

Proposal for THE BOOK OF HOLES

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Abstract

The following chapter emerged out of a practice-based research encounter with a set of documents at the UK National Archives relating to the South African War – record WO 32/8061. Framed as a proposal for an ‘artefact’ and an ‘essay’ (which may or may not exist), the chapter points outside itself to another reality. As such, it thematises its own incompleteness, as well as its entanglement within a context beyond its immediacy. These concerns are imperative to the chapter’s focus, as it is essentially a meditation on ‘holes’ – in history, in memory, in archival reserves, in the very language through which the traumas of the past are articulated. Working with and through these lacunae – particularly as they pertain to the history of the South African War concentration camps – the chapter attempts to perform its own instability, irresolution and fracture. In the process, an argument is staged that interrupts itself repeatedly: personal interjections and ruminations (from ‘the author’) intercede in the reasoned coherence of ‘the discussion’, such that the line between ‘objective researcher’ and ‘invested narrator’ becomes blurred. In this respect, the chapter intimates that coming to terms with the past is not a matter of grappling objectively with unassailable truths (as if these were available in the first place). Rather, it entails a self-reflexive process that traces the ‘holes in history’ as meaningful aporias – as intervals in signification, at the limit-point of the sayable, wherein are held the “aspects of historical experience that are subjective, submerged, even silent” (Hirsch & Spitzer 2010:401).



Part A: 'Artefact'

The reader encounters the following **artefact**: a neutral, somewhat nondescript solander box, in dark olive-green (a colour associated with official papers). It measures approximately 22cm (height) x 18cm (width) x 10cm (depth). There is nothing on the outside of the box to betray the contents, except a number embossed on the spine: WO 32/8061.

Opening the solander box (the lid of which pages to the left, like the cover of a book), the reader sees a tray with two compartments: on the left is a pair of neatly folded, white cotton gloves; on the right is a custom-made paper knife in polished steel. The blade of the paper knife is clean and sharp, but subtle detailing on the handle evokes associations of a bygone era. By lifting out the shallow tray, the reader gains access to the book beneath it. The book is in portrait format, roughly the dimensions of the solander box and about 6cm thick. It is hardcover with square binding, and clad in tawny brown book cloth. On the front, embossed in black in Gill Sans, is the full title:

WO 32/8061
[THE BOOK OF HOLES]

Putting on the cotton gloves and lifting out the book, the reader begins to page. At this stage she notices that many of the pages are uncut along the fore-edge: to access the contents she will need to take up the paper knife, insert the blade into each of these folded seams and rip. She will encounter slight resistance – the book is printed on 215gsm cotton paper – and will hear the unmistakable rasp of tearing paper. The act will need to be repeated at irregular intervals. Page ... tear and page ... tear and page ... page ... page ... tear and page ... and so on.

In this manner, with cotton gloves donned and paper knife slicing, the reader discloses the innards of the book: 172 sequential colour photographs, which document the holes indiscriminately made in a pile of historical documents (ostensibly for the purposes of binding them together). More specifically, the photographs track the path of a treasury tag feeding into these haphazard holes and the proximate sites of wounding. For example, they document where the woven cord has snagged and caught on the paper, rupturing the edges of a too-snug hole and meandering into the surrounds (like a river bursting its banks).

At times, the photographs include oblique and partial references to a larger context, via bits of text, scribbled notes and letterheads. A few pages in, the reader sees a British War Office crest, embossed as a letterhead on black-bordered stationery. Later she sees the handwritten words "South Africa" and then a typewritten, underlined heading: "Refugee Camps". Further along, a plethora of pages declare themselves "SECRET" or "CONFIDENTIAL" – but the photographs divulge nothing further, the contents of the communiqués having been excluded by the crop frame.

