

Reconciliation and Founding Wounds

But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it.

—James Baldwin

In the reflections that follow, I want to make a very modest claim: any reckoning with the past that imagines another future must attune itself to the specificity of historical experience. This seems a rather mundane observation, and yet if we take historical experience seriously, so much of how we understand the interval between past and future is transformed. In that sense, I want to make a modest claim that has explosive conceptual potential, shifting a certain universality presumed in notions (and even practices) of reconciliation toward an attunement to the historical specificity, with all of the existential affects it bequeaths to a polity, of pain, loss, and conflict. We may find that the “re-” of reconciliation does not travel well across historical borders. How does original, founding violence transform our sensibility and approach to reckoning with the past? And, from that, how does such a transformation reconfigure our notion of the future? The temporality of reckoning with the past is of course just so crucial. In time, pain is passed on, repeated, and even institutionalized. In time, a break with that pain is possible in the vision of another future, another beginning.

Prompted by Jacques Derrida’s critique of forgiveness, I want to begin with a short reflection on his critical development of “globalatinization” and the global embrace of forgiveness and reconciliation as modes of politics-toward-the-future. I want to begin with Derrida for two intertwined reasons. First, it is Derrida’s critical development that first compelled me to rethink the “re-” of reconciliation and move toward a notion of *conciliation*. Second, and more broadly, I still consider Derrida’s essay “On Forgiveness” to mark a decisive conceptual shift in theorizing collective reckoning with historical pain, so rooting my reflections in that essay is at once an extension of Derrida’s insights and a kind of intellectual honesty. Prompted as well, and perhaps first, by the work of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2006)—the ultimate destination of my initial foray into Derrida’s work—I want to claim that the very idea of reconciliation in the context of the United States, reckoning with slavery and its aftermath, is upset and overturned on the basis of the specific historical experience of race and racism as a founding wound. Such specificity—like, perhaps, any specificity taken seriously—both sustains and displaces the promise of reconciliation. To put it plainly, anti-black racism is not a rupture or tear in the social fabric of the United States, nor in the Americas as such. It is, rather,

what it means to be American, and so not an asterisk or exception to that cultural, political, and historical identity. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose work began in 2006 in response to an eruption of violence nearly thirty years prior, engages racial violence in the context of a single event and also in the horizon of the founding institution of slavery. Imagining the work of reconciliation in this context—moving from globalatinization to the specificity of historical experience, from reconciliation to conciliation—radically recasts problems of history, politics, and the future of friendship.

What, then, do we mean by reconciliation? And what relation does it bear to historical experience, especially that experience of a founding wound?

History and Reconciliation

Reconciliation is rightly coupled to the problem of historical and political truth-telling. To reconcile is to act on the truth, which presupposes, if reconciliation is to be a sincere effort and process, a rigorous rendering of historical and memorial truth. In this sense, the story of truth and reconciliation is familiar, if not in some ways a bit clichéd: after a period of internal violence, atrocity, or state-sponsored terror, a nation undertakes the difficult process of rendering a truthful account of collective trauma. Determining what precisely happened, who were perpetrators and victims, and what is the significance of retelling the truth of the just-past is invariably painful, so the increasing complexity of truth-telling in the process of a commission's work reveals the ultimate stake of reckoning with the past: who will we be? The transition out of a spasm of internal violence places us in the future tense, while at the same time fixing our moral gaze on the wreckage of history. An interval. Another relation, whether plainly political and institutional or complexly cultural and historical, is possible because the future is open. But that futurity is always tied, inextricably, to how the story of the past is told. Truthfully. So, truth-telling is no small task. Indeed, the politics of retelling events just immediately past reveals much about how a hoped-for future is irreducibly fraught across the legal, political, and ethical dimensions of documentation. Should the perpetrators be named? What is the role of ideology and ideological critique in theorizing violence? Should named perpetrators face judicial action, or should amnesty be invoked in order to privilege truth over justice? Is truth its own kind of justice? What is the meaning of a divided or fragmented truth for a future that envisions a more ethical sense of belonging?

These questions bring the wound of the past into the present and present-future, saturating the kinesics of truth-telling speech. That is, the embodied performance of telling the truth, whether in public audiences or a form of memorial/memoir, gathers a full sense of time to the kinesics. Saying and telling the truth of historical pain is awash in multiple, overlapping temporal moments. Gesture, tone, and the performance of telling—what we perhaps too casually call testimony—reveal to us as much as (if at times more than) do the dates, names, and acts told in such truth-telling speech. Reports are never enough. Reporting is crucial to the human drama of encountering the fullness of the past. The activity of truth-telling has its own logic and moral dynamic, bearing memory in more than dates and names. The embodiment of telling—exceeding the economy of the told—intensifies the weight of memory on

