

since 1989, we've watched political leaders look for the familiar embrace of an enemy's antlers.

But it's important to remember that it's a metaphor, that stags are no more prone to divorces than to first-strike missile deployment. Theodor Adorno objected to astrology (or, more specifically, to the astrology column in an American newspaper) because people thought that the stars were about them; better to say that we are about the stars. That is, it's not that stags are like us but that we are like stags. One of the uses of the natural world is the generation of striking images and actions that let us define and redefine ourselves and connect ourselves to everything else. That the natural world gives rise to metaphors by which we understand ourselves is, I have long thought, one of the most neglected reasons for protecting it and paying attention to it. It's important to remember too that biological determinism is just bad analogy: all that stuff claiming we are like our primordial selves, therefore we must eat raw food or copulate with those who look this way or act out that way, is just saying that the stars are about us.

The definition is always partial: the door at the far end is always open for something else to happen, for redefinition. "My love is like a red, red rose," wrote the poet Robert Burns;<sup>3</sup> we assume that there is something about roses—sweetness, redness, delicacy, beauty, ephemerality—that he has in mind and do not picture his sweetheart with thorns, roots, and maybe aphids. Partial resemblance, because metaphor takes us only so far; then we must travel by other means.

The same week I saw the skulls of the stags who'd starved of intractable combat. I went downtown to meet my friend Claire and see the last day of a big show of Yoko Ono's art.<sup>4</sup> It was a magnificent show, and Ono's work managed to do all the things the conceptualists of that era most prized, but with a kind of tender hopefulness that wasn't theirs but hers. At the entrance to the exhibition were two tables, each with two chairs, and the tabletop was a chessboard set with chess pieces, ready to play. But all the chessmen—and the tables, and the chairs, and the board—were white, whiter than the stags' antlers, than their skulls, than their teeth, pure white. In Ono's game, your opponent was no longer different from yourself and maybe no longer your opponent. Can you fight yourself? How do you know when you're winning?

Claire, who has gone around the world doing antinuclear and peace work and now heads Oakland's Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center, has many surprising talents, and it turned out that she is an avid chess player. I am not and I was tired, but that was all to the good, because she was delighted that it took only three moves for me to mistake her rook for mine and move it against her—at which point the game was over, we had unhooked antlers, and Ono

1. Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), a German-born philosopher and sociologist.
2. Robert Burns (1759–1796), a Scottish poet who adapted and preserved Scottish folk songs, including "My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose" (1794).
3. Yoko Ono (b. 1933), Japanese American artist and musician known for her marriage to John Lennon and her peace activism.

had firmly suggested that difference is negligible and conflict avoidable, in this artwork that was about remaking the games and metaphors for war into a playful merging. Further in the exhibition was documentation of Ono's billboards and placards from the Vietnam War era, which said things like "The War Is Over. If You Want It." Ono makes it clear not only that we could disengage from conflict but also that with open imagination we could transform it into something else—perhaps into love, a word that crops up all over her work. Stags are stags, but chess doesn't have to be war. Neither does war.

#### QUESTIONS

1. Rebecca Solnit both values and considers the limits of metaphor. What, according to Solnit, can metaphor accomplish? What are its limits?
2. In this essay about the functions of metaphor, Solnit uses many metaphors, such as "the gray throne of an elephant's head" and "the yellowish hackneys of crocodile sniffs" (paragraph 1). Trace Solnit's use of metaphor throughout the essay. Which metaphors are most effective for you? Why?
3. Solnit considers "backed horns" both literally and figuratively in this essay. Write about a phrase or cliché that you came to understand in a new or deeper way either because of personal experience or through learning the origins of that phrase or cliché.

PUMLA GORODO-MADIKIZELA "Language Rules":

Witnessing about

Trauma in South Africa

"IT'S PLAY A GAME."

It was strange, almost surreal, to see a group of young girls seven to ten years old laughing and carousing in the streets of an Eastern Cape township in South Africa—the Mlungisi Township, the same township that in the mid-1980s had become the scene of so much misery, a tinderbox of inflamed emotion against the inhumanities of apartheid. But that was before these children were even born. I was doing some work in Mlungisi Township and happened to be walking through their neighborhood when I saw them. Their squeals and cries were the very embodiment of joy. My heart leapt. They looked like little tender shoots of foliage—little blades of life—poking out from under the cooled lava of the township once utterly devastated by apartheid's volcano.