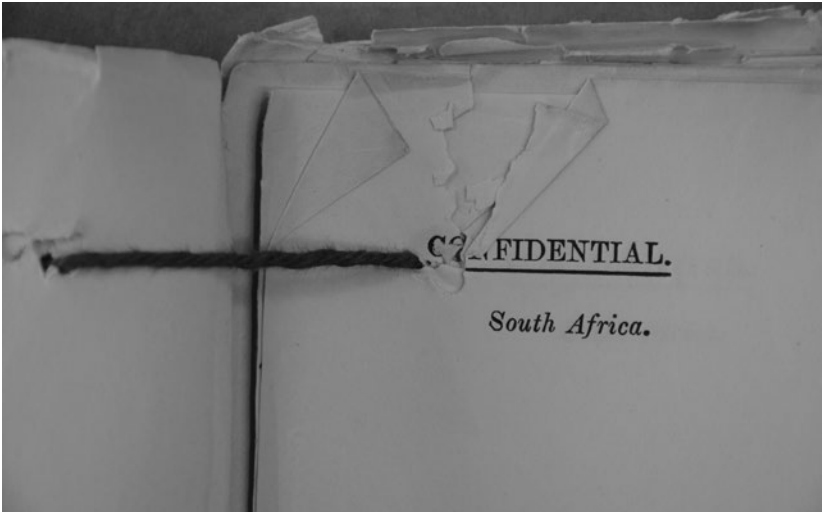
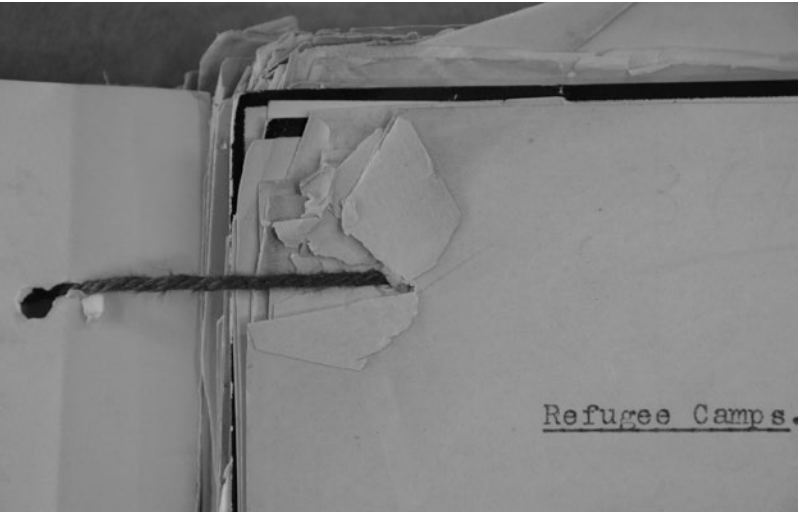
At the back of the book is the colophon, which, inter alia, references the source of the photographs as follows:

Source:
The National Archives of the UK (TNA), record WO 32/8061.
Photographed by the artist: 8 October 2015.

Citable Reference	Description	Start date	End date
WO 32/8061	War Office and successors: Registered Files (General Series). OVERSEAS: South Africa (Code 0(AU)): Boer War: Reports, accounts and recommendations concerning concentration (refugee) camps. WO32/8059-8064 were attached when in use at the War Office. Held by: The National Archives	01/01/1901	31/12/1901

(<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>)

To the attentive reader, this information would shed light on the number in the title (WO 32/8061), situating **the artefact** in relation to archival practices as well as a particular history. In turn, it might deepen a reading of the holes as sites of wounding, and the tearing of the uncut pages as inherently violent. The white cotton gloves might acquire more sinister connotations – evoking care and preservation on the one hand, but also the threat of contamination (are they worn to protect the book or to protect the wearer?). The paper knife might distinguish itself more acutely as a weapon.



ABOVE: Figure 2. Maureen de Jager, *Record WO 32/8061 (2c)* detail, 2016 | Digital photograph | 30.48 x 40.64 cm | Courtesy the author

Part B: 'Essay'

Alongside **the artefact** (metaphorically rather than literally), the readers encounter **the essay**, understood as a "short piece of writing" but also as an "attempt or effort"; a "weighing up" (from the Late Latin *exagium*) but also, importantly, an "*experiment*" (Google Dictionary). In particular, **the essay** is an endeavour to meditate, experimentally, on the phenomenon of 'holes', proffering an argument that runs through and across and under the concerns of the artefact.

The essay is not an *explication* of **the artefact** (which would imply that the mute artefact 'comes first' and depends on textual explanation to give it meaning). Rather, **the essay** presents itself as a separate but overlapping exploration which speaks to, and draws from, **the artefact's** significance reciprocally, criss-crossing its path unpredictably.

