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Kaddish for Those We Never Knew: Mourning and Bearing Witness to Losses that Are Not Our Own Through Fiction

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Abstract

While fiction and testimony may seem to be genres at odds with one another, fictional literature has been at the forefront of advances in memory and trauma studies. Theories such as Marianne Hirsch's postmemory and the so-called 'transnational turn' in memory studies have aided in describing how later generations deal with inherited memories of past traumas and those from other contexts through literature. Nevertheless, as history surges on, we find ourselves ever more distanced from the violence of the twentieth century century, whose losses, both material and abstract, are now inherited by the present postmemory generation and can only be assumed vicariously. These conditions, coupled with the effects of an ever-globalizing world, result not so much in a deficit of factual memory but a deficit of ethico-political or emotional positions from which to confront the violent past and its losses.

Within memory and trauma studies much has been written on literary or cultural representations and the work of mourning. The original Freudian concept of mourning as it is positioned opposite melancholia has often been critiqued and written off as conservative, exclusionary, conducive to amnesia, and so on. These concerns are particularly relevant in the case of postmemory, posttraumatic narratives where the losses of previous generations to be worked through in a potential, collective mourning process are temporally distanced from the present.

Nevertheless, I propose a view of mourning through these types of works that moves beyond the original Freudian consolatory paradigm: that is, a literature that seeks to offer neither a substitute nor consolation nor promises of overcoming a loss. Instead, I envision a process of mourning that transcends this temporal distance through the sustaining of loss, the incorporation of absence within the narrative form and on the level of the diegesis, where the irrecoverability of the past becomes evident through the necessary recourse to invention, supposition and fiction itself.

This same acknowledgement of past losses as irrecoverable and the notion of our position in the present as inconsolable before loss can also serve as an affective model for mourning that transcends not only time but geographical or even cultural distance. In other words, the recognition of the irreparability of loss through the fictional work can serve as a means of reframing claims of injustice transnationally. I see these narratives as constituting a

sort of testimony that allows us not only to heed the imperative to remember but also permits us to participate in a collective mourning process that transcends not only temporal distance but cultural and geographic as well.

As an example of a transnational posttraumatic narrative of mourning, I will briefly reference the North American Jewish author Nathan Englander and his novel *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007), a novel about Argentina's detained-disappeared that presents itself as incapable of offering consolation while, at the same time, offering itself as a testimony of how, despite distances, we are affected and touched by suffering across borders.

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Anthony Nuckols

Recent decades have been witness to theoretical contributions which have furthered the ways in which we understand and articulate the past's bearing on the present: the so-called memory boom of the previous century has led theorists, such as Dominick LaCapra, to argue that 'the *problem* of memory has become so widespread and intense that one is tempted to take a suspicious view and refer to fixation'.[1] Even before this 'fixation' on memory, however, the question of literature and representing the traumatic past provoked much debate, from Adorno's oft-quoted dictum on poetry in the post-Holocaust world to Elie Wiesel's statement on testimony as a newly invented literature by Holocaust survivors. At the centre of the debates surrounding literary representation and the horrors of the past is the question of fiction and testimony: who has the right to speak, what role does literary invention have, if any, in representing past trauma and what are the possible limitations and ethical implications of fictional works dealing with the traumatic past. Holocaust testimony as a genre insists on the unknowable, incomprehensible nature of the Holocaust ('an event without witness')[2], while fictional Holocaust narratives would seem to insist by way of identification with either narrator or characters that 'this incomprehensible event [can] become comprehensible and so [...] normalized, part of experience'.[3] In other words, fiction and testimony would seem be at odds with each other.[4]

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[1] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 8.

[2] Dori Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival', In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 81.

[3] Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 22.

[4] This is perhaps best evidenced by the infamous case of Bruno Dösekker's publishing his work of fiction, *Fragments,* as a memoir under the false name Binjamin Wilkomirski. Despite the fact that Dösekker's case is morally suspect, 'Susan Suleiman described *Fragments* as "a work of literary art,

Despite the particularities of these debates, literature has nevertheless played an integral role in the advances in both memory and trauma studies: concepts such as Marianne Hirsch's postmemory have provided us with the necessary tools to explain how later generations have dealt with inherited memories of trauma through literary works and the so-called 'transnational turn' in memory studies has led to a shift in gaze to other national cases, creating a nexus for comparative literature and memory studies, especially in postcolonial studies.

Yet despite the imperative to remember stemming from the very same debates on representation and the horrors of the twentieth century, memory and the construction of social narratives surrounding traumatic events can be exclusionary as well, where memories of the past are constructed in such a way as not to compare with other contexts but to compete and even exclude. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler has explained how trauma and the subsequent commemoration of the losses of the 9/11 attacks were conceived in such a way as to deny the *grievability* of others.[5] Moreover, our relation to trauma occurring in other contexts is not always as straightforward as we sometimes think. Michael Rothberg makes a telling observation in *The Future of Trauma Theory* (2014) on the structural violence of the globalised system in which we live, with the example of the fires and collapse of clothing factories in southern Asia in recent years. In a globalised world subject to rules of late capitalism, the term 'bystander' is no longer sufficient to truly grasp the meaning of our position in the present before these types of tragedies: 'we are more than bystanders and something other than direct perpetrators in the violence of global capital.'[6] Taking into consideration these questions that have conditioned the way we conceive our relation to the past (fiction versus survivor testimony, postmemory, uses of memory and our relation to trauma that is not our own), what sort of literature could allow for a more inclusionary form of remembrance, one that would take into account not only our

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powerful in its effect' and Lawrence Langer 'regarded the book to be "a very compelling work of literature"'. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 37.

[5] Perhaps one of the most poignant examples in Butler's work is the case of the Palestinian-American who wanted to place an obituary in a San Francisco paper, only to be denied this right on the grounds that it would be offensive. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 35.

