possess the truth.

⁷ Ricoeur P. Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems. In: *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*. Translated by: Pellauer D (Minneapolis, Fortress Press;1995), p. 203, 205.

While it remains unfinished, the act of bearing witness, at its best, speaks of a kind of receptivity and response that, relinquishing the need for specific evidence, demonstrates an openness to truth, even if that is a truth that confounds and scandalizes. This act is a concrete depiction of hope. I propose to explore the idea of how witnessing presupposes and enacts hope, in particular, in the face of national and intergenerational trauma, specifically in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. However, before looking at historical examples of bearing witness, I will begin by outlining the contours of the philosophical concept.

Philosophical accounts of bearing witness

While one certainly can witness to the mundane aspects of human existence, philosophical interest has focussed on bearing witness to uncommon and excessive phenomena, specifically in response to traumatic or religious experience.⁸ Bearing witness is conceptualized as an alternative form of truth-seeking. Thus, it may be simplest to begin by saying what witnessing is *not*—by identifying those forms of truth-seeking that are distinct from witnessing. Having identified those epistemological alternatives, the forms of hope implied in each case might also be clarified.

Most clearly, to bear witness to an event is not to give an *explanation* of it, nor does it presuppose a correlationist theory of knowledge where subjective expectations are adequately matched by the objective evidence given. Nor does it require the fideism of “new phenomenology’s” passive acceptance of what comes solely on the terms of the given itself, and yet, neither does it locate the source of truth within the subjective

⁸ See Jones T. Traumatized Subjects: Continental Philosophy of Religion and the Ethics of Alterity. *Journal of Religion*. 2014; 94 (2): 143-60.

horizon of hermeneutics. A word more on each of these alternatives is warranted to get a better sense of the epistemological alternative offered by witnessing.

The common sense mode of truth-seeking that we are most accustomed to is explanation and correlation. The aim of explanation is to clearly outline what is verifiable about the object of knowledge and to present evidence that confirms, or correlates with, this outline. Likewise, it is important to be able to accurately identify and explain what gave rise to the experience of the object—the “originary event”. From this model of how we know, as its critics will tell us,⁹ so too a particular ethic emerges: because knowledge both begins and ends with us, and because we think of knowledge primarily as something we possess, we develop an ethics in which the objects of our knowledge (including other people) are simply means to our own ends, things to be acquired or disposed of, projections of our own imaginings, idealized, objectified, or to put it more politically, othered, subjugated, and colonized. The understanding of hope which correlates with this view of truth-seeking expresses an expectation to attain that which I desire perfectly, without remainder to, or subversion of, that expectation.

The explanatory understanding of truth-seeking has been thoroughly deconstructed in the past century, with other epistemological possibilities coming to the fore and battling for supremacy. In the early part of the twentieth century, that battle took shape as a debate between phenomenology and hermeneutics. Both schools are united in their attempt to counter the hubris of the “egology” of the supreme knower and his objectification of the world,¹⁰ but they disagree about the best way to do so. With the

⁹ Levinas is pre-eminent here. See *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by: Lingis A (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press; 1969).

¹⁰ Levinas, 44.

former there is an attempt to arrive at a “pure” uninterested description of phenomena (objectively speaking), following a methodology that endeavors to bracket any personal bias.¹¹ In the latter, comes the claim that all knowledge, all understanding, all experience, is inevitably from the very start conditioned by one’s context, historically situated, and individually interpreted.¹² In this case, we don’t correlate inner concepts with an external world; we make that world, constituting it through our interpretation of it.

If we relate these two alternatives to different conceptions of hope, it becomes clear that the danger of a purely phenomenological view of hope might echo the risk of encouraging a passivity of the subject who is merely to receive the intrusive salvation that comes from on high. The objects of our hope, if encountered, will always be utterly other than what we expect and must be received as such with as little personal inflection possible. A hermeneutical view of hope, on the other hand, runs the opposite risk of never escaping the boundaries of subjective desire; thus, the danger is that hope can only ever be idolatrous.