*(Indeed, the reader could encounter **the essay** and **the artefact** in any order. The designation 'Part A' and 'Part B' implies neither precedence nor pre-eminence.)*

Part B. THE BOOK OF HOLES (**the essay**) gestures obliquely to another oblique text: *The book of margins* by French Jewish poet and philosopher, Edmond Jabès. First published in two parts in 1975 and 1984, *The book of margins* is, in many ways, an older, distant cousin to THE BOOK OF HOLES (they are like unacquainted relatives meeting serendipitously, only to find themselves finishing each other's sentences).

These are Jabès's (1993:65) words:

All that finally remains of the completed book is a gaping hole,
the same dark hole that is covered by the sleeper's lids.

Mark C Taylor (1993:ix-x) notes that Jabès is preoccupied with the "problem of language", which he sees as irrevocably marked by silence, absence and loss in the face of unspeakable tragedy. In response to Theodore Adorno's dictum that, after Auschwitz, we can no longer write poetry, Jabès (cited in Taylor 1993:ix-x) insists: "after Auschwitz we *must* write poetry but with wounded words". In *The book of margins*, allusions to reading/writing as wounded (and wounding) abound. For Jabès (1993:59), writing entails "breaking a word, letting words play in the breakage of a word". Elsewhere he observes, "Reading a text involves several degrees of violence; this is sufficient warning that there is danger in the house" (Jabès 1993:42).

*(A reader encountering this quote having experienced **the artefact** might recall the implicit violence of tearing uncut pages – an action now glimpsed, retrospectively, through the keyhole of Jabès' warning. A reader yet to see **the artefact** might experience this confluence later.*

Either way, there is "danger in the house".)

"Silence is the dried blood of the wound", says Jabès (1993:67).

Using Jabès as a starting point (or, more specifically, using the uncanny and serendipitous alignment between *The book of margins* and *THE BOOK OF HOLES* as a starting point), **the essay** meditates on silence (and silencing), wounds (and wounding) in relation to the witnessing of trauma, archival practices and historiography. Where *The book of margins* references, as its touchstone, the horror of Auschwitz, *THE BOOK OF HOLES* concerns itself primarily with an earlier, arguably less infamous tragedy – the South African War of 1899–1902 (otherwise known as the ‘Anglo-Boer War’ or simply ‘Boer War’ – as cited in the UK National Archives reference above).

At the heart of both – Auschwitz and the South African War – lies the distressing fact of lives senselessly lost in concentration camps. But this is also where the correlation ends, for the concentration camps of the South African War were not intentionally genocidal. (To what extent they were *unintentionally* genocidal is a matter of debate.)

The essay approaches its topic through the lens of “camp mythology”: a term coined by Elizabeth van Heyningen (2013:1–22) to denote how particular, skewed conceptions of the South African War concentration camps came to be accepted as ‘fact’. As Van Heyningen (2013:8) notes, the mythology of the camps was prefaced on exclusion – “of men, of blacks and of dissidents”. In effect, it ratified a history full of holes and unacknowledged silences (“the dried blood of the wound”).

In addressing itself to these absences, **the essay** seeks not to fill them (via a problematic revisionism), but to interrogate more broadly the link between history writing and mythology, drawing on Roland Barthes’s (1972:143) conception of myth:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.

This type of ‘flattening’ is designed precisely to smooth over omissions and exclusions, presenting a version of events that is seamless, streamlined, self-evident and coherent. It is history “whitewashed”, to cite Emily Jacir and Susan Buck-Morss (2011:35), cleansed “of that which is truly terrifying: ambiguity”.

Holes in History (Testimony)

In ‘weighing up’ the holes in history (in *this* history, specifically), **the essay** must wrestle with the difficulty of proffering meaningful commentary: how does one approach the topic of a past so fraught and contested? For it is also a history full of *pain*, mythologised to perpetuate pain. Almost since their inception, there have been numerous attempts to ‘tell the truth’ of the South African War concentration camps, successively ballasting and unmooring this ‘history’.

At this point, as ‘author’, I am compelled to declare a vested interest: a great-grandmother who survived the Winburg Concentration Camp (but buried four of her children there). So it is ‘my’ past too, an uncomfortable fact for an Anglicised Afrikaner.