the present, and so also the future. To wit: it is not enough to have one's name named as a victim or to have the cluster of actors and contexts reported in an impartial historical narrative. Indeed, impartiality is its own kind of repeated violence, eclipsing the singularity of human suffering with the neutrality of public discourse. This is why truth-telling, as well as its occasional companion work of reconciliation, always has a face: the witness or the victim. Both the public audiences in, say, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Peruvian Comisión de la verdad y de reconciliación deepen what troubles and is wounding about historical memory and bring into clear focus what is at stake in imagining another future. We have to live with, and sometimes as, this body who is performing and gesturing such sadness. All of this violence haunts us yet at the same time promises to transform our possibilities as a polity. In the devastating kinesics of memory, lived as the public audience and its troubling retelling of trauma, our shame about the past poses the future's openness in complete lucidity. The face, as Levinas has reminded us, functions as an overloaded, yet crucial, chiasmic site of the public and the private, crossing the common with the singular: the publicity of truth-telling speech is necessary because the political sphere is at stake, but the privacy of that story and history—the *histoire* of violence—reminds us of the singular, embodied memory of pain as moral and political force is gathered into that public moment. Testimonial kinesics—the embodiment of time and truth-telling—therefore proves critical to the concretion of truth (this pain is lived in this body, communicated as incommunicable in this gesture, tone, and word) and the interval to another possible future (these bodies demand belonging, so systems of violent exclusion must be destroyed or fundamentally transformed).

At the very moment we glimpse the force and necessity of the chiasmic moment of testimonial kinesics—the complex and compelling crossing of the public-common with the private-singular in the speaking, gesturing, and performance of witnessing to pain—the question of reconciliation appears on the stage. That is, when the performance of private pain is brought to bear—always decisively—on the public sphere, the fundamental brokenness of our shared space is given painful, clear articulation. Brokenness, shame, and fixation on the interval between the painful past and open future converge in the complex language of reconciliation. If reconciliation heals, then how is reconciliation anything other than collective apology and forgiveness?

Jacques Derrida's essay "On Forgiveness" offers a chronotope of sorts for the idea of forgiveness. Derrida's chronotopic reading is crucial and politically critical, for the spatial and temporal matrix or matrices of forgiveness he outlines follow the expansion of Western (Christian) ideas across languages of sin and redemption, of transgression and repair, and so of the wound and the possibility of healing. Temporally, the language of forgiveness begins in a particular moment of conceiving the logic of sin and redemption (Christianity and its latinization). Spatially, forgiveness becomes global as reckoning with history's violence grows increasingly planetary in event and scope; Derrida cites not only the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission but also the utterances of the Japanese prime minister Tomiichi Murayama in 1995, who offered an apology for atrocities committed against Korean and Chinese men, women, and children during World War II. We could add our own examples, including, very locally, the strange and unexpected phenomenon of governing bodies

in the southern United States offering apologies for slavery that included those with such iconic names from the Confederacy (Virginia) and the violent anti-civil rights movement (Alabama). Apologies are not simply words. They (want to) initiate a process of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation by demonstrating the reform of the people or state, which in turn makes the unforgivable memory of atrocity suddenly worthy of forgiveness: *If I am capable of apology, I am worthy of your forgiveness*. The antiphony of this moral scene is remarkable. Repentance—the call—prepares the (collective) soul for the forgiveness—the response. “The proliferation of scenes of repentance,” Derrida writes, “or of asking ‘forgiveness,’ signifies, no doubt, a *universal urgency* of memory: *it is necessary* to turn toward the past; and *it is necessary* to take this act of memory, of self-accusation, of ‘repentance,’ of appearance at the same time beyond the juridical instance, or that of the Nation-State.”¹ Repentance, that master word for apology and forgiveness and perhaps even reconciliation, occupies an unstable space. It is neither the habit of a particular community nor the practice of a purely political initiative. Rather, repentance is the time-space of multiple and self-differentiating sites of remembrance. Whether the gesture of apology, the solicitation (or offering) of forgiveness, or the complicated rhetoric, then practice, of reconciliation, the chronotopic dynamic would seem invariant. Or seem to seek invariance. That is, to put it plainly, the space and time of imperial Western history and ideas converge in the redemptive moment of reckoning with the past. What has been broken might be put back together if only the apology and its accompanying, entirely prostrate, performances of ante-repair hold true to their promises. The complicated, religious motifs of forgiving the Other—whether that Other be the singular or the political—are shown by Derrida, with his characteristic subtlety, to reflect an impossibility. Impossibility, of course, because Derrida identifies the terms of forgiveness in their purest sense: the unrecovered victim and the unreformed perpetrator.

Reconciliation is informed, perhaps unwittingly, by this very same impossibility. It bears repeating here that reconciliation so often finds itself entwined with the language of forgiveness, even when the political character and context of reconciliation work are distinguished from the personal nature of acts of forgiveness. The economy of wound-repair-healing at the political level mimics, if not outright reproduces, the economy of sin-contrition-redemption in the personal dynamics of forgiveness. The state does not ask for forgiveness but rather petitions for reconciliation. Derrida’s short essay calls that distinction into question by demonstrating how the thread of the religious and personal binds tightly together with the secular and political. Two languages, one economy of redemption and repair. And so reconciliation becomes, in a flash, a sort of political forgiveness project. The redemption of the state, the people, and the history of both are at stake in reconciliation work. Globalatinization—Derrida’s term for the global reach of Christian sentiments and moral language—folds forgiveness into reconciliation, then exports the latter across scenes of political atrocity, regret, and moral address.

