haunting legacies

violent histories and transgenerational trauma

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VIOLENT HISTORIES AND
TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Gabriele Schwab

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Preface

In the summer of 2003, I wrote the essay titled "Haunting Legacies: Trauma in Children of Perpetrators." At the time, I did not plan a book, but the topic took over. For several years, I had already felt the urgency to write about my growing up in Germany after WWII. I was in training analysis at the time and in the process of dealing in depth with having grown up in the wake of one of the most atrocious genocides in history. I needed further to explore what it meant to me as a child to live in post-war Germany, especially after finding out about the Holocaust in the early years of high school. After September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003, it became more pressing to deal with violent histories, not only of my home country but also more generally. For the first time I felt like a bystander, a position I had harshly condemned in the German war generation. I needed to face the violence committed by the United States, my country of residence, which had been my home for more than twenty years. It no longer seemed enough to march for peace carrying a sign that read "Not in our Name!" or to wear blue stickers with the names of people recently disappeared under the Bush administration. I realized that in my own case, doing more first meant dealing with the legacy of violence I had inherited. This is why the Holocaust

and Germany are at the center of *Haunting Legacies*, but I hope that my interspersed reflections on other violent histories such as colonialism and slavery demonstrate that my main theoretical explorations and arguments are pertinent to violent histories and transgenerational haunting more generally.

Three of my colleagues and close friends had a particularly strong impact on *Haunting Legacies*, and their work provides the material for some of the chapters: Ruth Kluger, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Simon J. Ortiz. Ruth Kluger, a child survivor of the Holocaust, began writing her memoir *Weiterleben* (*Still Alive*) in the wake of an episode of heart failure after which her doctors gave her only a few more years to live. While Kluger's memoir, on which I draw in several chapters, deals with living in the wake of the Holocaust, writing also *became* her way of living on in the wake of a medical death sentence. This happened about two decades ago, and Ruth is still alive and as vital as ever. Her book, our many talks, and her joyful energy and resilient spirit have inspired me deeply.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work, especially his theoretical essays and his prison diary, strongly shaped my thinking on the mental effects of violent histories. *Decolonizing the Mind* and *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, in particular, were invaluable to my thinking about the psychic life of colonization, imprisonment, and torture. Ngũgĩ's writing and personal life unfailingly convey what matters most: never to give up or lose hope, ever. Ngũgĩ's friendship and intellectual support continue to nourish my work.

Simon J. Ortiz and I met in 2003 at a conference organized by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o at the International Center for Writing and Translation. Soon after we began working on *Children of Fire, Children of Water*, a composition of dialogical memory pieces in which we narrate and reflect upon our different violent histories. We juxtapose and interweave stories about growing up under the continued colonization of the Acoma people and in war-torn postwar Germany. Writing down my childhood stories sharpened my theoretical reflections. Simon's unfailing support and encouragement carried me through times when writing became emotionally hard. Often I felt again what I felt as a child, namely, that I was "a girl without words." This new insecurity is linked to the fact that in writing *Haunting Legacies* I could no longer separate the personal from the theoretical. Reflecting my own history in Simon

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Ortiz's very different history made me see the familiar in a fresh way. In many ways, *Children of Fire, Children of Water* and *Haunting Legacies* are companion pieces for me.

Working on *Children of Fire, Children of Water* also inspired me to include personal vignettes in *Haunting Legacies* that reflect my subject position and transferential relationship to the material. I could not have anticipated that the time of working on these projects would be one of unusual, if not uncanny, personal turbulence and trauma. I feel that the book was conceived when we buried my mother on September 11, 2001, because it was after my return from Germany to the United States that I began writing about growing up in postwar Germany. I continue to hesitate about disclosing this personal underpinning, but I cannot ignore that some personal experiences during that time became so crucial to the writing itself that it would be a disavowal not to mention them. Writing about my German legacy in the midst of new violent histories and personal trauma was a way of coping and going on.