*Four decades after the war, my great-grandmother wrote a memoir recounting her capture and internment – a personal narrative addressed to her surviving children. I searched her memoir for clues about my heritage, and found a private voice of suffering couched in a rhetoric of uncanny familiarity: her story is at once heartbreakingly sincere and tellingly generic, covering the same old ground as a plethora of women's testimonies ("the loss of home, the maltreatment of livestock, the brutality of British troops, the heartlessness of the camp staff, the discomfort of camp life, the poor quality of meat, the deaths of the children", and so forth (Van Heyningen 2013:15–16)). Although it moved me to tears, I am obliged to concede that my great-grandmother's memoir is quite **unexceptional** (but even to admit this seems like some sort of betrayal).*

Van Heyningen (2013:15) notes that the use of women's testimonies "as evidence for the trauma of the camps" was introduced by pro-Boer social reformer Emily Hobhouse, who encouraged Boer women "to tell their own stories" for the benefit of English audiences. Hobhouse insisted that these testimonies "told the unvarnished truth", implicitly espousing the view that testimony signals "a privileged mode of access to the past" (Grace 2012:108). According to this view, as summarised by Ernst van Alphen (1997:25),

Best of all is the diary, because the writing of the diary all but coincides with the events of which testimony is given. The memoir ranks a good second in the hierarchy of genres. Although it was not written at the time of the event, and has therefore lost some of the diary's temporal connectedness, it is nevertheless direct in that it is told by someone who witnessed the events 'in person'. The fact that witness and narrator are identical provides trustworthiness and authenticity to the testimony.

Van Alphen (1997:25) discredits this naïve apprehension, arguing that "the experience of events is not 'naked' or factual at all; it cannot, in fact, be separated from the act of interpretation". In other words, "the experience of history depends on cultural and narrative frames", which inevitably mediate what and how the witness sees and remembers. Annie Coombes (2003:8) similarly suggests that, "all memory is unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness and shared social processes".

Seen in this light, all testimonies are necessarily selective and exclusionary. This is particularly the case where trauma impedes memory; where, as Joan Gibbons (2007:74) suggests, "the magnitude of extreme trauma is so great that it can only ever be partially told". Dominick LaCapra (2004:117–119) describes trauma as a "radically disorientating experience" often involving a "dissociation between cognition and affect". As such, unresolved trauma is intrinsically "aporetic": "one typically can represent numbly or with aloofness what one cannot feel, and one feels overwhelmingly what one is unable to represent". In essence, the traumatic experience is and remains elusive. Attempts to render it intelligible "through a harmonizing or fetishistic narrative", though prosaically offering closure, merely mask the holes in comprehension by means of a "retrospective 'suturing'" (LaCapra 2004:119).

*Several theorists (following Freud) have also commented on the 'belatedness' of traumatic memory. For Gibbons (2007:74), "recall of a traumatic event may not be admitted to the consciousness until a safe period of time after its occurrence, signalling the unpreparedness of the person/s involved at the time of its occurrence and their consequent inability to integrate the experience". In this scenario, the traumatic present would register as a blind-spot on the psyche, not just unsayable but **unseeable**, at least initially.*

I think of my great-grandmother, holding her tongue for forty-one years before committing words to her memories (and then writing with such vivid immediacy – as if the events she describes happened yesterday).

Holes in History (Mythology)

The essay goes on to examine how camp mythology was vindicated and sustained by ‘memory work’: by the transmission of testimonies evincing a ‘collective memory’, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, by practices of public memorialisation, as a means of actively remembering (and maintaining) the mythologised past.

By the 1930s, suggests Van Heyningen (2013:19), “the mythology of the camps was so firmly established that any attempt to offer an alternative perspective or question the received wisdom was met with suspicion”. At the same time, “stories of British atrocities were developed and embroidered”, and “Afrikaner writing became increasingly embittered” (Van Heyningen 2013:19). Van Heyningen cites Sarah Raal’s memoir, *Met die boere in die veld* (1937), as a case in point. Replete with “lurid descriptions of suffering in the camps”, it galvanised readers with the contention that “ground glass and vitriol were put into the sugar” (Van Heyningen 2013:19). Denials of such atrocities “served only to fuel Afrikaner nationalist anger that former inmates of the camps should be considered liars” (Van Heyningen 2013:20).