[6] Michael Rothberg, 'Preface: Beyond Tancred and Clorinda: Trauma Studies for Implicated Subjects', in *The Future of Trauma Theory*, ed. by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. xv.

own past losses but also the suffering of others, resulting in what Michael Rothberg has termed 'multidirectional memory', with 'the potential to create new form of solidarity and new visions of justice'?[7] How are we able to heed the imperative to acknowledge and remember loss stemming from the past lessons of the Shoah in a world where our connections to *the other* are ever-changing in the system of global capital which has left us somewhere between bystander and director perpetrator? How are we to grieve losses from which we are not only temporally removed, but also culturally or geographically distanced? How are we to acknowledge or even *mourn* losses that are not our own?

Theories on mourning which, along with memory and trauma studies, have lent themselves to the study of literary or cultural representation to such an extent that we can even speak of 'mourning theory', can help us shed light on these questions.[8] While Freud's original concept of mourning opposite melancholia forms the basis of almost all mourning theories today, I propose an understanding of mourning that goes beyond the original Freudian binary that could be applied to what we may call posttraumatic narratives of postmemory: that is, a collective mourning that is carried out in the present, temporally removed from the moment of traumatic loss, as an affective mode of confronting and connecting to an inherited traumatic past that bridges the gap between the historical moment of occurrence and the present.[9] Here I propose to take this concept one step further, where the very same tropes identified in posttraumatic narratives of mourning can serve to bridge not only temporal distance, but also geographical or cultural distance as well, where collective mourning is seen as an affirmative, transnational, political practice in the creation of community in which both author *and* reader can assume the role of transnational posttraumatic witness.

Returning to the question of testimony and fiction, I conceive transnational posttraumatic narratives of mourning as a form of testimony: a bearing of witness to others

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[7] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 5.

[8] Lucy Brisley, 'The Will to Remember: Problematizing the Ethico-Politics of Mourning and Melancholia' *The International Journal of Civic, Political, and Community Studies,* 10, (2013), pp. 61-72.

[9] Elsewhere I have positioned these posttraumatic narratives of mourning opposite what we may call narratives of historical memory recovery, especially in the case of contemporary literary works on the Spanish Civil War. See Anthony Nuckols, 'La novela de duelo frente a la novela de recuperación de memoria histórica', *Caracol*, 11 (2016), pp. 210-242.

and their losses that transcends borders, as well as a direct testimony of the particularities of our own connection to these losses which are not own; a sort of literary 'monument to witnessing', in words of Shoshana Felman.[10] Firstly, I will briefly describe my understanding of mourning and the tropologies that define posttraumatic narratives of mourning. Secondly, I will lay the framework necessary to apply posttraumatic narratives of mourning *transnationally*, drawing primarily on the work of Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, and Nouri Gana. Finally, I will offer up an example of a transnational posttraumatic narrative of mourning, referencing the North American Jewish author Nathan Englander and his novel *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007), a novel about Argentina's estimated 30,000 detained-disappeared during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). Here, a novel written by a North American author allows us to bear witness to the losses of the *Proceso de reorganización nacional* ('the National Reorganization Process') and our relation to them.

Posttraumatic Narratives of Mourning

As previously mentioned, the Freudian binary of mourning versus melancholia continues to underlie the majority of present mourning theories, where originally the success of the healthy mourning process is reduced to the complete decathexis from the lost love object and the subsequent reinvestment of libidinal energies in a replacement; melancholia, on the other hand, is understood as a violent, pathological state in which this process is arrested.

The so-called consolatory paradigm[11] (where the lost object is subsequently replaced) has been critiqued and written off as conservative, exclusionary, and conducive to amnesia: where the substitution of the lost object is seen, at best, as reflecting a simple return to the status quo, governed by a capitalist modus operandi where the original object is viewed as disposable;[12] at worst, the replacement is seen as as an act of killing that condemns the lost object to an irreversible hermeneutic death.[13] These critiques have given way to what has been termed the 'depathologisation' of melancholia, where the

[10] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 10.
[11] Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).
[12] Clewell; Brisley.
[13] David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, 'A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia', in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng, and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 365.

melancholic process of holding on to the lost object, refusing consolation and substitution, is vindicated and theorized as a process with great political and creative potential.[14]

While I do understand the consolatory paradigm of mourning as problematic, ethically and politically suspect, I do not see Freud's *original* melancholia as a productive model and using the original Freudian concept of melancholia presents certain problems: 'Contemporary theorists can embrace melancholia only inasmuch as they 'forget' that it entails an *unconscious distortion* of the lost object's meaning –i.e., it's a species of forgetting not, remembering'.[15] In other words, despite the aforementioned depathologisation of melancholia, its application to memory work, i.e. melancholic memory, is essentially a misnomer.[16] Furthermore, the concerns about consolation and the question of what exactly a mourning process would entail are particularly relevant, and become further complicated, in the case that concerns us here: in the postmemorial, posttraumatic present, how can the losses of previous generations, which are not directly our own, be worked through in a potential, collective mourning process? How can we conceive of the literary text as a conscious *cultural practice* that, at the same time, does not offer itself up as an aesthetic form of consolation.[17]

I propose, then, what we may call narratives of 'recalcitrant mourning';[18] that is, a literature that actively resists substitution, foregoing the possibility of consolation, where resistance to the metaphorical transaction via the substitute constitutes 'the very locus

[14] An example of one of the more recent contributions within this so-called 'depathologisation' of melancholia would be Enzo Traverso's *Left-Wing Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), in which Traverso defends melancholia in the left not as a debilitating and inhibiting pathological state wracked with narcissistic tendencies in the wake of the triumph of global neoliberal practices, pace Wendy Brown, but rather as a condition for political potential: 'this melancholia does not mean lamenting a lost utopia, but rather rethinking a revolutionary project in a non-revolutionary age' (p. 20).

[15] Greg Forter quoted in Brisley, p. 65.

