

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES

Journal of Transnational American Studies 10.2 (Winter/Spring 2019–20) Forward

The Routledge Companion to Transnational American Studies provides scholars and students of American Studies with theoretical and applied essays that help to define Transnational American Studies as a discipline and practice.

In more than 30 essays, the volume offers a history of the concept of the “transnational” and takes readers from the Barbary frontier to Guam, from Mexico’s border crossings to the *intifada*’s contested zones. Together, the essays develop new ways for Americanists to read events, images, sound, literature, identity, film, politics, or performance transnationally through the work of diverse figures, such as Confucius, Edward Said, Pauline Hopkins, Poe, Faulkner, Onoto Watanna, and others. This timely volume also addresses presidential politics and interpictureorial US history from Lincoln in Africa, to Obama and Mandela, to Trump.

The essays, written by prominent global Americanists, as well as emerging scholars shaping the field, seek to provide foundational resources as well as experimental and forward-leaning approaches to Transnational American Studies.

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*Edited by Nina Morgan, Alfred Hornung
and Takayuki Tatsumi*

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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First published 2019

by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Morgan, Nina, editor. | Hornung, Alfred, editor. | Tatsumi, Takayuki, 1955- editor.
Alfred Hornung and Takayuki Tatsumi.

Title: The Routledge companion to transnational American studies / edited by Nina Morgan,
Alfred Hornung and Takayuki Tatsumi.

Description: London : New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018054392 | ISBN 9781138058903 (hardback : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781351672627 (epub) | ISBN 9781351672634 (web pdf) |

ISBN 9781351672610 (mobikindle)

Subjects: LCSH: United States--Study and teaching. | United States--Civilization. |

Transnationalism.

Classification: LCC E175.8 .R68 2019 | DDC 973.0071--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018054392>

ISBN: 978-1-138-05890-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-16393-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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LAWS OF FORGIVENESS

Obama, Mandela, Derrida

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There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.

(Derrida 1996)

This autographic violence and fiction are to be found at work as much in what one calls the individual autobiography as in the “historical” origin of states.

(Derrida 2014)

Organizing amnesia

In a moment characterized by a growing movement to legislate the “right to be forgotten”¹ as a “human right,” an analysis of the archival gesture and the production of memory, especially in relation to national memory and its messianic trajectory as suggested in the autobiographies of both Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela,² indicates an aporetic or at least paradoxical relation to an ethics of forgiving and forgetting which has a bearing on national and political reconciliation today.

At a time when private individuals seek the digital erasure of pasts, the political autobiography may effect an apparent “imaginative amnesty,” forgiving national pasts in a reconciliation aimed at figuring a democratic future-to-come; yet the problem arises of whether such imagined formations—a “post-racial” America or “post-Apartheid” South Africa—as these narratives may promise if not document, of whether the persistence of these texts’ exceptionalist poetics and politics functions to forget a reality, which, like the return of the repressed, inevitably comes to haunt the streets of these nation-states, a haunting that manifests in familiar forms: police brutality and shootings of unarmed black men in towns and cities across the United States, and xenophobic riots throughout South Africa, for example.

Working like the archontic aspects of the archive as we have come to understand it through Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, effecting a “commencement” and pronouncing a “commandment,” the genre of the political autobiography conceals while it purports to

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reveal, buries what it lays out: it violates its truth claim in what may arguably be a quintessentially political power play that kills or sacrifices “life writing”—the biopolitics of individual memory embodied in the genre of the autobiographical—while politics “as usual” survives.

What is it that “political autobiography” does for us today, in our precarious nation-states? What does it seek, in the case of Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*, to affirm, to gather up, and, in doing so, what does it allow to be forgotten and to be forgiven? Why today, in the face of the Googlization of globalization of geopolitics—commonly summarized under the term “googlement”—is a narrative structure of this kind, a narrative structure perhaps nowhere more perfectly modeled than in Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* yet a viable modality in the work of sustaining the nation and its status quo, while it is nevertheless broadly read as a model document of individual transformation and national liberation?³

In *Archive Fever*, the drive to archive—what Jacques Derrida spoke of so presciently over twenty years ago as a kind of fever⁴ which we can today see as proliferating and accelerating in all data gathering and processing search engines, social media, and the like—is inextricably connected with the founding of (more literally, the foundation of) the law and state; and it is also bound, death-drive like, to its destruction. Doing the work of preserving the record for posterity, the archive may appear as a device against forgetting, a forthright mechanism of memory, yet Derrida’s assertion that it is also and concurrently a structure of forgetting complicates the effect and identity of its production. If the archive of the event says, “Gone, but not forgotten,” perhaps the Derridean hauntological revision of the archive might (worryingly) read, “Forgotten, but *not gone*.”

Derrida observes that the Greek word *arkheion* names the house of the *archons*:⁵ “The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law” (Derrida 1996, 1–2).⁶ This private sphere—the house—that becomes public, the institution, is an “unusual place” and a “place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*” (Derrida 1996, 3). Although the metaphor of the house as the site of political power and legislative origins is a familiar one, from The White House and the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., to countless other similarly named palaces of political power worldwide (on a smaller scale, even every American president’s home is turned into a small museum as is the case with any home of Mandela’s left standing⁷), the concept of the archive itself derives much of its importance through its apparent mechanistic rather than symbolic work. In defining the term further, Derrida goes on to say that “arch-ontic power” denotes “the power of consignation”—here, meaning, “to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida 1996, 3). Such unification of an ideal configuration is very much in line with the exceptionalist poetics of the political autobiography and its patriarchal heritage,⁸ but it is also indicative of the force of the archive’s authority to present a unifiable construct and dynamic—despite multiple and different versions recorded in an archive, they testify to the same “event” or contribute to the unique unity of the exception, the status of which is such that it is set apart or aside as significant precisely for the sake of its singularity. For the purposes of this discussion then, I am reiterating the relevance of the underlying congruence of the archive and the political, of the elite and the elected, in order to underscore the complexity of its apparent objectivity and universalism, gathered under the one roof, or name, or website, or project. Perhaps the archive should be approached as contested rather than hallowed ground; despite the reverence which it garners as a source of fact translatable to truth or experience, we might be better served by recognizing just how material the archive has become in both its content and its form (even if that form is “virtual” or “digital”); thus while the archive is very much the mechanism through which so much