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"What game?" the others shouted back, skipping back and forth. "I let me show you," the first one said. She was about eight and looked as if she might be the informal leader of the group. She began to demonstrate. The other girls didn't seem too enthusiastic about this new game. What was wrong with just playing skip? But slowly, they became intrigued.

"It is called the necklace game," the leader said. "This is just going to be pretend necklace, not the real thing," she said. She pushed the other girls aside as if to open up the stage. Rotating through the role of victim, then killers, then onlookers, she seemed to my amazement to recall virtually everything that actually happened in a real "necklace" murder, even though she hadn't been born when the last necklace killing occurred in her township.

She flailed her arms, screaming in mock anguish as if being beaten, swinging back and forth, turning her head from left to right, and begging for mercy with eyes wide open to show fright. Then she switched roles and play-acted with someone going off to find petrol, then another person offering matches, then someone running to demand a car tire from an imaginary passing motorist.

"Give me your tire," she ordered with mock hostility. She narrated the part of the motorist dutifully obeying, then the petrol man, then the matches man. Finally, she returned to her victim role, struggling against the make-believe fire placed around her neck. Nervously, she made a gesture simulating the striking of a match, as if her friends—now a crowd of executioners—had forced her to set herself alight.

As imaginary flames engulfed her, she threw her arms wildly into the air. "Now sing and clap your hands and dance. I'm dying," she said. Her friends started clapping and singing in a discordant rhythm. They formed a circle and went round and round her "body." Gradually, the high-pitched screams of the girl with the imaginary tire around her neck faded into a whimper as her life ebbed away. Consumed by the flames, she slowly lowered herself to the ground and "died." It was all make-believe.

None of the girls I saw reenacting the necklace game that morning had actually witnessed a necklace murder. But the unspoken events of the past—the silence of Mlungisi's hands—had become imprinted on their minds. It was not just the outward form of the game, but its inner meaning, the sense of trauma to communal life that it carried with it. They carried the collective horror somewhere deep within them. Reenacting the death dance of the necklace victim may well have been a way of transforming its memory into something more accessible and less fearful for the girls.

This incident provides an illuminating metaphor for the way in which trauma is passed on intergenerationally "in ways subtle and not so subtle" through silences, fear, and through the psychological scars and pain that are often left unacknowledged. The questions that remain for us when we witness a scene such as this one are: Did they witness it? If they only heard about it without witnessing it, how could they so accurately reenact it?

The language of violence is etched in the memory of many victims of violent conflict and passed on to the next generation in the way that traumatic memory so often is. The notion of intergenerational transmission of trauma

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has been well established, particularly in the surviving families of the Holocaust, where it has been observed that second- and third-generation descendants of survivors know their parents' trauma without their parents ever discussing their experiences in any detail. The traumatic stories are communicated in behaviorally subtle and unconscious ways. The externalized silt of a necklace murder by the young girls in the story above could be seen as an expression of that which cannot be spoken but expressed only through symbolic language.

This repetition of real events from the past seems like a transformation of traumatic experience into ritual, perhaps a cathartic way of putting into action the struggle to find language that expresses the frustrations, helplessness, disempowerment, and dire poverty of people whose lives never counted in the past and continue to count for little in the greater scheme of things.

The notion of "language rules"—which I have borrowed from Hannah Arendt's reflections in her book on Eichmann—is an interesting one.<sup>2</sup> Arendt uses the phrase in reference to the use of euphemistic language, where nothing is called by its proper name. The phrase "language rules" implies, on the one hand, that one has to obey rules of communication and, on the other hand, that these rules of communication often fail us, and that words may fall short of adequately conveying the meaning of experience, especially experiences that are imbued with painful memories.

The stories of trauma told by victims who testified before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) illustrate this struggle with language. Traumatic experience overwhelms the senses so that even in the retelling of the trauma, language is inadequate. Language does not sufficiently capture what happened. As victims navigate the world of language to try to communicate these painful memories to witnesses of their traumatic testimony, the essence of their experience may be lost in the words they choose in order to convey what they went through. I would like to illustrate this "loss" of meaning with two stories from the TRC.

The first story is drawn from our work in the early stages of the TRC process. We were conducting outreach meetings throughout the country to invite communities to submit testimonies in preparation for the TRC's public hearings. I was part of a team leading the TRC's outreach program in the black township of Mlungisi in the Eastern Cape region. In the 1980s Mlungisi had suffered unspeakable violence both at the hands of apartheid government police and also as a result of the atrocities of the necklace murders committed by young people affiliated with the anti-apartheid struggle. The history of Mlungisi was a bloody one that left the community ravaged, where memories of an unspeakable past were performed through children's reenactment games.

1. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975), German-Jewish political theorist and philosopher; Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962), a German Nazi who facilitated the deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps during World War II.

2. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994) [author's note].

Ten years after the raging fires of the necklace murders in the streets of Mlungisi were extinguished, one could still see the brookiness in the faces of the people sitting in the community hall waiting to hear our message.

We gathered on the stage of the community hall to give speeches about the different trc committees, inviting the audience to remember the past and bear witness to their pain and suffering. In the midst of my presentation, I noticed that a woman in the audience was shifting and turning in her seat. By the time I completed my presentation, she had defiantly turned her back to us. I wondered if her body language was a reaction to something I had said. I walked down from the stage to talk to her. As I touched her on her shoulder she got up angrily and walked away. I followed her outside to a spot under a tree. With a look of pain and anger in her eyes, she asked why we were asking them to bring up "buried pain." She wondered why the commission wanted to open up old wounds.

"We have laid these stories to rest," she said. "Now you are asking us to talk about things that we have forgotten!"

Like an unwelcome messenger I sat there next to her, not looking at her and not knowing what to say. It started to rain—a sign from above to rescue me from my guilt for having caused her pain—and I offered to drive her home. Driving in silence, I knew what unbearable horrors our presence in the township of Mlungisi was forcing its residents to remember. Our quick arrival at her home brought simultaneously some relief—I would soon be alone with my guilt and not have to face her—and a sense of anxious anticipation—I did not trust myself to say the right parting words that would express my regret for having caused her pain. As I opened the door to let her out of the car, I expected to say my good-byes and return back to the hall. But instead, Mrs. Plasjic invited me into her home. She asked me to sit on one of only two chairs in her kitchen while she sat in the other. She then told me her story:

My son was eleven years old. He had come home during school break at ten o'clock. I was sitting right there, where you are sitting, just sitting exactly where you are sitting in that chair. He walked in, dressed in his school uniform, went to the cupboard over there, and opened the drawer to get a knife. He cut himself a slice of bread. He was in a rush; he is like that when he comes home during break. He got some peanut butter and spread it on his bread. He put the bread back, but there were crumbs left on the cupboard. And the knife was still smudged with peanut butter. He ran out, still chewing his bread and holding it in his hand.

It wasn't long. I heard shots outside—some commotion and shots. I went flying out of the house. Now I am dazed. I run. My eyes are on the crowd that has gathered. Here is my son, my only child. My anguish was beyond anything I thought I could experience. They have killed him. I threw myself over him. I can feel the wetness of his blood. I felt his last breath leave him. He was my only child.

This is a compelling example of how witnesses of trauma continue to live in the grip of the images of their traumatic memories and of what Ruth Clynn calls the "ceaseless repetitions" of traumatic experience.<sup>3</sup> The images, emotions,

3. Ruth Clynn, "Trauma on the Line: Terrorism and Testimony in the *amni di pianho*," in *The Value of Literature in and after the Seventies: The Case of Italy and Portugal*, ed.

and voices from the past are etched in her memory—the crumbs left on the cupboard, the knife her son leaves behind still smudged with peanut butter, and her anguish reappear as if the event is happening in the present. Each memory—the chair on which I was sitting, the jar of peanut butter always on the cupboard—seems to take on new significance, to become a symbol of her little boy's final act in his home. Even the crumbs are treasured as a kind of sacred memory.

As she told the story, the event was so vivid in my mind that it was as if it were happening at that very moment. Her use of tense defies the rules of grammar as she crosses and recrosses the boundaries of past and present. *He ran out. He is still chewing his bread. Now I am dazed. I can feel his blood. I run.* The final moment comes when she recalls seeing her son's lifeless body: "Here is my son." My eyes follow her hand as if I would see her son lying on the floor. I feel like a witness standing both outside of her memory and participating in the act of remembering: Are we in the past, or the present? Is the past even "past"? The answer to these questions lies in Lawrence Langer's notion of the "timelessness" of traumatic memory: Trauma, according to Langer, is "immune to the vicissitudes of time."<sup>4</sup>

Another example that illustrates the timelessness of traumatic memory is from the testimony of a mother whose son was killed on army duty in the South African Defense Force (sADF) during the apartheid government's war against the liberation struggle in Namibia. Wallace McGregor was second in command in a unit responsible for minesweeping operations in an area occupied by the sADF across the Namibian–South African border. He died after suffering injuries from a mortar bomb explosion. According to army policy, all his mother, Anne-Marie McGregor, was told was that her son died "in operation." Not only was she prevented by official sADF policy from knowing the details of how her son was killed, but Wallace's body was brought home in a sealed body bag, which deprived her of any last moments she might have wanted to have with him before he was buried.