[16] Brisley, p. 65.

[17] Jo Labanyi essentially urges us to consider cultural texts as *cultural practices.* Jo Labanyi, 'Doing Things: Emotion, Affect, and Materiality', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 11.3-4, (2010), pp. 223-233.

[18] Patricia Rae opts for the term 'resistant mourning', which she defines as 'a resistance to reconciliation, full stop: a refusal to accept the acceptance of loss, whether through the severing and transference of libidinal ties or through the successful expansion of identity through introjection, or through any other kind of compensatory process'. See Patricia Rae, 'Introduction: Modernist Mourning'. In *Modernism and Mourning*, ed. Patricia Rae (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, 2007), pp. 16-17.

where mourning becomes an affirmative practice with political consequences'.[19] Put another way, the literary narrative about the traumatic past cannot, and should not, offer consolation for past losses nor hope to give form to loss, which by its very essence lacks form.[20] Furthermore, if, according to the early Freudian economics of mourning, in order for the process to be successful there must be a substitutive transaction, then resistance (disobedience, refusal, recalcitrance) to fulfilment renders mourning a task impossible to carry to completion.[21] While at the individual level, this would perhaps trigger an arrested process, for the collective, this ongoing work of mourning would allow for an always-open working-through loss in postmemorial, posttraumatic literature, where past losses are acknowledged as irreparable and unrecoverable, where the inherited absences are actively sought to be sustained through the literary work: before the losses of history, we remain inconsolable and to mourn is to bear witness to our *inability* to fully know these losses in the present, let alone begin to remediate them.

In texts themselves, this is done through what we may call a poetics of absence or absence as a trope, where absence or the impossibility of recovering history is either acknowledged or introduced into the literary form or on the level of diegesis. In the case of a homodiegetic narrator, often times the reader is confronted with a narrator who overtly admits not knowing everything about the traumatic past of a certain person or event, and thus resorts inevitably to supposition and inference; others may, in an attempt to relate some episode of the past, do so in what may be perceived by the reader as a difficult, ultra-mediated narration. Still others, in the case of a heterodiegetic narrator, may offer, through a sort of prosopopoeic trope, a focalized conjuring of the lost or dead. Still others may choose to incorporate absence directly into the narrative form itself with the use of ellipses or intentionally disrupted shifts in narration. Despite the diversity in achieving this said poetics of absence, the irrecoverable, unknowable, and irreparable character of the past

[19] Idelber Avelar, 'Restitution and Mourning in Latin American Postdictatorship', *boundary 2*, 26.3 (1999), p. 203.
[20] Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (Albany: The University of New York Press, 2004), p. 6.
[21] Avelar, p. 206. This notion of a mourning process impossible to carry out is reminiscent of Derrida's mourning aporia or 'impossible mourning' (Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). However, as Theodore Koulouris points out, Derrida's notion of 'impossible mourning' must not be confused with the Mitscherlich's 'inability to mourn', which they saw as characterising post-War German society in their inability to fully come to terms with not only the Nazi atrocities but also the loss of the figure of the Führer.

becomes manifest through the necessary recourse to invention, supposition and fiction itself, resulting in a narrative that houses, often times in more ways than one, loss at its core.

Having briefly laid out characteristics of posttraumatic narratives of mourning that categorise them as such, I wish to offer now a visual example with the intention of illustrating more clearly how loss and subsequent absence may be central to a work, as well as shifting the focus towards the Argentinian case. In his work on the figure of the detained-disappeared[22] in countries of the Southern Cone, Uruguayan sociologist Gabriel Gatti points to several visual artists whose work participates in what he has coined as 'narratives absent of meaning'[23] (*narrativas ausentes de sentido*): social narratives constructed in a posttraumatic reality that are constituted in and assume *catastrophe* as 'the place of enunciation'; while 'it may be a place difficult to utter' it is, nonetheless, a space 'from which one can talk and in which identity can be constructed'.[24] In the case of forced disappearance in the Southern Cone, the artists in question confront the irremediable immateriality of the disappeared body, 'assuming *the very impossibility of representing* and the consequent need to find the means and languages to work with that impossibility'.[25]

From among the various artists cited by Gatti, the work of Argentinian photographer Gustavo Germano perhaps best visually exemplifies how I see posttraumatic narratives of mourning as housing absence at its core. The first and original series entitled *Ausencias* (2006)[26] is composed of two sets of photographs: the first, consisting in personal photographs of family members and friends taken in the 1970s, are placed alongside Germano's photographs taken in the exact same locations but decades later in 2006, with the patent absence of family members or friends who were disappeared during the years of the last Argentinian dictatorship. Identical photographs, save for the aging of the

[22] This dual, inclusionary term encompasses those who were detained, tortured, and/or disappeared. Additionally, here I use the verb *disappear* as a transitive verb, mimicking this versatility that exists in Spanish, which emphasises the idea that one is disappeared by force.
[23] Here it is important to point out that Gatti uses the term *narrative* to refer to socially constructed narratives surrounding the figure of the detained-disappeared as opposed to literary narratives.
[24] Gabriel Gatti, *Identidades desaparecidas: Peleas por el sentido en la desaparición forzada* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2012), p. 147. My translation. Original: 'el lugar de enunciación [...] aunque sea un lugar difícil de decir, desde él se puede hablar y en él se puede construer identidad'.
[25] Gatti, p. 150. My translation. Original: 'asumiendo la imposibilidad misma de representar y la necesidad consecuente de dar con resortes y lenguajes para trabajar con esa imposibilidad'.
[26] Along the same lines and title, Germano went on to create *Ausências (Brasil)* in 2012 and *Ausencias (Colombia)* in 2015 with family members of victims of forced disappearance and violence in these two cases.

photograph's subjects and, in some cases, colour versus black and white, the result of the juxtaposition of the two photos places loss and absence at the very centre of the photographs:

> All of the photos contain a lack, and it is extremely forceful. There is something there that is not seen but yet fills. And it oppresses and overwhelms.[27]

Figure 1. Ausencias.[28]

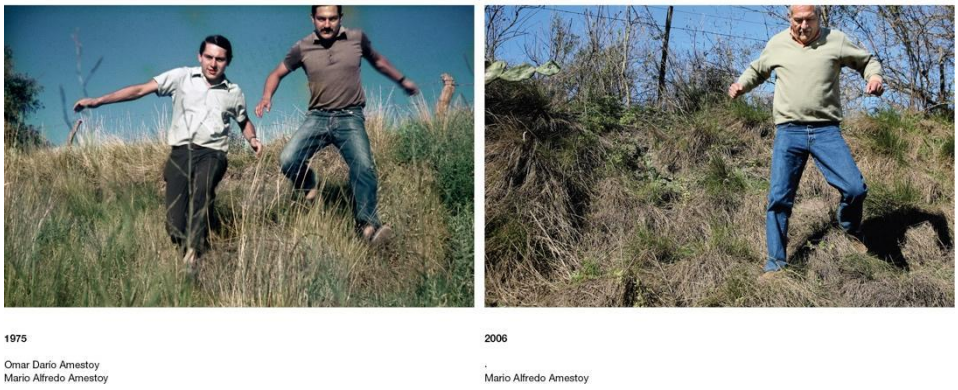

Figure 2. Ausencias.[29]

Comprised of fifteen distinct pairs, Gatti writes:

[27] Gatti, p. 153. My translation. Original: 'Todas las fotos contienen una falta, y es tremendamente contundente. Hay algo ahí que no se ve pero que llena. Y que oprime y sobrecoge'.
[28] Gustavo Germano, 'Ausencias (Argentina)', *Gustavo Germano* <http://www.gustavogermano.com/#ausencias> [accessed 23 January 2017].
[29] Germano.

> […] the complete series produces a terribly unsettling effect, that of discovering that the emptiness, excuse me, *that* emptiness, is indeed filled.[30]

I suggest that this affective model for mourning can transcend not only time but also geographical or even cultural distance. In other words, if we can posit 'recalcitrant mourning' narratives as a mode of confronting inherited, indirect traumatic losses, can we not also conceive (and locate) similar narratives that may equally serve as an affective model for *transnational*, geographically or culturally indirect traumatic loss?

Transnational Posttraumatic Narratives of Mourning

In his book *Signifying Loss* (2011), Nouri Gana points the way (as the subtitle suggests) 'Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning', focusing on the work of several authors, hailing from different backgrounds who grapple with a traumatic loss in their own contexts. In the coda to the same study, he lays the groundwork for what he calls a 'geopolitics of mourning', posing the question as to whether or not a rethinking of loss and mourning can lead to 'the production of viable affective bonds that might in turn foster a sense of transnational solidarity and global community?'[31] I conceive what I propose here as a possible response to the question raised by Gana, where posttraumatic narratives of mourning functioning transnationally (i.e. addressing past violence across borders) not only allow us to acknowledge the loss and pain of the other, but also demonstrate how we can be affected by and, sometimes, tied-in to trauma that is not always our own, enabling a 'multidirectional memory' exchange.

Judith Butler's reflection on community and the state of dependency as the primary human condition explains how we are tied up not only with one another but also with those who came before us, where violence 'is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie' and where:

[30] Gatti, p. 153. My translation. Original: '[…] la serie complete produce un efecto terriblemente turbador, el de descubrir que el vacío, perdón, que ese vacío, está lleno'.
[31] Nouri Gana, *Signifying Loss: Toward a Poetics of Narrative Mourning*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), p. 182.

> […] the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fibre of the boundary that contains me […], but also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded.[32]

Nevertheless, Butler addresses the fact that this notion of shared bodily vulnerability is often times constructed along either national or racial lines, leaving other losses as unthinkable and ungrievable, as demonstrated in the case of the United State's reaction to the 9/11 attacks, where unilateral, pre-emptive war always already precludes the grievability of the other.[33]

On a transnational scale, I see this, in part, as a problem of what Nancy Fraser calls misrepresentation through misframing: when notions of shared body vulnerability are delimited to the Keynesian-Westphalian frame (i.e. the nation-state), entire communities of individuals affected by injustices are excluded from participation. In an ever-globalising world where we are faced with crises that clearly already exist and function transnationally (climate change, war, refugees, genocide, etc.), misrepresentation through misframing only multiplies and exacerbates oppression and inequality, foreclosing for many the ability to make claims against injustice or even to have their grievances and losses understood as grievable. Yet despite the disenfranchising of entire communities thanks to the system of global capital, we are, in a way, more interconnected than ever before, implicated in and tied to many of these injustices, as Rothberg's aforementioned reflection on the term 'bystander' suggests. In other words, today, more than ever, 'the state-territorial principle no longer affords an adequate basis for determining the 'who' of justice in every case'.[34]

Nevertheless, we can challenge current modes of framing through what Fraser calls the 'transformative approach', where:

[32] Butler, p. 27.
[33] Gana has also theorised on the possible political implications stemming from the notion of inconsolability, p. 180.
[34] Nancy Fraser, 'Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World', *New Left Review*, 36, Nov-Dec, (2005), p. 12.

> […] the aim is to overcome injustices by changing not just the boundaries of the 'who' of justice, but also the mode of their constitution, hence the way they are drawn.[35]

If we hold on to Butler's notion of vulnerability and apply it to this transformative approach in reframing how boundaries are established, we can begin to conceive of a mourning process that would establish a community that begins with our own experiences of violence but that would finish with the understanding of our connectedness, or even complicity in, other acts of violence: 'Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all,' where loss 'tear[s] us from ourselves and bind[s] us to others, transport[s] us, undo[es] us, implicate[s] us in lives that are not our own'.[36]

Thus, I see *transnational* posttraumatic narratives of mourning as constituting a tool in combating the precariousness intrinsic to the globalising world as a way of redrawing or reframing the public sphere through the literary text, where losses that are not directly our own can be acknowledged as irreparable and unrecoverable, thus initiating a process of recalcitrant mourning, which not only disobeys calls for consolation, but also the current framing of claims to injustice.