That same decade saw “the foundational event of Afrikaner nationalism – the Great Trek of 1838” celebrated across the country (Coombes 2003:26). Festivities included elaborate reconstructions of the Trek, and culminated in the laying of the foundation stone of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria in December 1938: “the centrepiece of an orchestrated mass spectacle of Afrikaner unity and power” (Coombes 2003:25).

This is the ‘frame’ within which my great-grandmother sat down to tap her memory and write her memoir in the early 1940s. It is against this backdrop, within a milieu of heightened Afrikaner patriotism and anti-British sentiment, that she set pen to paper.

Admittedly, her memoir was not intended for public dissemination (unlike Sarah Raal’s). Nor does it read as overtly embittered or embellished (no mention of ground glass and vitriol). But it seems fair to say that her writing must have been influenced by the stories and sentiments doing the rounds – indeed, that her very recollection of what had occurred must have been tainted by the “cultural and narrative frames” within which she found herself. As Van Alphen (1997:63) puts it (citing James Young): “The motives of memory are never pure.”

Alongside women’s testimonies, the mythology of the camps was also entrenched through visual imagery – in particular, photographs taken in the camps purporting to show starving children – and through a fixation with the numbers and names of the white dead (“as if sheer numbers and names would in themselves establish and confirm the atrocity of the camps” (Van Heyningen 2013:17)). Shortly after the war, the numbers of Boer casualties were inscribed in stone on the *Vrouemonument* (Women’s Monument) in Bloemfontein: 4,177 women and 22,074 children. In the 1960s, inscriptions in stone extended to individual names, and granite memorials listing the dead were erected in most of the Boer concentration camp cemeteries.

The fact that no comparable numbers and/or granite memorials existed to account for the lives lost in the black concentration camps is incriminating and indicative, itself in keeping with a 'camp mythology' that usurped the concentration camps of the South African War as exclusive to Afrikaner history. Van Heyningen mentions a single memorial to black victims erected at Brandfort at the time of the war's centenary (1999–2002). Thinly veiled as conciliatory, even the motives of this 'gesture' seem suspect: it was intended to unite "black and white" as "common victims of Britain's brutality" shortly after the African National Congress's accession to power (Van Heyningen 2013:321–322).

What does one do with this lacuna? In early 2012, my father and I visited the site of the Winburg Concentration Camp cemetery and commemorative wall. I wanted to put myself in the landscape that my great-grandmother writes about. I wanted to feel the names, engraved in granite, of the four De Jager children buried there. We had to drive through a rubbish dump to get to the cemetery; cattle grazed amongst the gravestones, most of which had been pillaged and vandalised. It struck me that this place, this commemorative wall with its (white Afrikaner) names, was itself becoming a lacuna of sorts: a no-go zone that the present negotiates its way around. We had been advised to stay away – because the site is 'unsafe' – but we went there anyway (just after dawn). I wandered around feeling lost and uneasy, as if out-of-synch both spatially and temporally.

(It occurred to me that, despite my bloodline, I am not quite 'at home' in this history, any more than this history seems 'at home' in contemporary Winburg.)

Holes in History (Orthodoxy)

Jacir and Buck-Morss (2011:35) regard the notion of collective memory with evident suspicion. They describe a process whereby individual stories of the remembered past become collectivised, whitewashed, stripped of ambiguity, and turned into legend. When legends are "appropriated by power and fixed to objects", they solidify into orthodoxy – "setting the parameters of right belief" and policing "how the past is to be read" (Jacir & Buck-Morss 2011:35). In turn, "history enters the magic circle of political theology: right belief legitimates power, which legitimates right belief" (Jacir & Buck-Morss 2011:35).

In response, **the essay** considers how the formation of camp mythology may be seen to mimic this process: how a "founding body of stories and ideas" came to acquire an ineluctable "scared meaning" (Van Heyningen 2013:2). The orthodoxy of this mythic past was underwritten not only by popular history (folklore, poetry, music, commemoration and so forth) but also by Afrikaner *volksgeskiedenis* – a branch of scholarship supposedly wedded to 'objective-scientific' truth but in fact heavily ideological ("a history infused with Romantic notions of God-fearing, intrepid nineteenth-century pioneers, great visionary leaders and loyal followers who, despite trials and tribulations, established a 'civilized' form of government in the interior", as summarised by Albert Grundlingh (cited in Van Heyningen 2013:20)).