Derrida’s notion of “globalatinization” changes so much. In particular, it changes our assessment of the potency of reconciliation-talk. Derrida wants to cast a shadow of suspicion over the folding of forgiveness into reconciliation. For Derrida, and I think he is right here, there ought to be more distance between the two notions; when

reconciliation starts to sound like forgiveness, we ought to lend a suspicious ear and eye. But I would not make that suspicion absolute, nor do I see that folding as especially destructive for the inevitable chiasm of the private and political space of testimony. In fact, the language of forgiveness is both defensible and contextually relevant. For me, and this is no doubt part of Derrida's project in the forgiveness essay, the problem with globalatinization is not simply the Christianizing of reconciliation but also the uncritical humanism that would seem to sustain the planetary aspiration of reconciliation. How is it that reconciliation aspires to be global? What sort of commonality underpins the transnational movement of one and the same notion, one and the same logic of rupture-repair-redemption applied to vastly different historical experiences? We can describe it this way: reconciliation, informed by the moral force of forgiveness and under the regime of globalatinization, functions like a particularly well-made repositionable note. The sign and significance of reconciliation remains the same, no matter the social, cultural, and political text. Humanism stabilizes the text, which means that the repositionable note called "reconciliation" sticks whenever the political moment calls for repair. Where there is internal violence, the state or people is ruptured and in need of repair. This is the text of transition and reckoning with the violent past, an experience that is surely not limited to any one geographic field or set of localities. Reconciliation functions as that repositionable note, placed in moments and sites of violence as a—if not *the*—method of repairing the past in order to make the future different, better.

But historical experience ought to shift our theoretical field and disrupt the continuity of the transnational political and social text. Perhaps reconciliation is not so repositionable, not because it is overly intertwined with forgiveness or Christian ideas of redemption but because the text to which it would fasten is not always welcoming of the adhesive. Perhaps certain historical experiences make the language of reconciliation problematic, if not altogether foreign. In a sense, I would here simply make an appeal to the notion of specificity: every nation and every descent into internal violence is its own story with particular backgrounds of specific conflicts and actors. The space in which violence spasms cannot be generalized, which ought to raise questions about the repositionability of the note "reconciliation." The text is different, we could say, because the meaning of the violence is different. One need only think of the difference between the racial violence of South Africa under apartheid rule and the ideological violence under Pinochet's regime in Chile; the wounds in each case opened or deepened are incomparable, both because they employ different ideologies (racial, political) and because they deploy a different history (settler or colonial rule, Cold War ideological rifts). For that reason, those kinds of violence produce different moments of reconciliation because they mark out completely different stratifications in social, cultural, and political space. Which then raises the searching question: is every historical experience of spasms of violence—however brief, however sustained—a rupture of the social and political body? And so does every spasm of violence call for the sequence of wound-repair-healing that is so characteristic of reconciliation?

In other words, we have to take historical experience seriously. And we have to consider the idea that the very notion of reconciliation, whatever its moral force and

political possibility, appeals to a continuity of origin that does not obtain globally. What, then, does it mean to locate that different historical experience at the origins of the social relation, rather than in a moment of splitting and fracturing in a spasm of violence? That is, what if the difference in historical experience is not the character and arc of the social text, where we understand the social text to be the narration of meaning that forms social reality, but instead the antechamber to the text itself—a preface to the narration of the national that overwhelms the production of any story that would follow?

Thinking through Greensboro

The facts of the Greensboro case are simple, but they by no means tell us the truth. Nor do those facts give a clear indication of what is entailed in acts of reconciliation. What happened: on November 3, 1979, an anti-Klan and pro-workers march took place in the Morningside neighborhood of Greensboro, North Carolina. Members of the Ku Klux Klan showed up and, after clashing with marchers, fired on the crowd, killing five, and wounding eleven. All-white juries acquitted the assailants, even though local news cameras caught the violence on tape. The event haunted Greensboro for years and arguably still haunts the city. What can be said about this event and its aftermath?

The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission filed its report on May 25, 2006, but without any of the fanfare or critical media, academic, or widely political attention one usually expects from the release of such a report. It is not as if the commissioners composed the report without preparation or engagement with the now quite large network of truth and reconciliation thinkers and practitioners. In fact, the commissioners consulted with a long list of intellectual experts on transitional justice and worked closely with former commissioners from South Africa, Peru, and elsewhere. Their report counts pages into the hundreds, with sustained treatment of both ideas of truth and reconciliation and a comprehensive, ambitious recounting of events, actors, and contexts. The events at issue in the report have a short time-frame, with a single-day date-stamp (November 3, 1979), and an initially manageable set of actors, bystanders, and city geography (violent conflict between two groups in the Morningside neighborhood of Greensboro). So, unlike so many better-known commissions of truth and reconciliation, the Greensboro case is tasked with the assembly of a truth narrative within manageable parameters, informed by the insights of previous commissions and commissioners.