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contemporary research is “authorized” and legitimized, its unification, totality, or exceptionalism contributes to its fetishization: in its appearance, its political work and origins disappear or are forgotten while its historical authority proliferates backward into the past and concurrently into the future. Like the exceptional origins of the nation-state, the representation of the founding is founded on a replacement of the national foundation. Furthermore, the archive’s status as a site of memory, of keeping memory alive, so to speak, suggests that as preserved in an elsewhere, it is also thus shelved, forgotten. Speaking informally, in 1998, in South Africa at the “Refiguring the Archive” conference, Derrida suggests that forgetting is intrinsic to the archival structure, even if nothing is “forgotten”:

Even in the case of, let’s say—by hypothesis—a successful archive—even if you really succeed in gathering everything you need in reference to the past, and that you interpret it in a way which is totally satisfactory (then we’ll have here a full archive, correctly interpreted and no one would disagree on the truth and fidelity of this archive, everything is now kept safe and everyone agrees on that; so, we’ll keep this archive safe, okay?). Now, because of that, because of this very fullness, the hypothetical fullness of this archive, what will have been granted is not memory, is not a true memory. It will be forgetting.

(Hamilton 2002, 54)

Though on one level Derrida is here suggesting that in safe-keeping a memory one can safely “forget” about it until one desires to return to it, he hints that society, in order “to go on, to survive,” may also desire forgetting and safe-keeping concurrently, thus he ventures to add, “And perhaps, perhaps, this is the unconfessed desire of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (Hamilton 2002, 54). That is, forgive and forget—and move on.

This is not, however, a structure that Derridean deconstruction validates. In many ways, from the concept of “trace” to “messianicity,” to the “future-to-come,” the consistency and universality of an openness or a vulnerability to a “relation to the future” means that “it is impossible to close the archive” (Hamilton 2002, 46). What may be just as significant to consider in gathering the archive is, Derrida explains, how “this future-oriented structure of the archive is precisely what confronts us with a responsibility, an ethical and political responsibility” (Hamilton 2002, 46).

The Apartheid Archive Project, established in 2009, holds that “South Africans [...] today, when referring to pre-1994 South Africa, appear to suggest that the excesses of the Apartheid order never really took place...” (Duncan 2014, 283). In order to respond to this condition of forgetting, which is exacerbated by a growing violence and xenophobia⁹ throughout the major cities of South Africa—a condition that the Apartheid Archive Project sees as “*post-facto* evidence of the perverse legacy of the apartheid order” (Duncan 2014, 283) but which can be misread only as a failure of the ruling A.N.C.—the project is attempting to create a “vast network of silenced life stories and narratives to be recorded before they are lost to history” (Duncan 2014, 285). Thus this democratic and egalitarian project appears to position itself as an alternative against the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s “tendency to focus on the more ‘dramatic’ or salient narratives of apartheid atrocities” which are “‘grand’ narratives of the past or the privileged narratives of academic, political, and social elites” (Duncan 2014, 285). What seems to be at issue here is the after-effect of the TRC’s own archival gesture of working against itself “albeit unintentionally” (Duncan 2014, 282). It’s an interesting and not uncontroversial stake to claim that the project’s proposed “interrogating” of stories as opposed to (what is implied as the TRC’s) “simply accepting them at face value” (Duncan

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2014, 282) will prove to be the proper methodology for curing the forgetting that is supposedly due to the fact “that much of the details of apartheid racism have not been publicly acknowledged or assessed” and will thus counter “the carefully orchestrated amnesia about the past” (Duncan 2014, 285).

Sociologist Xolela Mangcu agrees that memory in South Africa is under threat of insufficient archiving and substantiates the general sense that today’s young South Africans are under the wrong impression about their shared historical past (“[O]ur children roll their eyes when we tell them about the past. ‘There you go, exaggerating,’ they say, ‘it wasn’t that bad.’”), a condition partly due to “blockbuster movies such as Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, which uproots Mandela from the historical context of the struggle” (Mangcu 2014, 58). Uprooting Mandela from his context is clearly a way of describing the politics of representation that depicts Mandela as an exceptionalist figure, a universal figure, and therefore beyond perhaps even above his historical context (“The archive,” Derrida says, “always works [...] against itself”) (Derrida 1996, 12). Announcing the death of Nelson Mandela, newspaper headlines, it may come as no surprise then, mimicked this same trajectory: “Mandela Taught a Continent to Forgive”; “He Taught the World to Forgive”; “The Conscience of the World”; “Hallowed Be Thy Name.”¹⁰

Even more to the point, perhaps, is that this (no doubt undesired and unnecessary) elevation of Mandela to the level of sainted also “forgets” the work of others or collapses theirs into that of Mandela. In thinking of Mandela as the “conscience of the world” or the world’s forgiver, it might be difficult to recall that it was Archbishop Desmond Tutu who “with as much good will as confusion” Derrida notes in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* “introduced the vocabulary of repentance and forgiveness”¹¹ into the process as President of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and thus “christianized the language of an institution uniquely destined to treat ‘politically’ motivated crimes ...” (Derrida 2001, 42). Mangcu argues that today’s political climate also has been shaped by similar distortions of memory:

There are myriad other ways in which the ANC has distorted the archive. Even as it has reduced the narrative to that of its own achievements and Nelson Mandela, it has failed to sponsor any scholarship around Mandela. [...] The governing party has done virtually nothing to promote scholarship around its own leaders—Oliver Tambo, Chris Hani, Joe Slovo, Griffiths and Veronica Mxenge—let alone those it has erased from public memory—Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, and others.