The Ministry of Special Cases

As an example of a transnational posttraumatic narrative of mourning, I point to Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007). Author of two collections of short stories, *For The Relief of Unbearable Urges* (1999) and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* (2012), as well as the recently published *Dinner at the Centre of the Earth* (2017), Englander's first novel depicts the story of a Jewish-Argentinian family in the days before and after the military coup of 1976, which would give way to the seven-year military dictatorship during which an estimated 30,000 individuals, deemed subversives by the government, would disappear. With forced disappearance at the centre of Englander's novel and his having written fiction about Jews during the Holocaust and Russian pogroms, Englander admits often asking himself questions like 'Do I have the right to write about a topic that has

[35] Fraser, p. 13.
[36] Butler, p. 20, p. 25.

nothing to do with my own experience?' or 'To what point is it respectful to become involved with something as gigantic as Jewish (or in this case, Argentinian) memory?'[37] Englander wrote most of the novel while living in Jerusalem, a time he associates with episodes of violence and the realisation of his own vulnerability,[38] and was inspired to write about the disappearances in Argentina from some young Argentinians he met in Israel who 'were so deeply formed by this period of history that it got under [his] skin and stayed with [him]'.[39] I understand Englander's novel as an exercise in reframing to the extent that it is a narrative that begins with Englander's own personal experience and ends with an openness to the suffering of the other.

In a similar way to Gustavo Germano's photographs, I see the narrative as displaying the same trope of absence, housing it at its very core: Englander explains that he is 'obsessed with the idea of negative space, with the idea of absence' in his work.[40] This absence functions on two levels within the novel: on the level of the diegesis for the characters involved, as well as on a non-diegetic level through the very structure of the narration. The resulting heteroglossia from these two ways of addressing absence in the novel permits the text to present itself as incapable of offering consolation for loss while, at the same time, offering itself as a testimony of how, despite distances, we may acknowledge suffering across borders despite our inability to repair or fully recover past losses. In other words, as a distanced, fictional account of loss and grieving, it constitutes a space unbounded by borders or limits in which both author and readers alike can bear witness to

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[37] Carolina Esses, 'Nathan Englander: "Estoy obsesionado con la ausencia"', *Revista Ñ Clarín*, 18 July 2009 < http://edant.revistaenie.clarin.com/notas/2009/07/18/_-01960392.htm> [accessed 22 September 2016], (para 3 of 13). My translation. Original: '¿hasta qué punto es respetuoso meterme con algo gigantesco como la memoria judía?'.

[38] 'It's a very American thought to think your life has value. Most other countries don't have that luxury. But this idea: Do I as an individual, do I have a right to think I don't want to die? Does this country need to protect me? […] And the individual's obligation to community and vice versa'. John Fox, 'Nathan Englander Interview', *Bookfox*, 2008, <http://thejohnfox.com/2008/10/nathan-englander-interview/> [accessed 22 September 2016], (para 4 of 86).

[39] Fox, para 26 of 86.

[40] Esses, para 3 of 13. This absence, similar to Germano's photographs, is also present on the cover of the Vintage International edition of the novel. Reminiscent of the photographs carried and displayed by friends and relatives of the disappeared from the early days of the dictatorship to the present, the cover of the novel depicts a young man's face which is blocked by a white box in which the title appears, thus impeding the viewer of knowing his identity.

the formlessness and irreparability of another's loss, acknowledging the grievability of the other.

The omniscient third-person narrator tells the story of Kaddish and Lillian Poznan and the detention and subsequent disappearance of their son, Pato, during the first days of the last Argentinian military dictatorship. Kaddish and Lillian, while both Argentinian Jews, come from very different backgrounds: Kaddish, the son of a prostitute, was raised within the Jewish community associated with the Society of the Benevolent Self, a synagogue run by gangsters and pimps;[41] Lillian was brought up in the more traditional United Jewish Congregation. Death, disappearance, and mourning itself are at the very centre of the narration, beginning with the protagonist's name, Kaddish, given to him by a rabbi at his birth ('Let his name be Kaddish to ward off the angel of death. A trick and a blessing. Let his child be the mourner instead of the mourned').[42] Establishing Kaddish as a mourner by name not only serves to foreshadow his soon-to-be state of inconsolable mourner, as we shall see, but is also ironic, as his job has to do not with sustaining a connection between the dead and the living but with erasing it: with much of Buenos Aires's Jewish community ashamed of their past connections to the less socially acceptable congregation, Kaddish is paid to enter the Society for the Benevolent Self's cemetery (separated by a wall from the upright Jewish one) in order to chisel away the names from tombstones of those who wish to erase any possible connection to their deceased family members associated with the congregation. Lillian, on the other hand, works for a small insurance company where, in the days after the coup, 'still-stunned citizens took out policies on themselves. They repeated questions, asked the obvious, and all touched upon the central point: '*What happens if I die*?' (p. 41). Foreshadowing the disappearances that until then had only been rumours, Lillian's boss admits that cashing in on the insurance policies was meant to be a smooth process: 'that is, for those with proof of death.' (p. 41).

Pato, Kaddish and Lillian's son, views his father's work with contempt, often times obligated by his father to help him in his remunerated grave desecration. A university

[41] For more information related to the criminal organization which dealt in human trafficking between Argentina and Eastern Europe between the 1880s and 1930s, see Gustavo Sánchez Canales, '"The Benevolent Self Was a Disgrace beyond Measure for Every Argentine Jew": Between the Need to Remember and the Desire to Forget in Nathan Englander's *The Ministry of Special Cases*', *Partial Answers*, 13.1 (2015), pp. 58-59.