One of the hypotheses of my argument is that witnessing to excessive experiences, be they traumatic or religious, begins to take us out of this either/or dichotomy between an objective, externally-focused account and a subjective, internally-focused one. Rather than rejecting the insights of phenomenology and hermeneutics, theories of bearing witness retain central elements of both.

In order to illustrate this claim, it is helpful to consider a concrete example—one which draws upon a discussion of witnessing in trauma theory. In his work on witnessing

¹¹ Originating with Edmund Husserl, this approach was carried forward by Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, et al.

¹² This approach originates with Husserl’s rebellious pupil, Heidegger, and continued in subsequent generations by Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Richard Kearney, et al.

to trauma, the psychiatrist Dori Laub describes a debate that occurred between a historian and a psychoanalyst who listen to a Holocaust survivor's account of a particular historical event: an uprising at Auschwitz in which Jewish prisoners set fire to the camp. In the survivor's account she speaks of seeing four chimneys set ablaze by the prisoners. Her witness is discounted by the historian as unreliable because it was empirically falsifiable (only one chimney was set on fire). Moreover she is "ascribing importance, to an attempt that, historically, made no difference".¹³ The psychoanalyst, on the other hand, hears truth communicated in her account – but it is a different order of truth, the truth of resistance in the face of dehumanization. What the survivor bears witness to is something more crucial and more radical than the number of chimneys that exploded: Jewish resistance in Auschwitz and survival beyond it. According to Laub, the authority of the survivor's testimony is derived from the fact that she is an *eyewitness* to the uprising. Why do we assume that the eyewitness is best able to say "what really happened" and best able to give a truthful account of the event?

When we privilege the eyewitness account, I suggest, we are not necessarily seeking mere historical accuracy. To gain objective knowledge of an event it is not strictly dependent upon who is doing the telling. Rather the eyewitness is authoritative because she is the only one able to give testimony to something beyond that which is objectively recordable, publically accessible, and commonly verifiable. It is a perspective that only the eyewitness can provide, because in part, the truth we are listening for, is her response to the original event. Yet, her response to the event witnesses to more than simply her own response; she alone can give testimony to all that she cannot recognize,

¹³ Felman S, Laub D, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge;1991), p. 61.

understand or explain, but nonetheless witnessed. Her witness moves us beyond the publically accessible historical facts of the event, as well as beyond her own personal response to it. Her authority comes in her unique ability to testify to the truth of the original event which exceeds both the merely objective and merely subjective, as well as the neat explanatory correlation of both—in this case, resistance and survival in the face of totalitarianism. Moreover, through the act of bearing witness to her past experience she enacts the very thing she is witnessing to: “And she came to testify to unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eyewitnessed—this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz”.¹⁴

Beginning now to shape the contours of bearing witness more positively, one can identify three general characteristics. Kelly Oliver, a contemporary political philosopher who draws significantly on Emmanuel Levinas, has developed the most robust philosophical theory of bearing witness and the following markers draw extensively on her discussion in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*.¹⁵

a) Witness is constitutive of a relational view of human subjectivity

First of all, according to Oliver, to be a human subject requires the ability to bear witness, that is, the ability to respond, to be response-able, which, in turn requires the ability to be addressed. This means it is impossible to have any sort of sense of identity apart from our relations with others. Oliver states it thus:

“Subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others – what I am calling witnessing. . . The responsibility inherent in subjectivity has the double sense of the condition of possibility of response, response-ability, on the one hand, and the ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others born out of that founding possibility, on the other”.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁵ Oliver K. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 2001).

¹⁶ Oliver, p.15.

Epistemology slides smoothly into ethics here: we have a “responsibility to response-ability, to the ability to respond.” This means that we are obligated not only to respond, but also to do so in such a way that enables and encourages the possibility of others’ response.¹⁷ By acknowledging the radical inter-dependency of human subjects, that I cannot become a subject without the ability to be addressed and to respond to another, a particular politics also emerges - one which allow us to “acknowledge the realness of another’s life [without] judging its worth... or understanding or recognizing it, but [simply] responding in a way that affirms response-ability”.¹⁸