(Mangcu 2014, 58)

Derrida’s dedication of his book *Specters of Marx* to Chris Hani (who was assassinated only days before the “Whither Marxism” conference) specifically addresses the forgetting that occurs when a person becomes a figure:

But one should never speak of the assassination of a man as a figure, not even an exemplary figure in the logic of an emblem, a rhetoric of the flag or of martyrdom. A man’s life, as unique as his death, will always be more than a paradigm and something other than a symbol.

(Derrida 1994, xv)

Political autobiographies, in establishing or re-establishing the foundations of a nation or a revolutionary movement or tracing the beginnings of a significant “figure,” are doing the work of “organizing amnesia,” effectively enabling an “imaginative amnesty” for the nation

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or its people, allowing a great many things to be forgotten—an act, as nineteenth-century French philosopher Ernst Renan observed, according to Derrida’s reading of his 1882 essay, “What is a Nation?”, that is essential to unifying a nation. Derrida writes:

[F]orgetting is therefore also constitutive of the history that will have formed a nation. Renan’s thesis, both paradoxical and sensible, is that forgetting makes the unity of a nation, not memory. And, even more interesting, Renan analyzes this forgetting as a kind of repression: it is active, selective, meaningful, in a word, interpretive. Forgetting is not, in the case of a nation, a simple psychological erasure, a wearing out or a meaningless obstacle that makes access to the past more difficult, as if the archive had been destroyed by accident. No, if there is forgetting, it is because one cannot tolerate something at the origin of the nation, an act of violence, no doubt, a traumatic event, some sort of unavowable curse.

(Derrida 2008, 293)

That the unifying of a nation requires that many things be forgotten is in concert with Nicole Loraux’s assertion in her book *The Divided City* in which she observes that ancient Athens “founded its political existence on a loss of memory” wherein “*politikos* is the name of one who knows how to agree to oblivion” (Loraux 2006, 42–43) or to “forgetfulness” or “concealment,” depending on how one translates *Lethe*. Thus not only does the nascent nation hold that it needs to forget, but it needs to forget much of what it has gathered, whether that is its perceived racial identity, its past history, terrible deeds, or any such concerns. Is it a matter of *convenience*, one wonders? *Who* is served by such forgetting? *What* are its forms?

In terms of how it informs the *polis*, “the foundation,” Derrida says in speaking of the origin of the nation-state as always outside the law and therefore always a violation (that is, a taking on of authority without authorization), and hence violent—“is made in order to hide it, by its essence it tends to *organize amnesia*, sometimes under the celebration and sublimation of the grand beginnings” (Derrida 2001, 57, emphasis added). Additionally, as Nicole Loraux observes: “the *polis*, with great consistency, masks itself from the reality of its own processes” (Loraux 2006, 22).

What are the parameters and forms of these processes? From the house of the archon to the digital home of today’s archives, what role does the autobiographical play in and alongside the national? What matters when it comes to the political work of these very different structures—the autobiography of a world renowned political hero, or the stories of “everyday racism” lived by unknown numbers of black and white South Africans, the former an exemplary story of one man who represents all¹² and the later the community establishing its own voice? When in his autobiography Mandela observes that “Freedom is indivisible,” he goes on to explain that his bond with the people of South Africa is likewise inseparable: “the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me” (Mandela 1995, 624). In common parlance, Mandela is synonymous with the event of the anti-Apartheid struggle and the ANC, and in some significant ways, the form of the political autobiography does not disabuse readers of this impression.

These questions point to some relevance that resides in the form as much as in the content of collections and disseminations of memory. Annette Wieviorka has observed that while the twentieth century may properly be called “the Era of the Witness,” it is the form of collecting testimonials as well as their dissemination that will transform the event—in backward fashion, from the future—in ways unimaginable.¹³ Where orchestrated (for example, by

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questionnaires, time allotments, environment) “testimonials” become a substitute for or are even isolated from “the history of historians” (Wieviorka 2006, 116) and analysis, thus the historical object may be obscured by emotion and feeling—or more, forgotten as it is transformed to suit another (politicized) purpose inside the new historical moment, as might arguably be the case with the “‘Americanization’ of the Holocaust.”¹⁴

In light of these concerns and recognizing that archives are very much beholden to the authenticity of their content, it is important to nevertheless also analyse how their form might transform what the archive offers the future. For someone like Mangcu, it seems, the archive must simply appear on the scene, inclusively, and with complete availability to scholars whose research will then enact in some way society’s appreciation for or understanding of and identification with the past. This seems idealistic if not just old-fashioned in its nostalgia. Without minimizing the validity of Mangcu’s criticism—“Twenty years after democracy we do not have a single national research institution focused on the black historical experience in the way the Goree Institute or the Smithsonian Institution does in the US” (Mangcu 2014, 60)—that South Africa has yet to establish a state-sponsored, national archive¹⁵ of the stature that South Africa deserves in recognition of its anti-Apartheid and black history, the claim that the people are “unable to speak about their experiences for lack of a proper historical archive” (Mangcu 2014, 60) may be difficult (if not also fruitless) to defend. Here, again, the question of the form arises. In ways reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s rereading of the aesthetic and the political in the age of technological reproduction, we might consider what new ways of forgetting—in the digital age of erasure and the right to be forgotten—might today’s technologies be creating through their virtual forms of collecting, archiving, and disseminating. How do narrative structures such as these political autobiographies and their filmic revisions suture or promote the sustenance of the status quo of the national through the guise of the historical, for these narratives also offer transformations of the event, but perhaps do so in a more subtle manner, in a “form” less obviously transforming; what, after all, could be more conservative than the autobiography? Thus the expectation that it is the archive that informs and transforms society may be questioned; because the future of the event as recognized in and by the archive is open, at risk, and vulnerable to the future, not only to interpretation but also to its technology, it calls for a political and social responsibility on our part, as Derrida suggests.