The past five years have been filled with more violence and trauma than any other period in my life. In 2004, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Njeeri wa Ngũgĩ, two of my closest friends, were brutally attacked upon their first return to their home country, Kenya, after twenty-two years of Ngũgĩ's exile. In 2004, Jacques Derrida lost his battle with cancer; Renée Hubert followed him in 2005. Both had been my colleagues and friends at the University of California at Irvine for two decades. Last year, my mentor and friend of forty years, Wolfgang Iser, fell in the street and died from the head wound he incurred. Finally, on July 15, 2008, I learned that my colleague Lindon Barrett, with whom I shared a beautiful friendship for eighteen years, was murdered in his home. The trauma of a murder leaves a haunting legacy that I find hard to accept, let alone be at peace with. Lindon's dedication in my copy of *Blackness and Value* reads: "Gaby, here's to our long and rich friendship—intellectual and otherwise. And here's to many more years. Love and Mischief, Lindon." We only had nine more years, but *Haunting Legacies* bears the invisible traces of our exchanges during those years.

I dedicate *Haunting Legacies* to my son, Leon. Only a few weeks after I began writing on this project, Leon experienced a major trauma that took over our family's lives for years. Diagnosed with PTSD and major depression, Leon was briefly hospitalized. The day after I brought him to the hospital, I learned that my brother had died suddenly and

unexpectedly of heart failure at age forty-six. The most important insights into trauma came from Leon, who taught me more than he will ever know. From him I also learned about resilience and survival. As I saw him reclaim his life, I understood more deeply than ever before why we need to respond to violent histories with an uncompromising fight for and affirmation of life at every turn. Leon's path to recovery, his quiet persistence and wisdom gained from his experience have shaped this book in so many ways that he has truly become a part of it.

Irvine, September 23, 2009

Acknowledgments

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Last, but not least, I thank my family and those I consider my extended elective family for their encouragement and dedication to my work and for providing a holding environment when I needed it: first

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Three chapters of *Haunting Legacies* were previously published and appear here in revised or expanded form. Chapter 2, "Writing Against Memory and Forgetting," appeared in *Literature and Medicine* 25, no. 1 (2006): 95–121. Chapter 3, "Haunting Legacies: Trauma in Children of Perpetrators," appeared in *Postcolonial Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004): 177–95. Chapter 5, "Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss," appeared in a shorter version in *American Imago* vol. 66, no. 3 (2009): 277–310. I thank the journals for granting me permission to reprint the essays.

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chapter one

Introduction

Where there is no grave, we are condemned to go on mourning.
—Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive*

It is the children's or descendants' lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others.
—Nicolas Abraham, *The Shell and the Kernel*

Our innocence had been replaced by fear and we had become monsters. There was nothing we could do about it.
—Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone*

The epigraphs borrowed from Ruth Kluger, Nicolas Abraham, and Ishmael Beah raise the question of how both victims and perpetrators pass on the ineradicable legacies of violent histories through generations. The transmission of violent legacies by far exceeds the passing on of historical knowledge or even of stories with thick descriptions of personal involvement. What I call "haunting legacies" are things hard to recount or even to remember, the results of a violence that holds an unrelenting grip on memory yet is deemed unspeakable. The psychic core of violent histories includes what has been repressed or buried in unreachable psychic recesses. The legacies of violence not only haunt the actual victims but also are passed on through the generations. Nicolas Abraham envisions a *crypt* in which people bury unspeakable events or unbearable, if not disavowed, losses or injuries incurred during violent histories. It is as if in this psychic tomb they harbor an undead ghost. According to Abraham, under normal circumstances a person mourns a loss by *introjecting* the lost person or object. Introjection facilitates integration into the psychic fabric. By contrast, a person who refuses to mourn *incorporates* the lost object by disavowing the loss, thus keeping the object "alive" inside. Incorporation is a defensive operation based

on a denial of loss. In a fusion of boundaries, the ego comes to identify and merge with the lost object. As Diana Fuss argues in *Identification Papers*, the person who refuses to mourn becomes like the living dead.[1]

Designed to circumvent mourning, a crypt buries a lost person or object or even a disavowed part of oneself or one's history, while keeping it psychically alive. "Where there is no grave, we are condemned to go on mourning,"[2] says Ruth Kluger. But what happens when we build a grave within ourselves? While we can foreclose mourning by burying the dead in our psyche, those dead will return as ghosts. Violent histories have a haunting quality even before their legacy is passed on to the next generation. In his memoirs of his time as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah describes being assaulted by intrusive memories and thoughts as if they were hostile alien forces coming from outside: "I spent most of my time fighting myself mentally in order to avoid thinking about what I had seen or wondering where my life was going, where my family and friends were. . . . I became restless and was afraid to sleep for fear that my suppressed thoughts would appear in my dreams."[3]