[42] Nathan Englander, *The Ministry of Special Cases* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 8. Further references from this edition are given directly after the quotation within the text.

student with openly leftist leanings, Pato and his fellow classmates are witness to the military junta's purges and reforms within the university, the violence committed by police on fellow university students, and the police raids and detentions that were becoming so commonplace.[43] Amidst ever-increasing stories of disappearances (the first of which is mentioned by one of Pato's friends, Flavia), Kaddish and Lillian urge Pato to get rid of his compromising books. Pato is unconvinced, therefore Kaddish proceeds to burn the books in the bathtub, only to be discovered by his son, provoking a brawl between the two and resulting in Pato's leaving. A few days later, Pato is detained along with his friends in the street one night after a concert. While the other detained youth are let go, Pato is held at the police station for having forgotten his ID. Kaddish is finally informed days later and picks his son up and takes him home. While waiting for Lillian's return home, Kaddish and Pato begin yet another heated quarrel – Pato tells his father he wishes he were dead, to which Kaddish responds he wishes his son had never been born – only to be interrupted finally by a knock at the door: 'Kaddish went to get it. And Kaddish got his wish. It was, in an instant, as if his son was never born.' (p. 116). Four men enter the house and take Pato away, along with two books, the ones Kaddish had not burned.

Thus, begins the 'period of inestimable loss and insecurity' that conditions the central plot (p. 104). Lillian and Kaddish begin the endless search for their son, tirelessly seeking out any information as to their son's whereabouts in police stations, speaking to officials, priests and high-ranking members of the Jewish community in Buenos Aires. Ultimately, they find themselves bogged down in the fictional Ministry of Special Cases where they are forced to wait days upon days in hopes of filing any injunction that would lead to information about their detained son.[44] As their search proves fruitless, here we as

[43] While it is true that the years leading up to the military coup were indeed plagued with violence from extremist militant groups of both right and left, the so-called 'theory of two devils' – that is, that violence came not only from the state but from leftist militant groups as well – was essentially a narrative created by the military junta to justify state terrorism: 'the higher estimates of guerrilla forces barely amount to 5 percent of the estimates 30,000 *desaparecidos*. The figure for victims murdered by the guerrillas in the period prior to and during the dictatorship is 687, most of them military or security forces personnel, and a few civilians.' Likewise, the term 'dirty war' (*guerra sucia*) can also be seen as a product of the military junta's official narrative, as the vast majority of detained-disappeared were *not* indeed militants, but civilians. See Susana Kaiser, *Postmemories of Terror* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 25-28.

[44] 'We Argentinians know that there never was such a ministry, and yet imagining it, in this case, becomes totally valid: upon finishing the novel it appears to us in fact that that it must have existed.' My translation. Original: 'Todos los argentinos sabemos que no hubo tal ministerio, y sin embargo la

readers are witness to the irremediable absence that has suddenly installed itself in Kaddish and Lillian's life: forced to repeat their story with everyone they question for help:

> […] in each telling it was if [their] son had never been. The idea of absence had acquired its own fierce momentum. It was like snatching a ball from a baby and hiding it behind one's back—there was the initial shock and then, like that, Pato was no more (p. 135).

As the couple continue their search, facing bureaucratic obstacles, the silence and unwillingness to speak of others in similar circumstances, and the harshness of not knowing whether their son is alive or dead, we see Kaddish and Lillian diverge in their coping of the situation. While Lillian remains confident her son will return, Kaddish begins to suspect that he will not:

> 'Don't talk like he's lost, Kaddish. Don't ever talk like we have no son.' 'We don't,' Kaddish said. Lillian, with great speed, slapped Kaddish across the face. 'It is not a sin to admit,' Kaddish said. 'Until we get him back, he's gone.' 'You listen,' Lillian said. 'He's not anything but ever-present, he is not anything but on his way home.' (p. 233)

It is here precisely here, in this divergence, this absence of both factual information and absence of body that the novel is converted into a space of doubt, granting us insight as readers into the cruel nature of what Gabriel Gatti refers to as place that surrounds the figure of the detained-disappeared: it is 'the limbo of the non-dead-non-living […] They are forever *being disappeared*. Neither alive nor dead, entities which are difficult to articulate.'[45] We see through Kaddish and Lillian that Pato is both simultaneously alive and dead, in a:

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imaginación, en este caso, se nos ocurre como totalmente válida: al terminar la novela nos parece que de hecho debió haber existido.' Carlos Gamerro, 'La dictadura contada en inglés', *Revista Ñ Clarín*, 4 October 2009 <http://edant.revistaenie.clarin.com/notas/2008/ 10/04/_-01773782.htm> [accessed 22 September 2016], (para 13 of 14).

[45] Gatti, p. 18. My translation. Original: 'el limbo de los no-muertos-no-vivos, los desaparecidos […] siempre están siendo desaparecidos: ni vivos, ni muertos, entidades incómodas para hablar de ellas'.

> […] space of perpetual instability, a sort of *permanent limbo*. An unsolvable space, moreover: it will not even be closed with the eventual certainty of death. He will continue *being* detained-disappeared.[46]

Just as the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons defined forced disappearance as a crime against humanity and one that is considered 'continuous or permanent as long as the fate or whereabouts of the victim has not been determined,' Kaddish and Lillian are condemned to suffer the crime as long as they do not know Pato's true fate.[47]

As Lillian continues her search for answers and help at the Ministry of Special Cases, the United Congregations of Argentina, and with a priest, Kaddish, thanks to a tip from a former client of his, goes to the fishing piers to speak with a man who supposedly knows something about his son. On the pier, the man introduces himself as Victor Wollensky, a naval pilot ('what might a man in this upside-down country end up doing in the navy but flying on planes') who claims to know 'what happens to the children', as he is 'the monster who tosses them into the sea' (pp. 263; 264). Wollensky explains that the detained young people are driven to the runway in busses, naked and drugged, and herded into the planes from which they are then thrown out, alive, over the River Plate. Showing him a photo of Pato, Kaddish asks Wollensky if he recognises his son, to which the pilot responds:

> 'They all look the same and they all look like this. *All in the same boat* is the saying. But they don't have one. They're all at the bottom of the river' (p. 264).