When Derrida argues that forgiveness is not institutionalizable but is instead something interpersonal, a face to face dynamic in its purest form, it is clear that Commissions of the “Truth and Reconciliation” model,¹⁶ as relevant and powerful and important as they may be for investigating allegations, establishing historical narratives, and preparing reports, are nonetheless “irreconcilable” to forgiveness, which is outside the framework and the authority of the juridical, state structure. This is not to deny the impact of reconciliation:

Of course, no one would decently dare to object to the imperative of reconciliation. It would be better to put an end to the crimes and discords. Once again, however, I believe it necessary to distinguish between forgiveness and this process of reconciliation, this reconstitution of a health or a “normality,” as necessary and desirable as it would appear through amnesties, the “work of mourning,” etc. A “finalised” forgiveness is not forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psychotherapeutic economy.

(Derrida 2001, 50)

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Along these lines, the archival gesture or structure therefore that works as a “political strategy” of forgetting performed as remembering, or the “psycho-therapeutic economy” of a memory by proxy—such as that performed by Obama’s political narrative when, for example, it provides Americans of slave origins a Kenyan story of origins as a kind of therapeutic for an unforgiveable loss of personal history—is sometimes engaged in the “process of reconciliation” as if the archival gesture were always already part of the regimen of a “reconstitution of a health or a ‘normality.’”

Michael Sheringham, in his essay, “Memory and the Archive in Contemporary Life Writing” addresses other suspicions of the archive, observing that in this moment “the field of life writing” has shifted from a focus on the individual as an idiosyncratic singularity to where the figure of the archive, and “the related vocabulary of document and trace, have become increasingly prominent...from a focus on the individual to the interaction of the individual and the collective; from exploration of inner life to...where identity is a function of the encounter with others in social space; from a sense that the materials of autobiography are personal to a sense that they derive equally from the social framework of memory” (Sheringham 2005, 49).

Taking note of Derrida’s description of the ambivalent and troublesome nature of the archival gesture, Sheringham observes the growing phenomena of “a whole symptomology that makes the recipients of the archive less the beneficiaries of munificence than inheritors of Pandora’s box” (Sheringham 2005, 49); in light of Paul Ricoeur’s sense that an encounter with the archive is always an encounter with interpretation, the movement in the genre of autobiography that Sheringham sees as foregrounding social or collective identity seems, to me, to extend the influence of the consignatory affect of the archival aesthetic.

However, a trend in contemporary life writing which highlights a growing consciousness of social memory or of the concept of the archive (and its influence on informing identity) must be distinguished from political autobiography which operates as its own archive, inseparable from its double bind of an exceptionalism that derives from its author’s own transformation into the state—the actual and at the same time synecdochic head of state—as is made clear by both Presidents Obama and Mandela; this appears to then symbolize the *transformation of the state*, but this is where the aporia rears its ugly head, where amnesia hits hardest. Hence the confusion of how it might be that the election and re-election of an African American president does not signify the end of racism and herald the beginning of an era of “post-racism” in the United States, or anywhere else for that matter.¹⁷

Exceptionalist poetics

How does Obama’s story work in the lives and stories of Americans? William Houston, in his *Black Masculinity in the Obama Era: Outliers of Society*, observes that modeling one’s life on President Obama’s life is not really viable for many if not most black American men (Houston 2014). This suggests that Obama’s political autobiography does not then serve as a primer of any kind; what it offers is not a “how to” reach for political and social success. Philip Holden notes in *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity, and the Nation-State* that “Autobiography is ‘a constitutive act, one designed to construct a reality about a life in a place or time ...’” (Holden 2008, 44). Additionally, autobiography is “a socially symbolic act concerned with establishing the relationship of an individual subject and a larger community or series of communities. [Thus] ...all autobiographies, by definition, participate in ... self-making ...” (Mangcu 2014, 162). To say that the autobiography constructs a “reality” about a life demonstrates a certain *naïveté* about the relationship between fiction and language, just

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as the now infamous rhetoric of denying blue and red states, and seeing only “united states”—however much we like to hear it—does not make it so. Hence Derrida’s observation that the kind of fictions and violations produced the moment that some sovereignty is claimed and named has an analogy: “... autographic violence and fiction are to be found at work as much in what one calls the individual autobiography as in the ‘historical’ origin of states” (Derrida 2014, 14).

Thomas Couser’s essay “Filiation: Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*” questions the production of a climactic section in the autobiography. The scene of Obama’s trip to Kenya, when Obama hears the story of his origins is, Couser insists, “conveyed, implausibly”:

as one long speech—almost thirty printed pages (or approximately 8,000 words)—with only short interjections or interruptions. Obama may have tape-recorded the original story and edited into its seamless shape, but no account is given of the process by which it moves from oral narrative to the printed page.¹⁸

What concerns Couser is the manner in which the “single-sourced story is inserted whole into the larger narrative as if simultaneously heard, memorized, and accepted as authoritative” (Couser 2012, 12). That the text mimics other genres at this point, the “folk genealogy” or perhaps more significantly, hints at a Biblical tone, is more interesting:

First there was Miwiru. It’s not known who came before. Miwiru sired Sigoma, Sigoma sired Owiny, Owiny sired Kisodhi, Kisodhi sired Ogelo, Ogelo sired Otondi, Otondi sired Obongo, Obongo sired Okoth, and Okoth sired Opiyo.