Mrs. McGregor was invited to the trc to talk about the loss of her son and her experience with the sADF. She told the trc about the years of agony, of knowing that she would never see Wallace again, yet *not knowing* whether the body brought back by the sADF officials was actually her son's body. Over the years that followed Wallace's death, Mrs. McGregor was plagued by this sense of uncertainty, and she "saw" her son in many young men she encountered in the streets who bore some resemblance to him.

Mrs. McGregor's apparent inability fully to grasp the inevitable reality of her loss is articulated in her encounter with the man who was the commander of Wallace's unit in Namibia. The man approached us at the trc after watching a television screening of Mrs. McGregor's trc testimony. In the television program Mrs. McGregor made a plea to anyone who was present when her son died

Monica Jansen and Paula Jordão (Utrecht: University of Utrecht Igitur Publishing, 2006) [author's note].

4. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 112 [author's note].

to come forward. Arrangements were made for the former commander, who was accompanied by his wife, and Mrs. McGregor and her two sons to meet at the offices of the recs.<sup>5</sup> Sitting in the room as a witness to the conversation about Wallace, I was struck again by the fusion of past and present in the retelling of traumatic events. For almost two hours the conversation between Mrs. McGregor and the former commander focused on Wallace, his habits and mannerisms, his words and his values. They compared "notes" on what they knew about Wallace, speaking in present tense as if Wallace had just gone out for a walk and would return to join us in the room. "Oh yes," Mrs. McGregor would respond to a statement about a particular characteristic of Wallace's, "he is very finicky. Wallace is a perfectionist. He will always do that . . ." She beamed with warmth and fondness when the former commander confirmed what she knew about her son: "That's exactly the way he is," she concurred. "He loves to be clean."

It seemed that for Mrs. McGregor the clock had stopped and that the story of her son's death had never occurred. So dramatic was the denial of time and reality that it seemed that we as witnesses were forced to suspend our judgment and our ability to "know better"—that is, to understand that Mrs. McGregor was only temporarily propelled to a past that she seemed to be experiencing as present, a state that Jennifer Willging calls the "disintegration of linear time."<sup>6</sup> What brought Mrs. McGregor to the reality of her loss was the commander's shift of focus in his narrative to a description of the critical event that led to Wallace's death. For the former commander, too, it seemed as if the images of that moment from the past flooded his memory, for as he began to describe the tragic scene, his voice started to crack and tears ran down his cheeks. He described the anxious moment when the paramedics' helicopter touched down in the operational area, how they rushed Wallace to the nearest hospital, and how he held Wallace's hand, "because I wanted my hand to be his heart." As he uttered these words, the former commander collapsed with the sheer intensity of the memory of that moment. He broke down in tears as he described the moment when he realized that his hand-heart was not enough to save Wallace's life. His wife sat motionless next to him, the quiet tears rolling down her face the only sign of emotion. In response, Mrs. McGregor, letting go of her younger son's hand, let out a deep mournful cry and buried her head against my chest. Her deep pain, expressed in her heart-wrenching sobs, symbolized both the pain of what was revealed by the former commander and the uncertainty she had endured over the years since her son's death. It had been ten years since Wallace died, but this was the first time anyone had spoken to her about how her son was killed. She was sobbing uncontrollably like a child, repeating the words "H is *verig dood*. Wallace is *dood*" (He really is dead. Wallace is dead) over and

over again. There was stillness in the room when, with apparent calm, she lifted her head, reaching out with her eyes to the former commander.

The radical shift in Mrs. McGregor's response from cheerfulness in the first part of her conversation as she recounted her son's special characteristics to the utter anguish expressed through her tears exemplifies several characteristics of trauma. One is the dissociation that helps victims and survivors of traumatic experience cope with the distressing elements of their trauma.<sup>7</sup> By engaging in an apparently "normal" conversation about her son, Mrs. McGregor was delaying confrontation with the reality of her loss. A second illustrative moment in her encounter with the former commander is her extremely emotional reaction to the "confirmation" of what she already "knew": that her son had died on army duty. Her breaking down, as if confronted for the first time with the news of her son's death, is suggestive of the fragmentation and compartmentalization that allows victims and survivors to escape, even if only briefly, from the ravages of traumatic memory.<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. McGregor's heart-wrenching sobs could be seen as the "second blow" of her traumatic loss. The first was ten years earlier when the news of her son's death came with a sealed body bag that deprived her of the deeper level of knowing that she needed to have some closure without any official acknowledgment by a witness who was present when her son was killed. Her tears seem to symbolize "the wound that cries out," a wound that "addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth" that cannot be articulated.<sup>9</sup>

