



Saying the unsayable: Imagining reconciliation in Gail Jones's *Sorry*

Valérie-Anne Belleflamme

Université de Liège

In her novel *Sorry* (2007), Australian novelist and essayist Gail Jones engages in a reflection on the ethics of reconciliation. Written in response to her wish to acknowledge the debt to the Stolen Generations, *Sorry* offers new possibilities of ethical mourning, allowing the dead to return and the voiceless to speak. This article explores the ways in which Jones not only fashions a narrative that bypasses the unsayable dimension of Australia's history and the representational difficulties inherent in trauma but also fosters the empathetic imagination through a metadiscursive discussion of the act of reading. Self-referentiality and self-reflexivity are also examined, as they allow Jones to draw attention to her novel's writerly elaborations and offer an alternative to standard reconciliation practices.

Keywords: Gail Jones, *Sorry*, silence, representation, metatextuality.

Département des langues et littératures modernes
Bât. A2 Littérature anglaise moderne et littérature américaine
Place Cockerill 3-5
4000 Liège
Belgique

Valerie-Anne.Belleflamme@ulg.ac.be

1 Introduction

“The novel”, in Australian novelist and essayist Gail Jones’s own words,¹ “is a place of ethical contemplation and rehearsal, it is a special way of thinking” (Wachtel 2012). It opens up spaces for “empathetic imagination”, through which “we enter into a new mode of thinking about how we relate to other people, how we relate to history, how we imagine other people suffering – if it is possible to imagine other people suffering” (Wachtel 2012). It investigates “what words do when we internalise them and think about them”; it explores different modes of thinking and different modes of saying, “what happens to guilt, what happens to violence within history, how [it is] spoken of or not spoken of, how [it is] known or repressed” (Wachtel 2012). In short, Jones advocates the return to the ethical novel “to tell us something about how to live” (Wachtel 2012).

Jones’s novel *Sorry* was published in 2007. Ten years earlier, in April 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was tabled in the Australian parliament. Enquiring into the forcible removal of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, this report included numerous Aboriginal testimonies documenting the emotional and physical suffering of “The Stolen Generation”. It then challenged the existing national history of Australia and its historiography by not only publicising the previously silenced Aboriginal history but also by giving Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders a voice to speak, thus favouring a rewriting of Australian history, one that would include the hitherto silenced history of the Aborigines. In addition, the *Bringing Them Home* report requested a national apology. At the time Jones wrote her novel, the Aboriginal community was thus waiting for a formal apology to be delivered by the government. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s formal apology was eventually given on 13

¹ “Five Bells with Novelist Gail Jones.” Interview by Eleanor Wachtel. *Writers and Company*. CBC Radio, 2012.

February 2008, that is, about one year after the publication of Jones's novel. *Sorry* thus predates the apology and in a sense fits into a pattern of "minor" apologies – such as black armbands worn by footballers; public walks organized as "gestures of healing" and Sorry Books signed all over the country – given in the absence of a proper national apology. These minor apologies were offered by guilt-afflicted settler Australians who felt that the legitimacy of their own nation had been compromised by the recent revelations. In consequence, in the opinion of Gooder and Jacobs, "it would seem that for many non-indigenous participants in the Sorry Events it was the *performance* of the apology that was centrally important. One had to be seen to be saying sorry" (Gooder and Jacobs 2000: 242; authors' emphasis), so that "the apology is as much an act of narcissistic will and desire as of humility and humanity", since it would require forgiveness "to eradicate the consequences of the offence and restore some form of social harmony" (Gooder and Jacobs 2000: 244). In other words, this acceptance of inherited responsibility may not always have been disinterested, if the object was in part the assuagement of guilt and the restoration of settler legitimacy. One may then be justified in questioning the probity of the sorry people's acts of contrition.

It is my contention that *Sorry* engages in a metatextual discussion of the ethics of reconciliation and cultural contrition. Interestingly enough, Jones claims that *Sorry* has "a political-allegorical aspect – as one would expect, claiming such a title –" but that "it is not centrally concerned with representing the Stolen Generations. As a white Australian, it would be presumptuous to do so and it would risk appropriation of others' painful experience" (Jones 2008: 84). By this comment, Jones thus distances herself from white Australian writers who dealt with the Stolen Generations in a way that seemed to appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences. What is more, she claims that her novel "deals with culpability and the refusal to say 'sorry', the characteristics, as we now know, of a certain type of (persisting) dispossession" (Jones 2008: 84). Also arguing that "the heartwarming Sorry Books [...] ought seriously to be considered within the genre of the poetics of political dissent,