(Obama 1995, 394)

It is important to ask what kind of absence this almost biblical “celebration ... of ... beginnings” (to repeat Derrida’s phrasing) performatively erases through the work of this genealogical archive.

In a June 2011 interview, Toni Morrison observed:

...so much of our history has been erased, distorted and reconstructed to a level of fantasy. It’s as though avoiding the truths of the past is somehow so degrading that no one can function. But I think clarity about the past plays a very important role in how we handle the present and what we might be able to do for the future. But if a human being doesn’t know what happened to himself or his parents, he will never be able to cope with the current situation or the future.

(quoted in Noudelmann 2012, 37)

The question here is whether or not that information has to be specific to oneself. Can the political autobiography that offers a community a narrative of origins, an imagined genealogy, work to unify or reconcile that community where historical conditions are such that a similar family genealogy is for almost everyone “the impossible”—on the level of “the unforgivable”; where an inheritance of slavery is the condition of having had erased the historical origins of millions, followed by millions more, in each generation? This scene in Obama’s autobiography works like a wish fulfillment that vicariously takes its readers on a trip to a time and place that can never, for generations of Americans, in reality be had. What Couser tries to suggest but does not claim directly is the strong possibility that the story of how “Miwiru sired Sigoma” is also, of course, a fictionalization, also a forgetting.

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Whatever feelings of social isolation and loneliness, of fragmented identity and weariness in the face of unrelenting racialization that the young Barack Obama endures as a college student whether in California or in New York or even as an organizer in Chicago, here, in these moments—in this gathering of 8,000 or so words—for the sustained length of the narrative, is for all intents and purposes now ameliorated by way of synchrony and logic, the “gathering together” of signs which Derrida notes is part of the archontic power of “unification” and “identification” (Derrida 1995, 3). The scene of Obama weeping at the Patriarch’s graveside is made all the more poignant for this apparent inheritance. This Kenyan homecoming signals, of course, another kind of return of the repressed, but as a metaphor for political reconciliation today, it reads as a reunion—a “gathering,” perhaps—that consolidates the past into the future-to-come, that enacts memory while it allows for forgetting, and that suggests a kind of “truth” that hints at reconciliation. Having returned to patriarchal origins, and standing in the place of so many who could never find such a gravesite, the image is powerful not only for Obama, but for millions. As Derrida observes, “being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida 1994, xix).

Imaginative amnesty: Forgiving and forgetting

Derrida reminds us in “Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German,” that a nation “is both memory and, in the present, promise, project”—and what Renan finally simplifies as a “desire to live together.” Derrida asks, “Is this promise not in itself, structurally, a relation to the future that involves a forgetting—indeed, a kind of essential indifference to the past, to what in the present is only present—but also a *gathering*, that is, also a memory of the future?” (Derrida 2008, 294). It is on the basis of this kind of forgetting that, according to Loraux, historians attribute the first example of political amnesty to Athenians in 403 BCE, to a promise to essentially forgive and forget that what precedes the harmonious fraternity of the *polis* is division itself, conflict, or, more specifically civil war. Sommerstein and Bayliss in their book *Oath and State in Ancient Greece* reference a recently discovered (in 2001) inscription of such a “reconciliation oath,” which seems representative: “... I will not recall past wrongs, either in word or deed; and I will not put anyone to death, nor punish him with exile, nor deprive him of property, on account of past events; and if anyone does recall past wrongs, I will not permit it...” (Loraux 2006, 142, emphasis added).¹⁹ Such a condition of a coerced amnesia may be expedient, but it seems that other oath-like discourses and practices, perhaps like the work of some Truth and Reconciliation commissions, the political autobiography, and the archive, in terms of their mutual *after-effect* of allowing to forget, one may argue, *appear* to function as essential components of the nation, and thus *seem* to foster “the desire to live together” (Renan, quoted in Derrida 2008, 294). Can forgetting ever be just, even when justified? It may be “natural” as Sigmund Freud makes clear, but is it also always politically expedient?

In his essay “The Laws of Reflection,” the unusual circumstances of Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment is gently referred to by Derrida when he asks, or “leaves open” the question of how Mandela’s own admiration for the ideals of democracy led him to refuse government offers of “conditional liberty.” It is a question that asks us to reflect on what appears to be the case: “Did he *let* himself be imprisoned?” Derrida asks. “Did he *make* himself a prisoner?” (Derrida 2014, 85). These rarely asked questions indicate the kind of forgetting that occurs, for example, when the readers collectively “forget” that Mandela was, in a way, voluntarily imprisoned, even though this truth is easily accessible to readers in other formats—a Google search, for example—and even though this truth is suggested and mentioned briefly in *Long*

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Walk to Freedom itself. On the one hand, it makes Mandela even more of a noble figure, but on the other hand, it complicates what is often repeated as a simple fact—“He was imprisoned for twenty-seven years”—because that imprisonment was concurrently punishment and protest, simultaneously readable as powerlessness and a powerful act of resistance, and yet, the Mandela Foundation website’s “prison timeline” did not, until 2015, make mention of Mandela rejecting offers of conditional release.²⁰ What has that particular archive been up to?