b) Witnessing involves an encounter with radical otherness

The main targets in Oliver’s treatment of witnessing subjects are explicit: she is arguing against a certain view of liberalism and the politics of multiculturalism,¹⁹ which she thinks relies too heavily on the category of “recognition” and entails a Hegelian master-slave relation in which the fate of the “slave” is forever determined by the “master”. Re-cognition requires familiarity, and thus, forbids from the outset any real encounter with otherness. Oliver asks how “is it possible to recognize the unfamiliar and disruptive?” This problem is exacerbated if we assume the subject is a clearly demarcated and self-contained agent: “If the self is bounded and experiences only that which is within its boundaries, then how can it encounter anything outside of its own boundaries?”²⁰ Thus, against the central tenet advocated by Taylor and Honneth that struggles against racism, sexism, religious violence etc, are struggles primarily for recognition, Oliver argues that the testimonies coming in the wake of slavery or the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.106.

¹⁹ Oliver targets Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth in particular.

²⁰ Oliver, p. 2.

Holocaust “bear witness to a pathos beyond recognition... [and that] the victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witnesses to horrors beyond recognition”.²¹

Oliver’s question is getting at a more basic epistemic query: can we experience true newness or difference at all, except by way of that which is familiar? To even begin to do so, Oliver suggests requires a methodological approach that cultivates open attentiveness. This is the difference between “listening to” and “listening for” in the sense of having an expectation for something specific. Simply, one cannot know what they are going to hear or what they are going to find. In this model it can no longer be a matter of recognizing the familiar in order to confirm what we already know, but rather of “listening for the unfamiliar that disrupts what we already know”.²² This “adventure of otherness”²³—to use Oliver’s phrase—is required with any robust concept of witnessing.

c) Witnessing is a way of seeking truth that is pluralistic and dynamic

From these markers it should be clear that witnessing is a process of building up a store of knowledge which, by definition, requires more than one person and in which truth is not something that can be possessed once and for all, but, nonetheless, remains endlessly sought out. The truth that is sought is understood to be something multi-form and dynamic; it is not determined by us, and is not something we can grasp and contain, or define comprehensively. It is something that requires multiple tellers and multiple audiences, and thus is “located,” as it were, in multiple places at once. Specifically, the truth of an excessive experience is found in the originary event (that which gave rise to

²¹ Ibid., p. 8.

²² Ibid., p. 2.

²³ Ibid., p. 20.

experience), in my ongoing reception of, and response to, that event, as well as in an other's response to my witness of the event, and so on. All of those responding witnesses, including significantly the ongoing 'witness' of the originary event itself,²⁴ contribute to producing the truth of the experience.

Bearing witness to collective cases of communal trauma (the Holocaust, apartheid in South Africa, the Indian Residential Schools in Canada, etc.) can only occur across the gap of history and only through multiple, diverse, even contradictory accounts. As we shall see this is an impossible task, even while it remains a most necessary task. As Oliver argues, this task is basic to our human subjectivity: "in order to reestablish subjectivity and in order to demand justice, it is necessary to bear witness to the inarticulate experience of the inside. This is not the finite task of comprehending it; this is the infinite task of encountering it".²⁵

Given these markers the need for a relation between bearing witness and the discipline of cultivating hope becomes more obvious. Witnessing involves the acts of cultivating an ability to respond to radical otherness without requiring it to be something I recognize first, in a way, moreover, that not only constitutes my own subjectivity, but which must simultaneously promote the ability of others to likewise respond. It also involves ceaselessly seeking the truth while acknowledging that such a truth will never be "mine"—can never be arrived at or possessed by me alone. Such an activity both requires and enacts a hope that must be active, non-teleological, open, responsive and political.

²⁴ In trauma, this occurs primarily through the dynamic re-presencing of the trauma to the one who suffered it. This happens when the traumatic event manifests itself in a recurrent manner through flashbacks, hyperarousal of the autonomic nervous system and other physiological reactions, periods of dissociation, and so on.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Through a more concrete consideration of a historical example of bearing witness found in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs), the markers given in the philosophical account are both confirmed and complicated.