According to Jacir and Buck-Morss (2011:35), "Orthodox remembrance is capable of performing murder on the material world ... Collective memory becomes conformism. Anyone who remembers differently is suspect".

"Doors lock from the outside", they conclude.

Holes in History (Anarchy)

On the one hand, then, **the essay** interrogates how tentative stories solidify into oppressive orthodoxy. In presenting themselves as comprehensive and self-evident, orthodox historical narratives mask the lacunae and contradictions upon which they are erected, aggressively stifling the voices of ‘anyone who remembers differently’.

But on the other hand, **the essay** also investigates the counter-impulse towards erasure operative in any orthodoxy: the slow undoing of certitude; the wearing-thin of evidence; the dismantling impetus of time and forgetting.

(Think of memorials taken over by garbage dumps.)

Antoinette Burton (2005:2) identifies the archive as “a site of knowledge production, an arbiter of truth, and a mechanism for shaping the narratives of history”. Comprising “traces of the past collected either intentionally or haphazardly as ‘evidence’” (Burton 2005:3), archives are often aligned with orthodox remembrance: “they come into being in and as history as a result of specific political, cultural, and socioeconomic pressures”. As such, archives are also inevitably “documents of exclusion” (Burton 2005:6), themselves incomplete and full of holes.

But if the sanction of orthodoxy maintains the partial archive (using its powers to govern access and to destroy potentially injurious records), then the threat of its collapse is also what renders archives precarious – as ruptures in the status quo reverberate through the halls of records, and books go up in smoke. Jacir and Buck-Morss (2011:37) contend that archives survive “by chance”, in a context where “disappearance is the rule”:

Annihilation is the fate of whole cities, obliterating far more of the human record than is preserved. Wars and disasters of nature are indifferent destroyers. Human intention is at work as well. Heresy, degeneracy, blasphemy, treason, disbelief – these are just some of the threats to orthodoxy that call for destruction of the human record.

I am reminded of Jabès's (1993:42) suggestions that “reading a text involves several degrees of violence”. 8 October 2015 – I am seated at desk 33C in the UK National Archives Reading Room, engaged in minor violence. It is a sunny autumn day in London and dappled light falls from the slanted windows across my desk. I am taking in the smell and texture of old paper, the sound of brittle folios as I page. Even before I register what I am looking at, my body absorbs these sense impressions.

Even left to their own devices (untouched by destructive human intention), archives necessarily gravitate towards erasure. They are temporal and unstable: as tenuous, in many ways, as memory.

But arguably it is precisely here, in their incompleteness and brittleness, that archives may be seen to ‘speak’ – not about the timeless truths of history, but, on the contrary, about “the limits of what is thinkable and sayable” (Merewether 2006a:17). To engage with archives in this way – against the grain of the search for

presence – is to embrace a process, as artist Renée Green (2006:49) does, that involves “the probing of inbetween spaces, which can appear to be holes, aporias, absences”:

For example between what is said and what can be comprehended; between an event and its re-interpretation; ... between organizing systems and their confounding; between what is seen and what is believed; between what is heard and what is felt.

This approach would necessitate interpreting the “gaps and absences” in archives as “a form of evidence, but evidence of their own ... incompleteness” (Merewether 2006b:135). In many respects, it aligns with Dori Laub’s conviction (as elucidated by Hirsch & Spitzer 2010:401) that the value of testimony lies not in its historical veracity, but in what it might disclose “about the *meaning* of an event, and about the process of its recall in the present”. Testimony matters (as does the archive), precisely *because of* its probable inconsistencies, factual inaccuracies and gaps.

By extension, apprehending history with and through its lacunae engenders an “enlarged notion of truth”, which stresses “aspects of historical experience that are subjective, submerged, even silent” (Hirsch & Spitzer 2010:401). It breathes new life into the mythologised past – in part, by recognising history itself as unstable and “in transit” (LaCapra 2004:1). In the process, it also recognises the inadequacy of language to ‘give voice’ to the vicissitudes of experience, without relegating the witness to a space of either positivistic recall or interminable silence. It enables us to speak our history with wounded words.