These questions and others remind us of the fact that despite reading the auto-biography or despite carefully watching his story as it unfolded, we still would not “know” Mandela, thus in discussing Mandela, Derrida hints at the messianic: “Who is it? Who is coming?” Derrida’s reminder here is that identity is not known even in its time; figures, especially political figures, come to mean something else in the future-to-come. They come to be understood in a different way, take on new symbolisms, and become a part of ideas that live past them. Bearing the responsibility to tell the full story, however, defining Mandela as the man who spent twenty-seven years in prison, who went on to become President, and the person who “taught the world to forgive” is an intolerable reduction of the complexity of his experiences; the political auto-biography might also serve as a point of erasure of the experiences of others, as Mangcu hints. In other words, a master narrative.

South African writer and anti-Apartheid activist Breyten Breytenbach does not let this representation of Mandela sit. In a letter nothing short of scathing, entitled, “Mandela’s Smile” (a corollary might be “Obama’s Smile”) Breytenbach accuses Mandela of everything from selling out (“Not for nothing your nickname, ‘Moneydeal’! ... Your aura is for sale”), to ignoring the plight of children in favor of attending to the parade of visits from the world’s celebrities and ex-politicians (“some exotic teddy bear to be slobbered over”), to his giving the revolution away (“Was the possible alternative—socialist redistribution—too horrible to contemplate? Too horrible for whom?”). Despite the overwhelmingly bitter tone of the letter, it’s also clear that Breytenbach is looking to the future: “To survive, we must assume the responsibility of imagining the world *differently*.”²¹

Though of course striking a very different chord, Derrida offers a cautionary warning about the nature of the image inside the system:

We have looked at him through words that are sometimes instruments of observation, that can become such, in any case, if we don’t keep guard against it. What we have described, in trying precisely to escape from speculation, was a sort of grand historical watchtower. But nothing permits one to take for granted the unity, and even less the legitimacy, of this optic of reflection, of its singular laws, of the Law, of its place of institution, presentation, or revelation, what one gathers too quickly, for example, under the name of the West. But this presumption of unity—does it not produce something like an effect ... that so many forces try to appropriate, always, an effect that is visible and invisible, like a mirror, and hard, like the walls of a prison? Everything that still hides Nelson Mandela from us.²²

Thus writing before Mandela was released and speaking on another day upon which Mandela refused the government’s offer of a partial release, Derrida suggests that it is not just the walls of the prison that hide Mandela from us. The question may be, what *doesn’t* conceal him? If political autobiography constructs as much as it reveals, if it reveals anything, what “is being made in order to hide it”?²³

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“One could never,” Derrida claims, “in the ordinary sense of the words, found a politics or law on forgiveness” (Derrida 2001, 38). There are *no* laws of forgiveness, but if we wanted to know, say, where forgiveness comes from, it must be, Derrida says, from the *unforgiveable* itself. If there were a logic, it seems clear that forgiveness, (“if there is forgiveness”) would have to come out of whatever was unforgiveable. For, as Derrida makes plain, one can only forgive that which is unforgiveable. In other words, it is not really forgiveness if one is dealing with what we might call a wrong, or an error in judgment that has to be righted by some reparation, or if a third party, embodied, say, as the law—the juridical apparatus—intervenes and negotiates a reconciliation or amnesty. For Derrida, the characteristic of forgiving the unforgiveable is that it remains, indeed, that must reside, outside the law itself. As is well known, a “right” to forgiveness doesn’t exist, even if, one day, there’s a universal human right to forget.²⁴

Atonements, giving back, making up for, amnesties, or any of these dynamics produce an imaginative condition, a fiction of reconciliation, an agreement that the aggrievement will be resolved through understanding or an understanding all the while knowing that there is no real way to level the field. Though it was commonly held that the election of Barack Obama to the office of the President would in another way give something back—dignity, authority, legitimacy—to black America that had been taken away a long, long time ago, in the form of generational debts that need to be paid, there’s barely a question here about whether or not this can ever be done, whether on a small or on a historic scale such as that of the case of slavery, oppression, and a nation built on racism. What’s done is done. Interestingly, Obama’s “No Victor No Vanquished” rhetoric²⁵ seems to make a virtue of historical necessity. In fact, it might be the case that these structures also produce or enact a kind of forgetting akin to that of the archive or of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission: the conflict has been had, the material is gathered so that it can be forgotten, handed over, *let go*. Except for the fact that it’s not. The victors as well as the vanquished know this well. This may be another fiction in camouflage like “Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America.”²⁶ Such reconciliation of opposites is desirable, such rhetoric is powerful, such a gathering, however, fictionalizes a reality that in fact has polarized the U.S.A. in the twenty-first century. As Derrida observes, “[t]here is always a strategical or political calculation in the generous gesture of one who offers reconciliation or amnesty, and it is necessary always to integrate this calculation in our analyses” (Derrida 2001, 40).

Forgotten but not gone: Hauntology

After reading a post on social media in 2012, written in response to yet another “not guilty” verdict in a trial about the murder of an unarmed black youth in the US, Patrisse Cullers’ response was visceral: “‘The three words, “Black Lives Matter” hit me in the gut,’ she remembers. ‘I put a hashtag on it because it just felt so necessary to archive it.’”²⁷ For Cullers, a black American activist, the narrative of racism is both personal and national—her hashtag, however, has “gone global” according to an interview Cullers gave in 2015 to Michel Martin of National Public Radio. The goal of developing a “new narrative” for black Americans, she says, is both “awe-inspiring and it’s also a lot of responsibility.” Perhaps an indication of a shift away from exceptionalist figures, #BlackLivesMatter is a leaderless movement: “It’s important to us in the BlackLivesMatter movement that ... we’re not following an individual... This is a leader-full movement.”