And yet the Greensboro commission is not underwritten by the local, state, or federal government. Nor is the commission supported by an international body. This is a decisive and difficult feature of the Greensboro case. It is a commission born from the Greensboro community itself, and its work of reconciliation is sustained not by a national or state prerogative but by memories of violence in November 1979 alone. In that way, we could say that even as the commission's report on truth and post-report work on reconciliation address the center of Greensboro's sense of community, that report and truth remain interstitial, suspended between the kind of internal critique and transformation one finds in a state-sponsored process and the sorts of reportage an external review (say, a historian's text) would contain. Reconciliation, because it

addresses the community from within the community, moves us ambivalently across this interstitial space, shifting back and forth from the heart of what it means to be a collective to the nonauthorized space of a truth whose only purchase lies in its presence to reconciliation work. The truth does not put perpetrators in jail, nor does it redeem the claims of victims in official civil and political life. At the same time, the truth aims at prompting the kind of collective self-evaluation, reconsideration, and moral reform that orients and motivates reconciliation work. In other words, the commission's report is unlike any other report from a truth and reconciliation commission. And still it is a commission of truth and reconciliation.

Concerned chiefly with the events of November 3, 1979, and the immediate working-class, largely black community of Morningside, the commission's question is initially quite simple: who acted and who was the victim? The question is all the more pointed in light of the legal aftermath of November 3, 1979. Despite the fact that news crews filmed the shooting, in which five lives were lost, and members of the Ku Klux Klan were clearly seen firing guns into the crowd of communist and workers-party demonstrators, all-white juries later acquitted two of the shooters from that day. The spasm of violence was not reconciled in the criminal justice system. Naming names is therefore a first and urgent aim; the ongoing victimization of the acquittal is repaired, even if just a little, in that interstitial space occupied by the commission's report. Though it is not a state-sponsored process, the commission's report is nonetheless a rigorous account of the event, complete with timeline, spatial location, and proper names. But this is only part of the commission's report, and surely its least ambitious task. For truth-telling, as in all truth commission work, also has the larger task of reconstructing the meaning of the event. And herein lies the most fecund, and therefore most fraught, articulation in the commission's report.

Violence and its aftermath often remain perplexing by virtue of the troubling intertwining of trauma, political indifference, and ongoing historical oblivion. The mystification of violence in the Greensboro case lies in the intersection of police response, local media treatment, and the dismissive, often heavy-handed interpretation of political leaders. It is enough to note the lack of institutional or political support for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission; when approached, city and state leaders advised forgetting, refusing memory. Concrete suffering, fear, and trauma are effectively dislocated and displaced in this near-universal response that interprets the two political actors (the Klan and the activists) as outsiders. Such an interpretation fails to appreciate how the presence of those actors, no matter their place of origin, reveals a connection between the anti-black racism and massive economic and racial inequality of Greensboro as a whole, Morningside in particular. Indeed, the truth-telling dimension of the commission's report documents this failure in excruciating detail, and always without polemic; for example, the conclusion of the report summarizes nicely the timeline that embeds Klansmen and activists in the police and political docket.² Even if they wanted forgetting, the truth dimension of the commission's report makes it clear that there was too much knowledge on the part of civil authorities.

The truth gives way to reconciliation. For the Greensboro commissioners, the aim was to document the multiple perspectives found among perpetrators, victims, and

bystanders, supplemented with forensic investigations into media sources, police docket, and political participation from the beginning to the ending spasm of murderous violence. From those perspectives, then, the question of reconciling: how can we conceive reconciliation in this moment, both as an imperative and general aim? The commissioners frame the problem in terms of persisting social inequality, which is not just economic in character or moral at its core but also, and perhaps first, profoundly political. It is a question of democracy. They write that truth and reconciliation are

one part of a larger effort to achieve social justice, and can have the most impact when there are companion strategies underway or put in place to accomplish reform, address inequalities and deepen democracy. In some cases this takes years and even generations; when authorities are responsive and responsible in acknowledging the truth, change may be felt more quickly.³

The deepening of democracy—this charge is significant, for it indicates a commitment on the commissioners' part to the idea of a tear in the social fabric. That tear or rupture functions as an asterisk to an otherwise seamless system of inclusion, flourishing, and belonging. The work of truth-telling excavates and exposes this wound. Reconciliation heals the wound through a transformation of democracy—that political commitment to belonging—through social justice. Truth begins that justice by bringing injustice into view, but truth is only the prompt to the difficult and most urgent work before us.

Such difficult work is made more complex by the lack of political authority. That is, no matter the recommendations, or even demands, of the commission's report, no action is compelled. Authority and compulsion therefore must seek another model. In the Greensboro case, this other model begins with what the commission calls "moral suasion." An appeal to a sense of right and wrong—no matter how shaky a ground—drives the work of reconciliation in the shadow of truth already told. This means that reconciliation moves away from the space of judge and victim, which is where a certain political sympathy lies for most onlookers, and toward the agonistic space of existing inequalities and violence. The commissioners write, distinguishing their work from other commissions,

And where there have been commissions with greater power, often compulsion was not used. Rather moral suasion played a powerful role, as it has here, in moving individuals to come forward.