As Eija Harjula and Timo Heiskanen remind us, when people are traumatized, a "silent language" begins to occupy the space between words, rupturing speech and changing its rhythm.<sup>10</sup> This "silent language" in essence conveys the "faded memory" of her trauma and her struggle with its disruptive impact.<sup>11</sup> When language failed, her anguished silence and speechlessness "spoke" through her tears. Paradoxically, this language of silence may also be a path toward the possibility, no matter how small, of closure. Complete closure after massive trauma is, of course, not possible. This is partially because of what has been termed the "indelible" imprint of traumatic memory.<sup>12</sup>

5. The man requested that his identity not be disclosed since he still felt bound by the same secrecy code [Author's note].  
6. Jennifer Willging, "Abnomic Emanuel's Shameful Narration," *French Forum* 26, 1 (2001), 83–103, 90 [Author's note].

7. In its broadest sense, *dissociation* means the "splitting off" of memories of a traumatic event from consciousness. Traumatic memories that become dissociated may be too painful and evoke too much anxiety to be consciously experienced [Author's note].  
8. Judith Herman, *Father-Daughter incest: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992) [Author's note].  
9. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4, 6 [Author's note].  
10. Eija Harjula and Timo Heiskanen, "Trauma Lives in Speech: The Rhythm of Speech Breaks, Words Disappear, A Hole Is Torn in Speech," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 11, 3 (2002), 198–201, 198 [Author's note].  
11. Puntia Gohodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003) [Author's note].  
12. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*; Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* [Author's note].

Mrs. McGregor and her sons, who sat in painful silence on both sides of their mother, may have been taking the first small steps toward some form of healing—a first layer of closure. As we left the room, there was a certain calm about the young men and their mother. There appeared to be a lightness about Mrs. McGregor as she got up to leave. As the former commander and his wife were escorted by one of my colleagues in the opposite direction, Mrs. McGregor turned with a warm smile and followed them with her eyes until they disappeared into the busy corridors of the tree. “You know,” she said, turning back to us, “Wallace would have been growing bits of gray hair just like him.” She then wondered if her son would have allowed his gray hair to grow, and thought that the perfectionist in him would have led him to pluck out the gray hair. It is precisely this level of engaging with the memory of her son that opens the possibility of the transformation of pain from her loss into a narrative that becomes part of her life.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Puma Cobocho-Madikizela tells stories of times when “Traumatic experience overwhelms the senses so that even in the retelling of the trauma, language is inadequate” (paragraph 14). Which story in this essay is most memorable to you? Why? Is there something about the way the story is told—Cobocho-Madikizela’s use of language—that makes it memorable?
2. Cobocho-Madikizela begins with a narrative about children playing a game and ends with a narrative about a mother seeking closure in dealing with the death of her son. Why do you think she begins and ends where she does? Do these stories illustrate something different or something similar about trauma and how individuals and groups deal with it?
3. Cobocho-Madikizela describes, provides history, analyzes, and reports on her own experience and the experiences of others. The essay is a complex mix of reportage, personal narrative, research, and analysis. Note the places in the essay where you recognize these different approaches to the material. In what places do you think the author is most successful? Least successful?
4. Cobocho-Madikizela writes about times when words themselves are inadequate; she also describes different uses of body language. Write an autobiographical narrative about a time when body language communicated more than words.

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language—so the argument runs—must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written.

These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad—I could have quoted far worse if I had chosen—but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer. They are a little below the average, but are fairly representative samples. I number them so that I can refer back to them when necessary:

“(1) I am not, indeed, sure whether it is not true to say that the Milton who once seemed not unlike a seventeenth-century Shelley had not become, out of an experience ever more bitter in each year, more alien [sic] to the founder of that Jesuit sect which nothing could induce him to tolerate.”

PROFESSOR HAROLD LASSER (LASSER IN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION)

From *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays* (1950), a collection of Orwell’s best-known essays. “*Politics and the English Language*” is the most famous modern argument for a clear, unadorned writing style—not only as a matter of good sense, but as a political write.