and not as casual or sentimental acts of mere signature” (Jones 2008: 164), Jones seems keen to subvert the stereotypical discursive manifestations of the Australian Reconciliation. In *Sorry*, the act of reading (and writing) gradually and metatextually takes centre stage. This is a book that refers to other books and reflects on itself as a book. It is self-referential and self-reflexive, and draws attention to its own writerly elaborations, made evident through both denotation and connotation, through explicit and implicit modes of narration, in order to emphasize its own status and function as an artifact. In other words, in *Sorry* text, intertext and metatext are intricately interwoven: they serve the purpose of offering another narrative, which operates as a meta-narrative and as an alternative to standard reconciliation practices, with a view to bridging the gap between white Australia’s history and the history of the Aborigines.

2 “This is a story that can only be told in a whisper”: Saying the unsayable

Set in the remote Western Australian outback during the 1930s and 1940s, *Sorry* narrates the story of the sisterly friendship between Perdita Keene, a white girl of settler lineage raised by unloving parents, and Mary, a sixteen-year-old “half-caste” girl of the “Stolen Generations”, who was removed from her family as part of the Australian government’s assimilation policy, raised in a Catholic orphanage and made to live with the Keenes. Together with Billy, the neighbours’ youngest and deaf-mute son, the three children form “their own little tribe” (65) and make up for Perdita’s hostile parental environment. Nicholas Keene, Perdita’s father, is a war-obsessed English anthropologist who goes to Australia with a view to uncovering the mystery of the “elemental man” and who thinks “tribal peoples base, unintelligent and equivalent to children, but also that they h[o]ld in their behaviour and beliefs the origins of sex, aggression and identity. He believe[s] in the British Empire, in its right of governance” (7). As for Perdita’s mother, Stella Grant, she is a Shakespeare-obsessed lunatic: she develops an early obsession with Shakespeare – she finds in his language “the extravagance and elaboration, a

betokening glory, that [is] lacking in her own much-too-common life” (7) – and “a moony passivity, a sort of easy, wandering, dreamy suspension” (8). However, despite the collapse of her spirit, Stella is still domineering, “smug as a cannibal”, “as if she’d just gobbled and swallowed her own daughter” (162). The narrative opens with the scene of Nicholas’s death and with Perdita’s being hushed to silence by Mary – “don’t tell them” (3). Later on, we find out that Nicholas has been stabbed to death, “his back and neck pierced crudely and roughly by a knife” (92) and that Mary stood close by, “stained purple and lurid with Nicholas’s blood”, “look[ing] utterly guilty” (91). In fact, when the police arrive on the crime scene, Mary, whose bruised thighs and neck attest that she has been raped, confesses to the crime. The police also question Perdita but she “says virtually nothing, and seems to have trouble forming words in her mouth” (92). Traumatized by the violence of this murderous act and by Mary’s removal, Perdita develops a psychogenic stutter, “infrequent in its appearance and enigmatic in its cure” (151), which gradually immures her in silence. Added to this, her partial amnesia keeps the identity of the real murderer unknown to herself but also, as she is both the protagonist and the narrator of *Sorry*, to the reader until the penultimate chapter of the book, when, with the help of her speech therapist Doctor Oblov, Perdita recovers speech and memory: “Something had opened, released” (195); it was she who had killed her own father. However, this disclosure will not free Mary from prison, where she will eventually die of appendicitis. It is only after hearing of Mary’s death that Perdita eventually begins to grieve and to apologise: “*I should have said sorry to my sister, Mary. Sorry, my sister, oh my sister, sorry*” (211; author’s emphasis).

In *Sorry*, Perdita keeps wondering why she was “never told anything” and why “adults, always and anyhow, get to make all the decisions” (47), which is reminiscent of Australian historian Henry Reynolds’s personal journal, significantly entitled *Why Weren’t We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History*, in which he criticises the distorted and idealised versions of the past he and generations of Australians grew up with. Perdita