We have demonstrated this power in bringing to the table, against many dismissive predictions to the contrary, not only former communists, but former Klansmen and Nazis, residents of the Morningside neighborhood, police officers, judges, trial attorneys, city officials, journalists and citizens from all parts of the city. In the words of one attorney, we have demonstrated that this process can "begin to melt the ice" within which many in this community have been frozen and unable to reach each other.⁴

Frozensness is such a quirky image to evoke in this exceptionally decisive context. The context of this comment is everything: to what in the past is the work of reconciliation

directed and toward what future is the work undertaken? The future is clear. Democracy must be deepened, social injustice made just and repaired. But the past remains unclear: is conflict frozen, locking the parties and social groups in long-standing conflicts over values and rights? Or is conflict frozen as the very origin of the social relation itself? This is a crucial crossroads.

We can certainly say this much: the ice is not “melted” for the sake of contact. Reconciliation work is not undertaken simply to initiate contact between separated social groups. Rather, the image of frozen relations suggests exactly at what reconciliation, in its repositionable note form, aims: repair of the brokenness of the world. In this context, it means that the events of November 3, 1979, tore into the body of Greensboro, North Carolina, and the wound has not healed. Reconciliation heals this wound by taking what is broken and assembling again a sense of the whole. The community is broken by the spasm of violence. Truth-telling, its moral suasion, and the concrete work of reconciliation repair and restore that brokenness. From the introduction to the report, the commission writes, “Reconciliation means to bring together those parts that were torn apart and make them whole again, to repair the brokenness in our community.”⁵ Repair the brokenness. Community. The latter is both the foundation of reconciliation work—the ruptured basis of belonging and democracy—and the regulative ideal of any vision of reconciliation: there must be a return to a better, pre-fractured community. We catch sight of brokenness in how it is signaled in the cluster of affects called trauma. A broken community is lived as one where no stability, safety, or affirmation is possible. Harm is lived as mistrust and fear, which underscores, again, the importance of truth. If truth is told, then mistrust and fear become something more than dysfunction. That is, with a certain truth in view, one can ground a reading of mistrust and fear as clues or symptoms of how the rupture of community is lived in the aggrieved body as affect. Symptoms are not simply relevant for individual diagnosis and address to trauma but also for understanding how a community lives as traumatized. Broken communities call for reconciliation because the affects of mistrust and fear are miasmatic. Life is nearly unlivable. The commission writes,

Once we tell and understand the truth, we then can take the next steps toward reconciliation. We can describe clearly the harm that was done, to individuals and to groups. We can explain how the actions of the past caused harm, and can show how that harm continues to cause problems in the community. We can understand how the on-going harm leads to mistrust, fear and division. This is what we mean when we speak of a broken community.⁶

Harm is ongoing, which means that reconciliation addresses memory, yes, but also how traumatic memory bears on the present. Community as miasma rooted in spasms of violence—reconciliation gets its footing in that sense of brokenness.

But even as reconciliation in Greensboro is envisioned according to the model of repair, the commission’s reflections on the concept and practice are clear about the fiat character of reparative work. Reconciliation breaks new ground: “Unresolved, past hurtful events divide a community. We can help the people in such a community reunite in common purpose by seeking truth and working for reconciliation. A reconciled community will be a strong community, where people work together for the

common good.”⁷ The new ground of reconciliation has careful and precise articulation here, and it is crucial for my hesitation about the process. The new ground is the identification of a common good, which underpins the vision of a “strong” community. Strength, one gathers, is derived from and grounded in the common good of a social justice committed to deepening democracy. Common purpose, common good—the commonness of community is broken in violence, diagnosed and treated with truth-telling, and then finally put back together in reconciliation. Repetition of the wound-repair-healing sequence of the globalatinization of reconciliation, perhaps, but here with the clearly articulated principles of deep democracy and social justice.

At the same time, the commission’s account of the meaning of reconciliation reveals a dependency on notions of a prior unity. The community is *re*-united, not united. Indeed, even the rhetoric of brokenness indicates a prior whole broken into pieces by violence. How stable is this conception of violence and wound? Is the historical experience of injustice and disunity one of exile and return? Or something altogether different? In other words, can we really say that the timeframe of November 3, 1979, is a sustainable frame for the event? Just after their discussion of a reunited and repaired community, the commissioners identify how the timeframe exceeds the event. They write,

In choosing our timeframe, we have chosen largely to limit our examination to local events occurring within the lifetime of most of those involved in the confrontation on Nov. 3, 1979. But because historical events at larger scales often figure prominently in community consciousness, we have also examined key events that loom large in collective memory such as the importance of the United States’ history of Constitutional rights, slavery, white supremacy, key labor or civil rights organizing efforts and geopolitical conflicts.⁸