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Drawing a comparison between Obama and Mandela in 2008, Breytenbach observed that

Mandela says that his major political work was done upon himself while he was in prison all those years. How to move from, say a nationalist leader to a national leader, how to move from a historical revenge to reconciliation, to nation-building, these were not easy things. And I think, in some ways, it has to do with constructing one's own identity. It has to do with constructing one's own ethical guidelines. And I think this is what Mandela did, and I think this is what Obama has done also. But they come to power carried on a huge wave of popular expectation. You know, what I find painful at the moment [...] seems to be a kind of a discarding of what this national mandate actually means that brought Obama to power here. When one sees the way the new administration is being constructed, it seems like Washington is just continuing the way it always has.²⁸

Indeed, two administrations later, the complaint that Barack Obama has not fundamentally improved the lives of black Americans is a familiar one. And figures from Toni Morrison to the average black American on the street will state clearly that the United States is far from post-racial, something that the racialized politics of the Trump administration has since exploited.

The #BlackLivesMatter Movement—a movement generated by three “queer Black women”²⁹—suggests that a grass-roots, anti-establishment approach is making a comeback, but in a different form, for whatever does return, returns, but always already as something different. #BlackLivesMatter it might not be surprising to learn will predictably find its way back to Africa at large, and to South Africa, as it is already in Ghana and Canada. It's the return of the repressed, but yet there is something very significant that happens when something is forgotten, when we allow ourselves to forget or when, not as a matter of choice, our amnesia is organized for us under the guise of celebratory beginnings (again) and under the spell of the leader-heroes of change. The biopolitics that is intrinsic to institutionalized and state racism, to what Michelle Alexander calls the New Jim Crow, is another apartheid—with a difference.³⁰ What Derrida once read as “racism's last word”—“Apartheid”—as studied and discussed and analysed and witnessed and experienced and archived as it has been, no doubt has its specter, and that specter is transnational.

And yet Mandela and Obama's embodiment of their respective national narrative is peculiar in so far as they do *change* the national story—thus symbolic of the past and concurrently of the future-to-come, their affirmation of progress is a “promise” that the nation's story *will be* different while it both affirms the past and affirms the different future. The effect of this is a compelling force akin to the power of transformation often attributed to forgiveness that affects *both* the victim and the perpetrator. As Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* has observed, what forgiveness does is to stop the indefinite ongoing existence of the unforgiveable. It serves as a limit. It intervenes. Perhaps, it brings an end: what today we commonly call “closure.” However, Derrida parts company with Arendt here. Derrida's reading of Freud suggests why the issues are never fully resolved, why they are not fully nor finally forgotten, why the archive is never closed and the future is always haunted. Alongside this ontology, there is always “hauntology”:

If I am ... to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of *justice* No justice—

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let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws—seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.³¹

The presence of technologies of memory—from Freud’s mystic writing pad to Google—point to the limit of our memories, perhaps a natural limit which we attempt to supplement or subvert with the work of the archival gesture. We record the past—the right documents, the right artifacts—in order to survive, to save the past from the forgetfulness of the future. As far as the political future is concerned, however, we would do well to remember that ghosts do not disappear, they *appear*.

Notes

- 1 Paul Lanois traces the “right to be forgotten” to the EU’s commitment to the right to privacy, dating before Vice-President of the European Commission Viviane Reding’s 2012 speech introducing the concept, back to 1995 and the establishment of the EU Data Protection Directive. See Lanois (2014). Additionally, as of January 1, 2015, individuals under the age of 18 in the state of California also maintain this right:

The most noteworthy aspect of S.B. 568 is the “*right to be forgotten*” clause in the context of minors. Essentially, this means that a California resident who is under 18 years of age now has the ability to have the online content that is collected and stored about them by an online service company to be permanently deleted. In fact, the website owner must actually disclose to minors that they indeed have this right and they must be educated about the actual process to make such a request when desired.

See McDevitt (2015). A version of “Laws of Forgiveness: Mandela, Obama, Derrida” was originally delivered at the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany and was subsequently published in *Obama and Transnational American Studies* (Universitätsverlag Winter, Heidelberg, 2016), edited by Alfred Hornung.

- 2 Mandela’s autobiography was published in 1994 and Obama’s in 1995, as was Derrida’s *Mal d’archive*.
- 3 The academic interest in this problem can be demonstrated in two important collections featuring transnational studies of autobiography, politics, and mediation, a growing interest in the first decade of the twenty-first century: *Auto/Biography and Mediation* (2010), edited by Alfred Hornung; and a special issue of the journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* (Winter 2010), edited by Sidonie Smith.
- 4 The metaphor of the fever can be read in several ways; however, it is important to note that at a 1998 conference in South Africa, the transcript of which is reprinted in *Refiguring the Archive* (Hamilton et al. 2002), Derrida offered this re-emphasis on the role of the death drive in his definition: “And it is because this radical drive to destruction is always at work ... that the desire for archive is a burning one” (Hamilton 2002, 44).
- 5 See Sommerstein and Bayliss (2013) for historical background on archons and their responsibilities in Athens; see chapter: “High Officials: Archons and Generals.”
- 6 Abdulrazak Imam, with reference to A. Sparks, reminds us that “Mandela obtained the plans of the [prison] cottage and ‘had an exact replica built as his holiday home at Qunu, his birthplace at Transkei ...’”(121). Significantly, the cottage was the site where, according to Imam, Mandela was given to feel as if he were the one hosting political negotiations with the South African government.
- 7 Nelson Mandela donated his first house to the Soweto Heritage Trust in 1997. “The Mandela House strives to be a world-class visitor attraction, and a leading centre for the preservation, presentation, and research of the history, heritage and legacy of the Mandela Family” (www.mandelahouse.com).