Seeking Truth through Witness

In the past three decades the world has witnessed a number of truth commissions in societies as disparate as Argentina, Bosnia, Cambodia, South Africa, Guatemala, Haiti, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, El Salvador, Kosovo, and Canada. This essay focuses on the commissions in South Africa and Canada – the first because there is the most theoretical literature on it, while the criticisms of the latter make it both a challenging and illuminating example.²⁶ Usually the commissions are created after a repressive regime has been succeeded by a democratic one. (Canada is an exception here in so far as it remains a “settler society”). In all cases the aim of the commissions is both preventative and restorative; in order to prevent the repetition of past national traumas, there is a collective attempt to uncover the truths of the past. In other words, truth commissions arise with the realization that “in order to come fully to terms with their brutal pasts, they must uncover, in precise detail, who did what to whom, and why, and under whose orders. They must seek, at least, thus to uncover the truth—insofar as this aim is humanly

²⁶ The national and intergenerational trauma suffered through the systematic policies of racial apartheid preceding the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission are well known. Less widely reported is the history of the Indian Residential Schools which led to the recent five year Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. This history is summarized in the mid-way report of the commission published in 2012: *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools* (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2012): “For over a century, generations of Aboriginal children were separated from their parents and raised in over-crowded, underfunded, and often unhealthy residential schools across Canada. They were commonly denied the right to speak their language and told their cultural beliefs were sinful. Some students did not see their parents for years. Others—the victims of scandalously high death rates—never made it back home... To put it simply: the needs of tens of thousands of Aboriginal children were neglected routinely. Far too many children were abused far too often” (1). The schools were a result of national governmental policies, but were run by religious organizations—the Catholic, Anglican, and United Churches of Canada. The explicit goal of the policy was assimilation and integration—to “civilize the Indian”—while the implicit goal was to “gain control of Aboriginal land” (2).

and situationally possible after the fact”.²⁷ The commissions commonly acknowledge three elements specific to such a mandate: 1) there is no *adequate* response to the traumatic events of the past; 2) at the same time, “failure to respond is unacceptable;”²⁸ and 3) this response entails an audacious pursuit of the truth.

In so far as it is understood to perform a kind of transitional justice, then the commission process likewise can be understood as performing a rite of passage from one historical moment and reality to another. If all commissions have as their rallying cry “never again,” there is an understanding that truth is the bare minimum requisite for moving forward peacefully. As Roxana Waterson, who has studied these commissions comparatively, states, “(w)here reconciliation is a goal... it cannot be detached so easily from the question of truth”.²⁹ Whatever the truth is, it is not insignificant—it matters. The TRCs establish a view of the meaning of truth, and its production, which aligns with the philosophical account.

First of all, as one can see from the South African TRC, truth is established only as one receives divergent accounts of it, from perpetrators, victims and bystanders. One of the consequences of this structure is that there is an explicit understanding that the truth these commissions set out to articulate is neither singular nor static. It is ongoing—

²⁷ Rotberg R. Truth Commissions and the Provision of Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation. In: Rotberg R, Thompson D, editors. *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2000), p. 3.

²⁸ Minow M. Vengeance, Retribution, and Forgiveness. In: *Facilitator Guide for Long Night’s Journey into Day: South Africa’s Search for Truth and Reconciliation* [Film]. Directed by: Reid F, Hoffmann D (Iris Films; 2000), p. 16. This echoes Laub’s description of witnessing as an “impossible necessity” (Laub, p. 67).

²⁹ Waterson R. Reconciliation as ritual: comparative perspectives on innovation and performance in processes of reconciliation. In: *Decolonizing Testimony: On the Possibilities and Limits of Witnessing*, a special volume of *Humanities Research*. 2009; 15(3): 34.

dynamically produced by an interchange between speakers and hearers—and, most obviously, it is multiple.