Traumatic memories come in flashbacks or nightmares. They come in the memories of the body and its somatic enactments. Traumatic memories entrap us in the prison house of repetition compulsion. To the extent that we are successful in banning thoughts and memories, we become a body in pain, leading a somatic existence severed from consciously or affectively lived history. Trauma disrupts relationality or is, as Bion calls it, an attack on "the capacity for linking," and ultimately an attack on thought itself.[4] Beah tries to stop or drown out thought itself to keep psychic pain away, but the pain only migrates into the body, into splitting headaches, as his head becomes almost literally a tomb for the staging of a theater of dead voices: "I did not want to show my friends the pain I felt from my headache. In my mind's eye I would see sparks of flame, flashes of scenes I had witnessed, and the agonizing voices of children and women would come alive in my head. I cried quietly as my head beat like the clapper of a bell."[5]

How do we deal with a haunting past while simultaneously acting in the present, with its own ongoing violence? Is the politics of mourning advocated by psychoanalysis adequate after catastrophic events? And is mourning, indeed, as psychoanalysis and trauma theory would have it, a precondition for moving beyond violence and avoiding repetition?

Haunting Legacies is concerned with what happens to psychic life in the wake of unbearable violence and focuses on irresolvable, impossible, or refused mourning of losses that occurred under catastrophic circumstances. Warfare and genocide, as well as more individual violent acts such as torture and rape, are liminal experiences that bring us to the abyss of human abjection. These violent acts cause soul murder and social death. No other species tortures or wages war. No other species pursues soul murder for the sake of pleasure. Torture and rape, the two most prominent forms of soul murder, eradicate psychic time because time cannot heal the victim's suffering in the same way time heals other wounds. Similarly, the trauma experienced after catastrophic losses, such as the violent death of a loved one, annihilates a shared sense of time and forecloses proper mourning. Victims fall into a melancholia that embraces death-in-life. Where there is no grave, one cannot mourn properly; one remains forever tied to a loss that never becomes real. Violent histories generate psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation across the divide of victims and perpetrators. No one can completely escape the ravages of war or the dehumanizing effects of atrocities, not even those perpetrators who seem to have escaped unscathed or those who frantically rebuild their lives, their cities, and their nations. The damages of violent histories can hibernate in the unconscious, only to be transmitted to the next generation like an undetected disease.

Haunting Legacies explores the psychic life of violent histories as translated into and recreated in literary texts, memoirs, and creative nonfiction. Occasionally, I draw on my own memories of growing up in West Germany after World War II under French occupation as a framework or trigger for my theoretical reflections.[6] I use these memories as markers of my own positionality within the project. Theoretically, I use psychoanalysis and trauma theory as well as other critical, cultural and social theories and philosophies that work toward understanding fascism, colonialism, war, and genocide—or even more specific and widespread forms of violence such as torture, rape, and humiliation. I draw on critics who think the psychological, the political, and the social together, including a wide range of critical theories by Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, Frantz Fanon, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Achille Mbembe, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o—to name just a few. I treat

these theories as heuristic tools and literature as empirical data gleaned from the creative reworking and translation of experiences. Fictional and autobiographical texts thus gain primacy as tools to challenge theories and push toward their refinement, if not revision.

Among the theories that most influenced this project are Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theories of psychic haunting, transgenerational trauma, and the crypt. In this context, I also draw on Jacques Derrida's elaboration of Abraham and Torok in "Fors," where he develops a concept of cryptonymy, that is, a traumatic designification of language to ward off intolerable pain. The creation of cryptic enclaves in language marks the traces of refused mourning. They appear, so to speak, as the linguistic scars of trauma and are not unlike the tombs in psychic life that bury the lost person or object but refuse to acknowledge the death. Live burials of sorts, these crypts in the psyche and in language contain the secrets of violent histories, the losses, violations, and atrocities that must be denied. "Doubtless the Self *does* identify . . . but in an 'imaginary, occult' way, with the lost object, with its 'life beyond the grave,'"[7] writes Derrida. The traces this endocryptic identification leaves in language can only be deciphered, de-crypted in a symptomatic reading, mindful of a secret in language. For Derrida, cryptographic writing is fractured writing that always "marks an effect of impossible or refused mourning."[8]

Language, Derrida asserts, inhabits the crypt in the form of words buried alive, that is, defunct words relieved of their communicative function.[9] Traumatic silences and gaps in language are, if not mutilations and distortions of the signifying process, ambivalent attempts to conceal. But indirectly, they express trauma otherwise shrouded in secrecy or relegated to the unconscious. Cryptographic writing can bear the traces of the transgenerational memory of something never experienced firsthand by the one carrying the secret. It is the children or descendants, Abraham insists, who will be haunted by what is buried in this tomb, even if they do not know of its existence or contents and even if the history that produced the ghost is shrouded in silence. Often the tomb is a familial one, organized around family secrets shared by parents and perhaps grandparents but fearfully guarded from the children. It is through the unconscious transmission of disavowed familial dynamics that one generation affects another generation's unconscious.