Confronted with the possibility that his son has been murdered by Wollensky or one of the many other guards, Kaddish:

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[46] Gatti, p. 63. My translation. Original: 'espacio de inestabilidad perpetua, una suerte de limbo permanente. Un espacio irresoluble además: ni siquiera se cierra con la eventual certeza de la muerte. Seguirá siendo un detenido-desaparecido'.

[47] Organization of American States, 'Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons', *Organization of American States* <http://www.oas.org/ juridico/english/treaties/a-60.html> [accessed 28 January 2017].

> […] lapel in hand, […] made a cut with a sawing motion. He put the knife down and rent the fabric, giving a good tear. This is how he did it, this is how it's always been done: a sign of mourning […] (p. 269).[48]

Despite perhaps coming closer to the truth, Kaddish is nonetheless faced once again with the undeniable absence of his son when he approaches the local rabbi with doubts about how 'to make a funeral when there wasn't a son' (p. 291). The rabbi explains that he does not understand how Kaddish can want to have a funeral without a body and with his wife still believing their son may be alive:

> 'Maybe,' the rabbi said, 'you're wrong in not waiting.' 'Me? I'm the same as always. Not right or wrong, only deficient,' Kaddish said, 'forever falling short. But this one thing, a father to a dead son without a son to weep over. This is an absence that's not right and not fair.' (p. 294)

Unconvinced, the rabbi explains that it would be against Jewish law to perform a burial without a body:

> 'Abandon the mourning. […] Go back to your wife. She's a sensible woman, Poznan. It sounds like she does the right thing. […] Forget a funeral. You are forbidden in these circumstances even to mourn' (pp. 294; 298).

Kaddish, burdened by his situation, leaves the rabbi's house determined to hold a burial for his son, to shed himself of the prohibition to mourn and assume, as his name would suggest, his role as a mourner.

In the meantime, determined in her search, Lillian has found a priest who assures her that her son is alive and well, but just needs a payment in exchange for information about his whereabouts. Unable to pay, Kaddish, himself convinced of his son's fate, decides to

[48] While here the news of the possible whereabouts of Pato is revealed to Kaddish by an admitted perpetrator, I do not see the novel as granting the perpetrator as a figure any sort of privileged place in revealing truth. For Kaddish, the revelation of the fate of many young people does not confirm his own son's fate, but merely catalyses his coming to terms with what he believes to be his son's final resting place.

break into the famous La Recoleta cemetery to steal some bones of an important family and hold them ransom in order to pay the impossible sum for Lillian's sake. However, the deceased's daughter does not feel threatened, nor moved to pay for what is already hers. Defeated, Kaddish returns home to present Lillian with the bones as Pato's: 'A dead son is all I have left to give you. That's why I'm here. That's what I've got. I brought you back his bones' (p. 338). Lillian, unconvinced they are her son's ('A mother knows her own son and when he is near'), tells Kaddish to take them and do what he must 'to set [him]self right' (p. 339). In an attempt to do right by his son and tradition, Kaddish buries the surrogate bones next to his mother's grave in the cemetery of The Society of the Benevolent Self. Lillian, convinced of her son's ever-present state:

> [...] made her way to the chair by the window. She sat down and settled in. She set her gaze on the corner Pato would come around. And as she did every night, Lillian thought, He will turn [...] (p. 339).

Neither Kaddish nor Lillian is able to truly mourn the loss of their son: Kaddish, perhaps conditioned by his own name, will forever know the replacement grave as false, and Lillian, with her notion of reality and time permanently distorted by her son's disappearance, will, as the narrator tells us, 'settle in' to the absence left by her son.

Having elucidated the ways in which absence functions at the diegetic level, where the catastrophe of Pato's disappearance comes to condition both Kaddish and Lillian's inability to fully mourn,[49] I would like to point out the ways in which I see *The Ministry of Special Cases* as functioning as a posttraumatic narrative of mourning *transnationally*, thus consolidating the text as a testimony not only of the losses of the detained-disappeared but also of our own inability as readers, distanced in time and space from the losses, to remediate loss. There is one moment in particular in the novel (a mere five pages amongst

[49] While here I use the same wording, I would not liken Kaddish and Lilian's 'inability to mourn' with that proposed by the Mitscherlich's in the case of post-war Germany, where the inability to mourn the lost love object (an idealised image of the Third Reich, the figure of the Führer, etc.) stems from the fact that the beloved object was responsible, in a way, for its own loss. See Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 15-16 and Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 1-3.

more than three hundred) where I see the same sort of poetics of absence previously mentioned at work.

Towards the end of the novel, we see a shift in the omniscient narration – a break, in the middle of chapter, where the narrator begins to use first-person plural pronouns, uniting both characters and readers: 'Let's make it clear that it's a girl from the start. There should be no expectation of its being Pato when we see the body, long and lank (and living still)' (p. 300). The young girl is being held in a clandestine detention centre (the very same cell Pato was held in, we are told) and who, between interrogations and torture, discovers six small notes written on paper left in the foam mattress of her cell with the name PATO POZNAN scribbled at the top. In this sort of prosopopoeic device where Pato is alive in these notes left by him, having passed through the detention centre as well, we see the girl as the nexus between both Kaddish and Lillian's realities:

> In the present is where things came apart. Lillian alone was convinced of Pato alive and Pato well and Pato held in some other place. Kaddish alone believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Pato was at the bottom of the River Plate. Then there was the girl. She embraced, quite neatly, the conflicting positions of Lillian and Kaddish. She saw both their truths, believed ardently both their absolutes. By virtue of inhabiting a cell where Pato once was and now was not, Pato was to her as living as he was dead. (p. 303)

The girl then takes a decision, receiving Pato's testimony by memorising the notes and hiding them in her mouth, in an attempt to protect them from her torturers.