The multivalency of the phrase “bearing witness” signifies both a speaker and a listener (or viewer). Multiple and diverse (even divergent) points of view are required to make up the truth for which these commissions strive. Of course, not all the witnesses that give testimony agree. Indeed, some may confound the expectation of the commission. For instance, in the Canadian context, there were some First Nations survivors of residential schools who, instead of delivering a litany of abuses suffered there, spoke with gratitude of the education they received, as well as their improved living conditions compared to their home life.³⁰ These accounts are certainly in the minority, but they too make up the whole of the truth of the residential school experience. Thus the unique challenge of the TRCs is to “produc[e] robust and authoritatively objective truth in the midst of contending subjectivities associated with competing perspectives on bitterly divided and contested pasts”.³¹

However, as is clear when reading transcripts or watching video of these commissions, the search for truth requires the active involvement of not merely those giving testimony, asking questions, or compiling the official reports; it also requires the involvement of the larger social audience. It is not simply a matter of hearing either the confession from a perpetrator, the testimony of a victim, or the witness of a bystander. Nor is the truth of past events contained in a written report which is received statically and passively. Instead one finds constant references to the active role of the “audience” in

³⁰ See *They Came for the Children*, p. 45-49.

³¹ Deborah Posel, cited in Bell L. Buffalo Boy testifies: decolonizing visual testimony in a colonial-settler society. In: *Decolonizing Testimony*, p. 83.

the proceedings. Indeed, one of the things that distinguishes a TRC from a normal legal proceeding or court trial is the involvement of the audience: “A TRC, unlike a legal trial, grants agency not only to those who are invited to testify, but to the audience, who must become engaged as witnesses to the testimony”.³² The audience, the public, play an active role in receiving and bearing witness to the testimony, and in responding to it. Like a Greek chorus, the audience acts as barometer and commentator to the proceedings, one which extends forward in time beyond the initial proceedings. For this reason, the task of the TRC is never finally finished even after the report is produced. There will always be a need for ongoing witnesses to receive and respond to it. The audience, as a collective and ongoing witness, is an enactment of Oliver’s ethical requirement that witnessing “enable response-ability from others”. The victims and perpetrators do not speak to an empty room; their witness is witnessed by others. Subjectivity is born out of this exchange. However, a continued analysis of TRCs also complicates this very irenic image of the hope of bearing witness.

Critical testimony

Responses to various TRCs are not univocal in their praise: critics of the truth and reconciliation process abound. The most common thrust of the critiques warn against the commissions’ instinctive pull towards completion or comprehensiveness. Truth about past atrocities, such critics argue, “will emerge by encouraging conflict and controversy, not by establishing one truth and declaring consensus”.³³ Resting in one singular account of the truth must be resisted.

³² Waterson, p. 37.

³³ Rotberg, p. 6.

Critics also raise questions about the potential coerciveness of TRCs. For instance, there are obvious problems with making “personal testimony” a requirement to receive reparations for one’s experiences. In the Canadian context, for example, the burden of proof is the onus of the survivor who must first provide evidence that they were at the school, and for further payment, then demonstrate the physical, psychological, emotional, and/or sexual abuse they suffered there and ongoing-effects of that abuse.³⁴ This sets up an obviously coercive environment in which to give testimony—one where the potential for ongoing victimization or re-traumatization is abundant.

Adrian Stimson, an artist and member of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation, makes this point forcefully in an essay called “Used and Abused”. He questions whether the TRC process is not “another layer of ethnocide within the colonial project—a layer more insidious as it provokes individuals to relive painful experiences over and over again in the name of ‘healing’”.³⁵ One must ask who the primary benefactor of such a process is—the government and church representatives who perpetrated the violence, the greater Canadian public who allowed it to happen and materially benefitted from the policy, or the indigenous survivors of it? Stimson’s point is not that no testimonies should be given—indeed his art is an incredibly powerful witness to the crimes of the residential schools. Rather, his point is that those testimonies need to be varied in their medium, indigenous in form to the people giving them, primarily for the benefit of those who

³⁴ In 2006 the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement established a number of ways to make reparations to survivors, including the establishment of the TRC 5 year mandate: it also included the Common Experience Payment which provided a lump-sum payment (\$10, 000) for all former residents, and set up a Independent Assessment Process to assess and determine financial compensation for those who had suffered psychological, physical or sexual abuse at the schools.