This unconscious transmission is what Abraham defines as the dynamic of transgenerational haunting.

In *Haunting Legacies*, I approach violent histories from the perspective of diverse practices of transgenerational writing, including literature, memoirs, and testimonies. By drawing on both autobiographical and fictional modes of writing about violent histories, I hope to open up a double perspective on haunted writing. Memoirs often bear the traces, gaps, and lacunae of trauma like raw scars; fiction, poetry, and film can create a more protected space to explore the effects of violence from within multiple voices embedded in imagined daily lives. Since I am concerned with transgenerational haunting, I place second-generation narratives about the Holocaust at the center. In this respect, the book is part of my own process of coming to terms with being born in West Germany in the wake of the Holocaust. German American writer Sabine Reichel emphatically states: "I . . . hated Germany. I hated being German."[10] Reichel's statement could have been my own. Most of my life, I hated being German. When I tried to bring up the topic of the Holocaust at home, my parents called me a "*Nestbeschmutzer*," a term referring to a bird that soils its own nest. The first time I tried to write about my experiences of growing up in postwar Germany was in high school after I learned about the Holocaust. The urge to pursue this project has been on my mind ever since, but like most Germans of my generation, I was for a long time too scared and in other ways not yet ready to face the challenge. For decades, I couldn't bring myself to come near the topic. It was too close to a home that was not home. Of course, this avoidance was also an involuntary participation in Germany's silencing of the Holocaust, and as such an unwitting collusion with the parental generation. I can now see the kind of public and personal silencing I experienced, and the censoring of my own voice, as a form of magical thinking in which, rather than conjuring and believing in a wishful reality, one attempts to make something unbearable simply go away.

It is no coincidence that the origins of this book coincide with the beginning of my training in psychoanalysis. In the first session of my training analysis, my analyst asked me: "If you were to name one prominent goal you want to reach in this analysis, what would it be?" Without hesitation I answered: "Writing a book about what it meant to grow

up in Germany after the war." I utterly surprised myself with my own answer. For all practical purposes, I had given up this project a long time ago when I found myself incapable of living up to the challenge. It was certainly not foremost on my mind, at least not consciously so. But I could not ignore my spontaneous answer and had to take this step in my own long process of coming to terms with my legacy. As I write about memoirs and literature, I am also following the traces of the violent history passed down to me in vicarious ways.

Obviously, for the descendants of both victims and perpetrators there is no innocent way to approach the personal legacies of violence. There is no way to escape the traps of writing about violent histories, especially since we live in a culture that routinely commodifies representations of violence. Critics have exposed the fallacies of a wound culture or an involuntary attachment to injurious states as well as the fallacies of seemingly exculpating narratives of perpetration.[11] At the same time, we know that silence is not an option. Perhaps the only way to avoid the fixation on past violence and injuries is to bring their traces into the present. Focusing on traumatic history often seems to release us from the present. We can ignore the violent histories that unfold before our very eyes when we are fixated on the past. I therefore decided not to focus exclusively on German history, but rather also to reflect on my engagement with this legacy through other histories of violence that reach into the present. I have lived in the United States for twenty-five years now. I had always wanted to leave Germany, but only in the 1980s when I took an academic position in the United States did I realize this wish. Now I am deeply immersed in this country's cultural life, including the contradictions and the violence that I witness on a daily basis. I sometimes think that I was born in the most violent country of that time, and ran away only to arrive in one of the most violent countries today. With the invasion of Iraq, I began to understand what it meant to feel like a bystander to a senseless war. Writing about histories of violence counters some of the helplessness I have experienced in the face of the violence committed by my new home country, the wars it has waged and continues to wage, and the global destruction of our planet for which it is responsible in disproportionate ways. Writing helps, but it is not enough. Writing is but a gentle nudge for those who struggle with the experience of living in today's violent world.

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