In this sense (and in tentative conclusion), THE BOOK OF HOLES (**the essay**) aspires to model itself on the example set by Jabès (1993:106), whereby “making a book could mean exchanging the *void of writing* for *writing the void*”.

Postscript (some reflections on a methodology, after the fact)

One of the anonymous reviewers of this chapter concluded his/her report with the following provocation: “If there is a hole in something, what has happened to the bit that was taken out of that something, to make what is perceived to be a hole? In a grave, for example, what happens to the dirt that is ‘displaced’ by the insertion of the coffin?”

In many ways, this postscript speaks to that uncanny remainder – the displaced dirt of the grave. Like all postscripts, it directs itself to the question of leftovers, of loose ends and afterthoughts, of inelegant excess. It aspires to offer an ending-post-ending, with which to corral the wayward aspirations of imprecise ideas (no, that’s *not* what I mean, the postscript implores the reader-reviewer, insistently).

That the history of the South African War is conflicted, unresolved, ambiguous and full of holes goes (largely) without saying. So what indeed *might* one say about this tragic past, beyond a banal admission of its complexity? How might one begin to (re)think and (re)write and (re)figure the war, without lapsing into the positivism it so patently resists? For the more avidly I research my subject, the more resolutely its ‘truth’ refuses to disclose itself (although its horror is everywhere in evidence).

Perhaps, like all traumatic pasts, this particular past is itself a displaced remainder; a mound of excavated

earth that refuses to be sublimated back into the grave. The operations of history – digging, unearthing and burying; digging, unearthing and burying again – conjure melancholic dust clouds but cannot lay the past to rest. “History ... is unfinished in the sense that the future always uses its past in new ways”, says historian Peter Gay (cited in Antze & Lambek 1996:xi). Yesterday is old soil, turned over (and over) again.

Taking the ‘unfinished’ nature of history as my starting point, my approach is to work with and through the past’s inconclusiveness, rather than against it. In this respect, I draw impetus from self-confessed epistemic sceptic Alan Munslow (2010:213), who apprehends history as an elaborate confabulation, “not the past resurrected”. For Munslow (2010:3-4), the past is fundamentally unknowable – indeed it “does not exist ... *before* it is ‘(hi)storied’” – and this renders the romance of ‘objective’ history untenable. “We cannot be ‘in touch’ with the past in any way that is unmediated by historiography, language, emplotment, voice, ideology, perspective or physical and/or mental states of tiredness, ennui and so on”, he insists; “there is no possibility of bringing the past back to the present” (Munslow 2010:36).

And yet, for Munslow, this state of affairs is neither distressing nor lamentable. Instead, the recognition that we construct “the-past-as-history” liberates one to consciously produce “the-past-as-history-as-artwork”, a “fictive, self-conscious, subjective-emotional, imaginative and carefully authored expression” (Munslow 2010:viii, 127, 138). It enables a way of ‘doing history’ marked by “a healthy undecidability” (Munslow 2010:7), an open-endedness that is ‘healthy’ precisely because the ‘history artwork’ declares its creative licence (its holes and embellishments; its inevitable agendas). “In one sense”, ventures Munslow (2010:139), “the most responsible attitude of the future historian is to acknowledge that history is always about morphing the past”.

But this responsibility is not to be taken lightly. In the absence of those outmoded ballasts, “objectivity and the correspondence theory of truth” (Munslow 2010:5, 7), the history artwork is about far more than “understanding defined as comprehension”; it is also about “discernment, sympathy, empathy, and the historian’s ethical choices” – qualities which Munslow deems essential if history is to be “emancipatory, liberating and socially valuable beyond the confines of empiricism and inference of likely meaning”.

In short, like all artworks worth their weight, the history artwork has both the capacity and responsibility to produce an affective ‘jolt’, one that “does not so much reveal truth as thrust us involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry” (Bennett 2005:11). In the process, it does not delimit thought by dictating the ‘truth’ of what has been; rather it entails a creative, responsible, ethically aware envisaging of the past that opens up future interpretative engagements.

In this sense, then, the history artwork always *proposes*, intimating that the perplexing task of looking back can and should redirect us forwards, towards the limitless potentialities of a history forever in the making.

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