³⁵ Stimson A. Used and Abused. In: Decolonizing Testimony, p. 71.

suffered violence, and not in order to ease the conscience of the nation that perpetrated it.³⁶

Furthermore, an analysis of the TRCs shows that there is no intrinsic or automatic relationship between bearing witness and healing: in other words, truth is a necessary, but insufficient, requirement for reconciliation. (Just as hope is a necessary, but insufficient, requirement for the fulfillment of its expectation.) Indeed, soliciting testimony from survivors may be problematic when there are no safeguards in place and the testimony is placed out in public, even commanding broad public interest and audience. The working assumption is that “the act of speaking about trauma in a setting such as the inquiry facilitates healing” as does “having [one’s] story validated and officially acknowledged”.³⁷ This is only an assumption, however—one which is rarely borne out in actual events. For many there may be a cathartic release in the immediacy of telling their tales (some for the first time), but with little follow up support in place and with few systemic changes occurring as a response, this can also have the effect of opening up long-covered wounds which could not be dealt with by individuals who must *bear* their testimonies alone.³⁸ When this occurs the ambiguity of hope comes to the fore: bearing

³⁶ See also Cornthassel J, Chaw-win-is, T’lakwadzi. *Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation*. *English Studies in Canada*. 2009; 35(1).

³⁷ Devitt R. ‘Healing the Heartbreak’?: The Role of Testimony in the Australian Inquiry into the Separation of Indigenous Children from their Families. In: *Decolonizing Testimony*, p. 64. Devitt is speaking specifically of the inquiry in the “Stolen Generations” by the Australia Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission.

³⁸ Devitt gives the example of Robert Riley, a prominent Australian indigenous activist who had himself been removed from his parental home at six months of age and placed in a Indigenous children’s home in Perth. Riley spent many years advocating for the rights of Indigenous people. As part of this advocacy he took part in the inquiry, and spoke for the first time publically of the sexual abuse he suffered while at the children’s home. Afterwards he “appeared to friends and to others to experience difficulties in coming to terms with that disclosure and what had happened to him” (Devitt, p. 63). Days before the inquiry was set to open its proceedings in Perth, Riley committed suicide. The same decline of mental health and the increase in suicide rates has been documented in the wake of TRC events in Canada, though as the commission only concluded its mandate in 2015, the long-term effects of it are still too early to judge.

witness becomes an act of an illusory hope—one which quiets the political call for systemic change rather than rousing it.

The value of considering a historical example of bearing witness in the TRCs is that it challenges a utopian vision about the value of witnessing – something philosophical accounts can veer into occasionally when they talk in terms of the “adventure of otherness”³⁹ that witnessing brings. It is not enough to bear witness; the way in which one responds to, and not simply receives, the witness given is a necessary corollary. The TRCs show that witnessing itself is not a neat formulaic process, containable and able to be replicated from one context to the next. Critical testimonies of the TRCs demonstrate how painful it can be when what comes when we witness to another may not be something we recognize. (While this concurs with the theoretical accounts, it is here articulated far more abrasively, and realistically.) They also forcefully remind us that witnessing ought not be artificially imposed from without; it must take on forms and media indigenous to those bearing witness. Further, and for this reason, witnessing needs to take on more forms than simply the verbal or narrational form. While it is beyond the parameters of this essay, one might go on to talk about other forms of

³⁹ Oliver, p. 20.

bearing witness including the artistic,⁴⁰ the poetic,⁴¹ the literary,⁴² and the somatic.⁴³ In the context of religion, we might add to this list the ritualistic forms of bearing witness.⁴⁴

The act of bearing witness to trauma (or any other excessive event) relentlessly, inexorably chases after truth, in part because the original event will not let the subject rest in any one (ever-inadequate) response to that event. The original event has a relentless hold on any witness to it which demands their attention. Consequently, the inherent inadequacy of any one given testimony results in the need to tell the story multiple times, in multiple ways – extending beyond the verbal, and narrational, to include artistic, political, and bodily witnesses.

In the words of Dori Laub, who has spent hundreds of hours recording and bearing witness to first person testimonies from the Holocaust, this act of witnessing “aspires to recapture the lost truth of that reality, but the realization of the testimony is not the fulfillment of this promise. The testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, difference, rather than the exploration of identity...”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ See Adrian Stimson’s caustic cutting performance art in *Buffalo Boy Confessional: Indulgence* (2007) or his harrowing installations such as *Old Sun* (2005).