The narrator then explains that as Pato's parents continue their search (Lillian for more information, Kaddish for a rabbi willing to perform a funeral without a body), the young girl's body 'had already been settled in the sand for some days under the pressure of a trillion litres of River Plate' (p. 304). Despite the fact that the narrator, endowed with omniscience, provides us with a vast array of details about our protagonists' lives or the very scene of the unnamed tortured girl, the narrator chooses *not* to reveal to the reader the contents of the six small notes:

> An obvious omission. It's fair to wonder about the contents of those notes. It's true that the girl got to read them and memorize them and swallow them down. It wouldn't be right, though, to share Pato's message when neither Kaddish nor Lillian will hear it, when neither parent will learn that those notes ever were. […] The memory is the girl's alone. And that's how it will stay. (p. 304).

Having to answer only to the reader, the narrator nevertheless opts for absence despite his knowing, converting us as readers into witnesses of not only the crime but the very same unknowability, irreparability, and irrecoverability it entails for Kaddish and Lillian.

The final product of this heteroglossia (the narration of Kaddish and Lillian's loss, fruitless search, and installation in never-ending absence through dialogue and omniscient narration; the narrator's direct address to the reader, including us in that first-person plural 'Let's make it clear') is a text that bears witness to the loss of the other, of others' losses, as well as our role in the spatially and temporally removed present to do no other than recognise loss, create testimony of our own inability to remediate and our own inconsolability before loss.

Conclusion

Englander's novel was generally well received in mainstream Argentinian press, being described as a responsible account of disappearance in the recognition of the irremediable nature of such a crime. In an article published in the Argentinian newspaper *Clarín*'s cultural supplement *Revista Ñ*, Carlos Gamerro reserves especially laudable remarks for *The Ministry of Special Cases*, a fact that when compared with Gamerro's brief overview of other foreign-born novelists who have written *novelas del Proceso* ('novels on the Process') holds all the more merit. For Gamerro, it is precisely because of novels like Englander's that:

> […] allow for the hope that the overwhelming experience of the last dictatorship [in Argentina] can go on to form part of the memory of *humanity* […] and not only our own. It is something we can celebrate, then, that the 'heavy inheritance

> of the dictatorship' is perhaps too heavy for the shoulders of one single people, and for one single literature.[50]

The heteroglossia present in *The Ministry of Special Cases*, the way in which Englander preserves absence on two different levels, permitting us to not only witness Kaddish and Lillian's loss but also mimicking it in a way by converting the reading of the novel as loss through the denial to reveal Pato's ultimate fate, constitutes what Emir Eshel calls a 'futurity':

> […] new modes of expression […] that change the world. Metaphors and creative narratives enable us to reshape habits, feelings, and even social relations. Their imaginative power contributes to the process by which a community and reconstitute itself.[51]

In Gamerro's review of the novel, he points precisely toward a future community where the atrocities of the detained-disappeared are installed in human memory, which in the case of the novel in question is possible because of the author's own inherited memories and narratives of loss and his own sense of vulnerability. Beginning with those sensibilities on behalf of the author, the novel published in the US effectively places the losses of Argentina within the public sphere.

In establishing this transnational space through the novel, it constitutes a literary exercise in Fraser's transformative approach to combat injustices caused by misframing, where certain individuals' stories are often denied an audience. The novel ensures the extension and preservation of mutual vulnerability and creates a public space through literature that is independent of the limitations of the nation-state and that allows us to access the posttraumatic past of others and acknowledges it as irreparable, unrecoverable and, nevertheless, an act a violence directed towards that very bond that connects us. While

[50] Carlos Gamerro, (para 3 of 13). My translation. Original: 'permiten esperar que la abrumadora experiencia de la última dictadura pueda pasar a formar parte de la memoria de la humanidad […] y no sólo de la nuestra. Es algo que podemos celebrar, entonces: la "pesada herencia de la dictadura" quizá sea demasiado pesada para los hombros de un solo pueblo, y de una sola literatura.'
[51] Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 7.

the novel never explicitly makes any reference to US involvement in supporting or abetting state-sponsored terrorism in Argentina or other Latin American countries, by presenting a fictional account of forced disappearance that sustains the particularities of loss for both characters and readers in the US (and world) market, the novel effectively paves the way for any future public debate on the issue.[52] Furthermore, in relating Kaddish and Lilian's attempts at filing an injunction at the Ministry of Special Cases on behalf of their disappeared son, Englander's novel tackles head on the issue of habeas corpus, a right which had been rescinded in the case of those declared enemy combatants by the US in their war on terror.[53] The novel thus becomes a space which allows for a multidirectional memory exchange, transforming conventional frames that reflect how we are connected to others' trauma and losses.

I see posttraumatic narratives of mourning as a cultural practice that, when functioning transnationally like *The Ministry of Special Cases*, participate in a mourning process that is catalysed and carried out through the acknowledgement of the unknowable and irrecoverable nature of loss. Returning to the previously mentioned tension between testimony and fiction, the incorporation of absence stemming from violent losses that are not our own directly into the literary narrative converts the text in a species of fictional testimony that functions on two levels: firstly, as a testimony to the others' historical losses and, secondly, as a testimony of our own position temporally or culturally removed from the past, fully incapable of anything other than acknowledging said losses.

[52] For more on US involvement in state terrorism in Latin America, see J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005).
[53] Englander explains that 'a very simple metaphor for a government literally out of control is the suspension of habeas corpus. But [he] had this as a metaphor for years, then [his] own government decided to suspend habeas corpus, so it wasn't a political book but then [he] inherited a political stance'. Fox, para 31 of 86.

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