Memory of the event, which has a date-stamp of November 3, 1979, is folded over into what is here called the “collective memory” of slavery, white supremacy, and the struggles against the violence accompanying all of those practices, habits, and institutions. That is, memory of the event is at one and the same time memory of history. A long history—indeed a founding history and history of founding—of pain echoes in the spasm of violence addressed in the commission’s report, which means that the report is in a certain sense only an incarnation of our oldest ghost: anti-black racism. Part of this claim turns on a nearly clichéd but revealing remark, reported in the conclusion to the commission’s report: “We have been constantly asked during our process,” the commissioners note, “‘Was Nov. 3, 1979, really about race?’ Labor organizer Si Kahn offered a clear answer when he said in our first hearing, ‘Scratch the surface of any issue in the South and you will find race.’”⁹ Reconciliation, if it is to be grounded in the work of truth-telling, is suddenly charged with (and by) the truth of a longer history, a more potent traumatic memory, and so a very different sense of a wound. Rather than a wound opened, it is a wound reopened and aggravated in the aggrieving violence of November 3, 1979. And here everything changes.

Everything changes here because the moment of rupture—the murder of activists, the terrorizing of Morningside—reveals a series of prior ruptures in the immediate

and also more distant past. It is a moment of *kairos*, perhaps, an in-between moment, exceptional because it gathers the perpetrators and victims into a gunshot and fallen body in which the fullness of painful historical time is experienced in one and the same event. Reconciliation saturates this moment as a possibility—and not, *pace* Derrida’s claim, as a necessity—because the irruption of violence repeats the past, but in a form that is contained in its eventfulness. The commissioners address this explicitly in the executive summary and the introduction in terms of the initial misplacement of the commission in a wider context. One could say that, put alongside apartheid South Africa or the regimes of torture in Argentina and Chile, the occasion of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation hardly seems worthy of the name “commission.” Indeed, five deaths strike the reader as a strange occasion for such elaborate reckoning. One answer to this is that the spasm of violence has haunted Greensboro since, so reconciliation is called for. Another answer, and the answer I think we need to give, is that the spasm of violence brought—and in memory continues to bring—the fullness of the past into the present. That fullness hearkens us back to the founding American violence of the slave trade and plantation slavery, which then becomes Jim Crow, which then becomes the miasma of social injustice under the regime of anti-black racism. Put in that context, then, the case of Greensboro is the case of the origins of the Americas: to say the word “Americas” is already to say conquest, the transatlantic slave trade, genocide, and the long shadow of the practice of chattel slavery. And so November 3, 1979, is exceeded, not by an imposition of the historical materialist, but by the very collective memory that plays ghostly companion to the memory of a single, though never singular, event.

Exceeding the timeframe: we could consider as well the function of the public audiences in the Greensboro case. Public audiences reveal so much, especially, as noted above, the crucial role of the kinesics of truth-telling. While not a formal part of the report, the public audiences in Greensboro were undertaken in order to initiate the series of conversations that air truth and, through listening and at times rigorous questioning, begin the process of reconciliation. The list of speakers in these public audiences is perhaps itself topic enough for full study, composed of community organizers, representatives from legal organizations dedicated to social justice, victims and their representatives, and even perpetrators. Consider, for example, the testimony of Virgil Griffin, a Klan leader in the Greensboro area. Griffin is called to respond to questions about the role of racism in the event of November 3, 1979, and his very presence, even if not his words, evokes the long shadow of collective memory. When asked about reconciliation, Griffin is clear about his position:

Because as I said, the committee say they want truth and reconciliation, then forget it and move on, it’d have been forgotten 20 years ago if it didn’t keep it in the news. Like I said, if you’re interested in the city of Greensboro and the citizens of Greensboro, you ought to be tryin’ to create jobs and get this mess behind and forget it, get people comin’ in here to create jobs.¹⁰

Events of reconciliation require the polis to be present; the community is what suffers the wound, so it is the community that heals in reconciliation work. But when the founding wound is slavery and its long, horrifying shadow, one has to ask what is

possible when a leader of the Ku Klux Klan speaks his way into the space of reckoning with history and forming the future. Is Griffin a figure of reconciliation here? Or just a reminder of the monstrous violence of the past and present?

Indeed, what is reconciliation in this context? It is in fact a misplaced concept. The concept is misplaced for the very same reasons that concepts of reunited community and brokenness resonate as unattuned to the specificity of historical experience. As the commissioners note, the spasm of violence in the report's timeframe brings slavery and its aftermath to bear on the present and its traumatic events; November 3, 1979, is not just the experience of shooting and terrorizing in Morningside but also and primarily the fullness of the founding wound of slavery. What is called for in the wake of this historical experience, having been traumatized into a vision of the new and the future, is what Grant Farred has thematized as conciliation.¹¹ With conciliation, we are able to break with the metaphysics of sin-redemption and the well-entrenched habit of appealing to original community found in the language of reconciliation. Conciliation does not appeal to a prior unity or sense of belonging. That is, conciliation is a call to make and create the connection of belonging, justice, and deep democracy, rather than, as with the language of reconciliation, employing the rhetoric of return. When the wound is founding, the "re-" of reconciliation cannot get footing, and yet spasms of violence like November 3, 1979, still issue a call for remaking the world. It is the world that calls for remaking, not the prior community. Conciliation remakes as a question for which there is no clue or model from the past: how will we make another world? Memory always calls to another future, but in conciliation this is a future constructed in the break from the past, never in return to a fantasy of original unity and belonging.