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- 8 This point should not be lost on readers of *Dreams from My Father* who might question how Obama's absent father became the center of his life story, which was so obviously shaped by the presence of his mother. The genre of the political autobiography seems to be patriarchal through and through, even or especially when the father is a "legal fiction."
- 9 Reports regarding xenophobic attacks in South Africa as recently as April 2015 have been widely publicized as a new phenomenon though critics assert that violence of all kinds and economic inequality have been steadily growing in South Africa post-Apartheid. See Breytenbach (2008a, 2008b).
- 10 Respectively, headlines from *The New York Times* (U.S.A.), *The Sun News* (Nigeria); *Belfast Telegraph* (Northern Ireland); *Sunday Tribune* (South Africa). Notable pieces, such as that written by President of Ghana John Dramani Mahama in *The New York Times* were reprinted and reposted globally.
- 11 Mark Sanders' *Ambiguities of Witnessing* offers a valuable chapter on this issue as it relates to culture, language, and translation—especially of the word "xolela" (Sanders 2007)
- 12 Derrida emphasizes the ways in which Mandela's Rivonia trial is marked by his consistent reference to himself and his people, "we," "us," and so forth. He is a "reflection" of who they are and vice versa. In reference to Mandela's defense: "The 'I' of this autobiography founds itself and justifies itself, reasons and signs in the name of 'we.' He always says 'my people'..." (Derrida 2014, 73).
- 13 Mark Sanders' *Ambiguities of Witnessing* is a very important study of this subject and something I have yet to fully absorb. An analysis that includes a discussion of his valuable work is something I look forward to pursuing in a longer version of this essay (Sanders 2007).
- 14 A term developed by Peter Novick in his *The Holocaust in American Life* (Novick 1999, 13).
- 15 There are, of course, other sources and archives in place either in South Africa or around the world. For example, "The South African History Archive (SAHA) is an independent human rights archive dedicated to documenting, supporting, and promoting greater awareness of past and contemporary struggles for justice through archival practices and outreach, and the utilisation of access to information laws," and

As of 2015, SAHA has launched a cross-programmatic pilot project, the Right to Truth (RTT) project, to consolidate SAHA's archival practice and information activism that has been focused on making the work and records of, and surrounding, the South African TRC more readily accessible.

(www.saha.org.za)

- 16 From Argentina to, most recently, Canada (2015) and Tunisia (2014), at least 30 nations have initiated an investigative commission to address government violations of human rights.
- 17 In a different context, Derrida attends to this in "Otobiographies," citing Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*: "State? What is that? Well, then, open your ears to me. For now I shall speak to you about the death of peoples. State is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly it tells lies too; and this lie crawls out of its mouth: 'I, the State, am the people.' That is a lie!" (Derrida 1985, 34).
- 18 Page 12, all Couser quotes are cited from the version of his essay posted on his Academia.edu page, see bibliography; for the version published in the journal *Life Writing*, see Couser (2012).
- 19 Sommerstein and Bayliss make the distinction that direct threats to democracy were the subjects of different oaths: "I will kill by word and by deed and by vote and by my own hand, if I am able, anyone who overthrows the democracy at Athens ..." (Sommerstein and Bayliss 2013, 131).
- 20 Since delivering a version of this essay as a lecture in Germany in October 2014, wherein I made this observation, the Mandela Foundation website appears to have been much improved—redesigned and revised in 2015 to include the 1985 offer of conditional release from Botha. There should also be clear reference to earlier offers of release to his Transkei homelands, which were, obviously, also rejected.
- 21 Breyten Breytenbach, "Mandela's Smile: Notes on South Africa's 'Failed Revolution,'" *Harpers*, Dec. 2008.
- 22 This translation of Derrida's essay, published in 2014 in the journal *Law & Literature* (26.1) by Charles Gelman offers a change in the last line. The translation published in *Psyche Volume II* by Caws and Lorenz reads "hides Mandela from our sight."
- 23 Although it is not exactly in line with my thesis here, Cheryl-Ann Michael makes a point about what political autobiography makes disappear: "In political autobiographies ... what is presented is an illusion of a linear development of political consciousness which cloaks an erasure of differences between past selves and the present 'I'" (Michael 2013[1995], 74).

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- 24 A week prior to presenting this paper in Mainz at Johannes Gutenberg University in October 2014, I was sitting in a little university room in Atlanta where I live, having an animated conversation with former Defense Minister Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg, who is said to have plagiarized hundreds of pages of his PhD dissertation. Mr. zu Guttenberg had come to Kennesaw State University to introduce Mr. Jared Cohen, his friend and Director of Google Ideas; now, there are a great many things that zu Guttenberg might have wanted Google to erase or to help him and others forget, but unfortunately for him, the Google Spain case's right to forget or right to erase doesn't extend to public figures. In our meeting, I asked Mr. zu Guttenberg what he'd learned about forgiveness as a result of his experiences. He said, quite convincingly, that he learned "First of all, not to expect it." No doubt Derrida would strongly agree with this statement as he tells us that forgiveness—if there is forgiveness—"comes as a surprise."
- 25 "Obama on the World: President Obama talks to Thomas L. Friedman about Iraq, Putin and Israel." *The New York Times* August 8, 2014. <http://nyti.ms/1vnTGVb>.
- 26 This sentence is taken from President Obama's 2008 victory speech, but versions of it can be heard from 2004 Democratic Convention speech onward.
- 27 Interview by Michel Martin. "The #BlackLivesMatter Movement: Marches and Tweeting for Healing" on National Public Radio. See Cullers (2015).
- 28 Interview with Amy Goodman of the independent American news program, "Democracy Now!"
- 29 For a "herstory" of this movement, see their webpage: blacklivesmatter.com/a-herstory-of-the-black-livesmatter-movement/
- 30 Ashley Dawson's work on "water apartheid" in Cape Town, South Africa today is an example of how such divisions return in different forms.
- 31 Page xix. For a full examination of this concept, see Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994).

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