⁴¹ Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky demarcates the difference between narrational explanation and lyrical witness thus: “Narrative is the genre of choice for the historical treatment of memory. *And then*, it says. *And then, and then, and then*” (p. 96). On the other hand, “Lyric attempts to listen—to remember—without constructing, without imposing a logical or temporal order on experience. *This*, it says. *This. And this. And this*” (Zwicky, p. 98).

⁴² For a philosophical example of an account of literary witnesses to trauma see Kearney R. *Narrating Pain: The Power of Catharsis*. Paragraph. 2007; 30(1): 51-66; idem, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴³ Bessel van der Kolk’s work on trauma has revolutionized the field. Van der Kolk demonstrates how the body always bears witness to trauma whether it wants to or not, indeed, our bodies are the primary witness to what happened. However, there are ways our bodies also can be the primary vehicles for a kind of witnessing that heals. See van der Kolk B. *The Body Keeps Score: Meaning and the Evolving Psychobiology of Post Traumatic Stress*. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1. p. 253-265. See also van der Kolk B, McFarlane A, Weisaeth L, editors. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: The Guilford Press; 1996).

⁴⁴ William T. Cavanaugh’s work, especially *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of God* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell; 1998) is pre-eminent in this regard.

⁴⁵ Laub, p. 73.

For this reason giving testimony is a “ceaseless struggle”.⁴⁶ Paradoxically, this is also the very thing that makes bearing witness an *impossible necessity*. In the context of TRCs, hope for reconciliation requires more than passive acceptance of another’s witness; it must also entail an active response that brings about systemic and political conditions requisite to true reconciliation.

Conclusion

I began this essay with Paul Ricoeur’s claim that hope is propaedeutic to a certain kind of thinking: “Hope is not a theme that comes *after* other themes, an idea that closes the system, but an impulse that opens a system, that breaks the closure of a system; it is a way of reopening what was unduly closed”.⁴⁷ Furthermore, he argues that, unable to have both, we must choose “between hope and absolute knowledge”.⁴⁸ Finally, Ricoeur will claim that the necessity of hope, why we need it, is not simply epistemological, but practical and existential: “this necessity is immanent to a will that expects and requires the fulfillment of its desire for reconciliation”.⁴⁹ What Ricoeur does not add here, but in light of the analysis of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions must be added, is that the expectation and desire for reconciliation which hope enacts, is hardly ever met *just as* one expects and desires. Indeed, the cultivation of hope as a discipline both desires and expects, *and* prepares for those desires to appear differently when they are fulfilled. Hope is cultivated not only in expectation, but also, through the way in which it responds to that which comes unexpectedly.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, “Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems,” p. 211.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214.

A discipline of hope entails the comportment of expectation, the awareness that something is coming. But more than that, hope requires that we must be prepared to both receive what comes and to respond to it; further, it requires that our response be varied and multiple and that it will never rest in completion. To practice hope is to acknowledge that what has come will continue to challenge and summon a new response. Finally it is to confess that our response, nonetheless, will be oriented in a yearning for the truth *in the face of* a concurrent realization that such a truth remains ever-elusive. This is also what it means to bear witness. Hope might not be enough. Because hope, on its own, as Hesiod understood, could simply be illusion. Seeking truth through bearing witness is only a start—but it is one which requires a radical capacity for hope in the face of the onslaught it prepares to responsibly, and responsively, receive.

“To try to make sense of one’s life is to gather one’s own and the community’s memories in an attempt to produce some kind of fit, some kind of mutual accommodation. But this project is continually undone by the world, by deep, open attention to the world”.⁵⁰ Such an undoing does not result in absurdity but, in defiance of Camus,⁵¹ is precisely what hope looks like. Hope is this willingness to be undone by the witnesses which counter our expectation, to be undone and, then, remade in our response.

⁵⁰ Zwicky, *Lyric, Narrative, Memory*, p. 94.

⁵¹ As Albert Camus famously argued in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absurdity is a result of the incommensurability between our expectations and the evidence of the world.

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