Further, and crucially, conciliation affirms the central place of the figure of friendship in the making of political relations. The transformative force of conciliation lies in the transition from an agonistic space of terrorizing the enemy—the founding wound and legacy of anti-black racism—to the opening of a possible and for the first time relation of the friend. In politics as a kind of friendship, we can still privilege the rhetoric of connection and belonging, which, to my mind, is an important and transformative sense of political life. Bodies are concrete in friendship, and the movement from suffering to flourishing is saturated with affects and meanings for not only the relation made for just the first time, but for the entire polity. In that sense, conciliation is not institutional or civil reform. A first friendship must be made. Memory of atrocity, because it is not a break from a sense of belonging and instead a reminder of the wound that founds relation, is either repetition of the past or the clearing of space for a new sense of the interhuman. This moment of intrigue and creation is fleeting and difficult, but it nevertheless has to be seized upon as the only possibility. Where there is nostalgia, there is only the new as fiat and creation. Conciliation, not reconciliation. Is this not our calling in testimonial kinesics? Does not the face of trauma and historical experience call us to make friendship for the first time and to create, again for the first time, a sense of home?

We can return to our discussion of Derrida on forgiveness here. What Derrida sees as globalatinization—that generalization of the sin-redemption play in scenes of forgiveness, apology, and reconciliation—is drawn to its limit when the wound toward

which reconciliation is aimed is a founding wound, not a tear in what was a better community. Historical experience bears on the Greensboro commission's report as the antechamber of the timeframe, haunting the languages of harm and memory with the other memory, the founding memory, of slavery. A founding memory confounds the language of sin and brokenness. If there is no community, no common good or shared task, then there is no unity to have been broken. Conciliation replaces reconciliation. Conciliation replaces, not because it is a different ambition but because it is attuned to the specificities of historical experience. As well, conciliation settles the question of belonging and futurity—the address to any wound, especially a founding wound—in the interhuman, the dynamics of wounded communities, which moderates (or even neutralizes) the role and function of the state. For, in the community founded in an original wound, the state has meant violence in beginning (slavery) and in the long shadow of anti-black racist practices, including the very terms of the Greensboro case (police indifference to the 1979 event, acquittals in the court, and resistance to the commission from the outset). The appearance of Virgil Griffin at a public audience says all of this already, without the gesture of repair. He has not sinned against the community. Rather, he is the community's original sense of what is fractured—appearing without repentance or gesture of conciliation, to be sure, but nonetheless telling the community that its brokenness is original and enduring. The founding wound wants forgetting because it sustains the continuity of the wound; Griffin tells that story in a public audience. Remembering the founding wound, and so not remembering the event that breaks a community, prompts us to so much of what the Greensboro commission articulates and aspires toward—a sense of the common good, social justice, and unified purpose—but always with an abyss of beginning. An abyss of beginning because there is no precedent. There is no prior foundation. Friendship must be made for the first time, which is to say, the address to the founding wound must make its way back to the state and not begin there. An abyss of beginning, without precedent, the becoming-community of conciliation faces the wounds that found community. And it asks, in that moment, for the near-fiat event of saying yes to the future against, and at the same time with, pain and memory.

Events of Conciliation

Let me begin a concluding set of remarks in the first person. I was a graduate student at the University of Memphis in the early 1990s, and when I think about my time spent in the South, a particular moment comes to mind. Friends and I had spent a bit of time in the north end of downtown, having drinks and food. At that time, the north end of Memphis was a strange combination of vacant lots, abandoned storefront-style buildings, and a handful of thriving businesses. We'd had a few drinks, planning to walk to the other end of downtown to listen to music, but as we walked I wandered off across a vacant lot to relieve myself in what looked to be a spot of overgrown grass. It turns out, however, that this was not a lot at all, but rather a patch of grass carved out as a memorial site. Mounted on a broken slab of concrete was a plaque describing the site of memory—the concrete was a crumbling foundation of a slave auction block. The plaque was simple and melancholic, describing nothing more than the fact of history: here, on this spot, human flesh was sold. For the better part

of a century. Indeed, that sale is what makes our history possible. On this broken concrete and in this memorial plaque is the founding wound.

It was at that moment that I understood, perhaps for the first time, the full meaning of Walter Benjamin's image in Thesis IX of his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Thesis IX contains that most famous of Benjamin's images: his crib and indulgence of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, an altogether unremarkable painting-sketch that Benjamin loads with the entirety of Western history. The angel of history, Benjamin famously writes, is blown forward by the wind called progress, but this blown-forwardness works against the angel's will. The angel sees history as a pile of wreckage; seeing one single catastrophe unfolded in the silent element of time, he wants nothing more than to awaken the dead, hear the voice of the past, and perhaps signal the redemption of catastrophe in the reinsertion of life into death's grand and horrifying element we call history. The wreckage is mute and distance itself. In that muteness and distance, however, the wreckage of history has not lost its ability to disturb and interrupt. To the contrary, it is the retreat of the catastrophic past into the silence of history, coupled as it is to the flow of historical time into the future (time and memory are obstinate), that makes disturbance and interruption possible. The real question, it turns out, is not whether history is catastrophic but instead the ethical: what are we to do in the space of disturbance and as subjects, communities, and systems of belonging that have been interrupted—sometimes from the beginning of a collectivity—without the possibility of awakening the dead? What is wreckage to us? And who are we to that wreckage?

The auction block, which I still almost compulsively call, by accident, the chopping block, was precisely that wreckage. It reminded me, just as I was about to do that most human and most "at home" of functions, that we are not yet a home, not yet a politics of friendship. The progress of capital shifted our national history from the trade and sale of human flesh to the same in other commodities. Post-Jim Crow, still more progress and still less of the violence and pain of hate. So much so that here we were, on the grounds of what we thought was a series of old cotton mills and general storefronts (how are those not the most haunted of houses?) but was instead the second abyss of our communal space: the auction block that chopped up memory and history. If only that wreckage could fix our gaze, then questions of home, belonging, friendship, and historical justice would register as imperatives. Transformative imperatives, to be sure.

The failure of the wreckage of the past to fix our gaze, buried as it is instead in the weeds of our abandoned spaces, says something important about reconciliation and conciliation. In particular, it points to the importance of memory work in originally broken collectivities as arising out of events of conciliation. Events, that is, which appear less as reminders of loss and fracture than hauntings in the fantasy of a shared beginning. Deconstructive, we might say. Certainly hauntological: the *logos*, the *word*, and, when set in a series of reflections and programs, the *practice* of conciliation are deeply informed (even just formed) by the ghost of an irreparable first wound. Such hauntings maintain both their life and death in relation to the founding wound and, when we are seized upon like the angel of history, leave founding wounds on us. Or remind us of the wounds we live already.

What is Greensboro to us? By “us,” I of course mean those of us implicated in the deeper, deconstructive supplement of history’s long shadow in the Greensboro commission’s mandate. If reconciliation is haunted by those moments in which Klansmen address the community as members of that community, and black residents of Morningside listen, then register outrage from a collective subject position that has never belonged, then the question of reconciliation is revealed to be misconceived. Conciliation takes its place. When conciliation displaces and replaces reconciliation as the original condition and possibility of repair-as-first-creation, we are implicated in that moment. For belonging has to be made. Belonging has to be made just like Frantz Fanon’s vision of a new humanism. Just like Fanon, the founding wound leaves us no trail through history but only wreckage and its quiet, barely suppressed capacity to disturb and obligate us to the new. What an enigma this is, the problem of beginning for the first time.

In closing, then, it is worth recalling a passage from James Baldwin’s “Princes and Powers.” Baldwin’s essay is a report written in response to the 1956 First International Congress of Negro Artists and Writers, a conference that gathered the leading black intellectuals from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. The aim of the conference was to lay the groundwork for a pan-African identity, negotiated through poets and philosophers and other intellectuals, which would survive and build in the post-independence world of the black Atlantic. But Baldwin’s essay is repeatedly interrupted by his own hesitation before this project. Perhaps paradoxically, the language and cultural-political project of *Négritude* (which dominates the Congress) turns him back to the question of home and the United States. He writes,

It was a society, in short, in which nothing was fixed and we had therefore been born to a greater number of possibilities, wretched as these possibilities seemed at the instant of our birth. Moreover, the land of our forefathers’ exile had been made, by that travail, our home. It may have been the popular impulse to keep us at the bottom of the perpetually shifting and bewildered populace; but we were, on the other hand, almost personally indispensable to each of them, simply because, without us, they could never have been certain, in such a confusion, where the bottom was; and nothing, in any case, could take away our title to the land which we, too, had purchased with our blood.¹²

This passage is remarkable in part because it captures Baldwin’s essayist genius so perfectly, but, for our purposes here, it also speaks directly to the question of founding wounds. It poses the question of home and brokenness as coextensive problematics. By travail, purchased with blood, there is land and home. Those coextensive problematics make the question of conciliation at once melancholic, yearning, and utopian in its aspiration. It imagines as building with and working from travail and blood, rather than a repair, reform, and restoration. The chopping block and the auction block begin that wound, marking it as irreparable because it did not open a previously closed body, and yet still wants to become more. Conciliation.

In other words, this is what it means to create with founding wounds. To bear that wound, to be haunted, and yet still glimpse the possibility of saying yes to that first friendship.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), 28.
2. *Final Report of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, esp. "Conclusion," 306ff. Document located at <http://www.greensborotrc.org> (last accessed March 1, 2011).
3. "Introduction," in *Final Report*, 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 15.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 21.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. "Conclusion," in *Final Report*, 310.
10. "Testimony of Virgil Griffin, First Public Hearing, Day Two" (July 15–16, 2005), in *Final Report of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Public Hearings*, 14. Transcript located at http://www.greensborotrc.org/hear_statements.php (accessed March 2, 2011).
11. See Grant Farred, *Conciliation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, forthcoming 2013).
12. James Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 45.