remembers her childhood, too, and “how adults, without asking, made all the decisions. How they claimed to possess all the big questions” and how she dreaded that, should her ruined speech not improve, “she would always be someone, a kind of object, whose face was grabbed, who was assumed to have nothing important to say” (109). Similarities thus exist between Perdita’s treatment by adults and the Aborigines’ treatment by the settler population. In the Australian past, Indigenous peoples used to be patronised by the white settlers and lost any capacity for self-determination, a phenomenon Perdita also faces: “Perdita knew then that in all the negotiations between them, Stella would always take precedence with speech” (129). She further explains that Stella “enjoy[s] her power. She enjoy[s] talking for [her] and finishing the ends of [her] sentences” (151-152). As a result of both her stutter and of being silenced by her mother, Perdita gradually stops speaking at all, which is when she alarmingly notices that “the quieter [she] [becomes], the more others [ignore] [her], the more [she] disappear[s]” (151). Likewise, as part of the country’s unofficial assimilation policy, numerous Aborigines were shunted into reserves while so-called “half-caste” children were taken from their families and placed in institutions to learn the white ways. As the term “stolen” in the phrase “Stolen Generations” not only so rightly but also very sadly connotes, these forced child removals occurred in the name of what Susan Elizabeth Hosking calls her country’s “assimilationist whitewash” (2011), a genocidal discourse seeking to favour the extermination of the Aboriginal race by means of purification. These child abductions met with the acquiescence of some well-informed parts of the settler population, whose professed ignorance of what was being done on its own behalf amounted to a form of silent complicity.

Interestingly enough, the silencing of the Indigenous community in *Sorry* makes itself manifest *through silence*. Ironically perhaps, the novel starts by immediately inviting the reader to be silent and to perk up his or her ears in order to listen to this story “that can only be told in a whisper”:

A whisper: sssshh. The thinnest vehicle of breath. This is a story that can only be told in a whisper. There is a hush to difficult forms of knowing, an abashment, a sorrow, an inclination towards silence. My throat is misshapen with all it now carries. My heart is a sour, indolent fruit. I think the muzzle of time has made me thus, has deformed my mouth, my voice, my wanting to say. (3)

In these few introductory lines, the burden of some unspeakable event is found to have been instrumental in the misshaping of the speaker's throat, and by implication in the shape of the narrative about to be spoken – so that, as of the novel's incipit, self-reflexivity is signalled. This, I argue, functions as a kind of warning for readers, that throughout their reading they need to be attentive to, and perhaps search for, the hushed tone which this story demands and which suggests the existence of some deeper, underlying truth. Indeed, the defining quality of allegorical novels being that the referent of the allegory remains unspoken, Jones makes use of this mode to elaborate a more critical perspective on the subject matter that she wishes to discuss. In other words, it is by circumscribing the “unsayable”² that Jones skilfully manages to attract the reader's attention to the gaping wound/mouth of Australia's history.

3 “How to gather, quietly and honourably, all that is now scattered?”: Representing the unrepresentable

As Michele McCrea rightly puts it, “in the text, ambiguities are rife and absences more telling than presences” (2012: 6). Just consider, by way of illustration, the following excerpt from *Sorry*:

² Haydie Gooder and Jane M. Jacob describe the “unsayable” – a concept adapted from Judith Butler's *The Politics of Excitable Speech*, in which she draws attention to “the kind of speaking that takes place on the borders of the unsayable” (1997: 41) – as an “utterance located on the border between that which feels absolutely necessary to say and that which feels too risky to say” (2000: 231).

There had been ‘disturbances’, the Protector said. There had been casualties. Something hush-hush, apparently. Something unmentionable. Without enquiring what he meant, Nicholas felt assured of the importance of his work, knowing he would report back to agencies of the State.

(12)

This passage suggests, as Julie McGonegal puts it, that “the (post)colonial secret occupies the liminal zone” of the “unsayable” (2009: 71). Indeed McGonegal describes the paradox of secrecy as “a tension between speaking and not-speaking”: “Secrecy is paradoxical insofar as it is only through circulation and dissemination that the secret is constituted as such” (2009: 71). By the same token, Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs regard secrecy in the case of the Australian Aboriginal sacred-secret tradition as “a matter of demonstration or performance”, or as “a dialogic relation [...] between secrecy and publicity”, since “after all, secrets cannot be secrets until they are spoken about as such” (1998: 25). Furthermore, as “knowledge that shifts uneasily between exposition and disclosure”, the secret according to Gelder and Jacob is revealing of the Australian nation’s refusal to speak the silence of colonial genocide (McGonegal 2009: 72). Yet, as McGonegal claims, even if there was on the part of the settler a willingness to speak of the unspeakable, “to name the secret of colonial genocide, there is nevertheless the problematic of representation” – “how does one speak about or present forms of knowledge that have been deliberately forgotten, elided, or repressed?” (2009: 72). The difficulties of representation are already at stake at the beginning of *Sorry* when the narrator, who possibly stands in for the author, wonders in a meta-commentary of sorts:

How to gather, quietly and honourably, all that is now scattered? How to reanimate the dead as if they were human after all, not symbols, or functions that I must somehow deal with, not flimsy puppet cut-outs trimmed to my purpose? (4)

It is, I believe, in order to resist “the *comfortable* narrative of the past”, as Sue Kossew words this (2013: 172; author’s emphasis), that Jones’s fiction makes use of the trope of the secret. More generally, I wish to contend that, through her writing, Jones endeavours to tackle the issue not only of representation (as that which is represented) but also of representability (as that which is representable, that is to say, that which has the quality of, and the capacity for, being represented). Thus, I agree wholeheartedly with McGonegal when she claims that “non-Indigenous fiction that attempts to represent the unrepresentable knowledge of colonial genocide has the potential to open up new worlds by making imaginable the kinds of worlds to which a vision of reconciliation is committed” (McGonegal 2009: 80).

Not surprisingly then, and quite in line with Jessica Murray’s claim that “fiction opens up possibilities for overcoming the representational difficulties posed by trauma” (2008: 1), Jones chose the genre of trauma fiction to deal with issues of representability. In her work significantly entitled *Trauma Fiction*, a term which alludes to the interaction between the medical and scientific fields and literary studies (see 2004: 4), Anne Whitehead seeks – rather successfully in my view – to resolve the paradox or contradiction that the term “trauma fiction” poses. She describes this paradox as follows: “If trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?” (Whitehead 2004: 3). Despite the fact that “trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities” (Whitehead 2004: 5), novelists, in order to evoke as faithfully as possible the effects of trauma in trauma fiction, must use literary techniques and stylistic features which “mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma” (Whitehead 2004: 84). These comprise a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice, intertextuality, and repetition. According to Sue Vice, these stylistic features are typically “brought to their limit, taken literally, defamiliarized or used self-consciously” in trauma fiction (2000: 4). Similarly Whitehead argues that writers of trauma narratives “push the realist project

to its limits” (Whitehead 2004: 84) as a reaction to what Michael Rothberg calls “the demands of extremity” (2000: 25). In short, trauma fiction requires from readers that they should “believe the unbelievable” (Whitehead 2004: 84) or at least manage to suspend disbelief and imagine the unimaginable. By the same token, Jones’s short story “Other Places” asks from the outset: “How to substantiate? How to fabricate the unfashionable ‘real’?” (Jones 1992: 28).

The story is then relevant to the novel, as suggested by David Callahan who sees it “as existing in a direct line of descent to Jones’s *Sorry*, [...] a novel that does not approach the site of Australian shame as directly as some might have expected from such a blunt label” (Callahan 2012: 141). In his essay Callahan, too, ponders the representational difficulties sometimes inherent in history-writing, claiming that “there are aspects of the history that needs to be written that may require other resources than those available to the arguments and strategies of non-fiction” (137). He goes on:

In this endeavour, writers of fiction conventionally have resources through which they may approach the catachreses of historical events in ways that may supplement non-fictional exposés of official doublespeak. Fiction can offer other satisfactions to readers’ ethical priorities and their desire to see guilt and shame processed from multiple angles, without the need to establish hierarchies in the areas of either narrative pleasure or verisimilitude. (137)

Departing from Jacques Rancière’s statement that “the artistic work of memory is that which accords everyone the dignity of fiction” (Rancière 2010: 9), Callahan argues that

it is this imbrication of the constructed nature of memory with the dignity of fiction that Jones’s story “Other Places” both opens up and enacts, but it does so in ways that cast doubt on the ability of some memories ever to attain “the dignity of fiction” in any uncomplicated fashion. (Callahan 2012: 137)

Callahan further argues that Jones's writerly self-consciousness "reveals the unparalleled resources of art to, in Baer's words, 'dispel the illusory certainty that what is seen is what can be known'" (141). This dispelling then becomes "the condition by which a politics of regret can exist not just as the self-consciousness of argued positions, but as self-consciously performed disjunctions at every level in a range of the registers that might be addressed to the situation" (141).

4 "Proxy lives, new imaginings, precious understandings": Imagining the unimaginable

This is indeed what Jones strives to achieve. However, in order to do so, that is, in order to imagine the unimaginable, she needs to imagine *otherwise*. In an interview she said that she is "very interested in what is forgotten, the way that certain voices in history are forgotten, [and] the rights and values of Indigenous people in particular are lost or locked away" (Jones qtd. in Kossew 2013: 173). Considering history as "a complicated process of repressions and revelations", she claims that, as a novelist, her "first responsibility is to remember what it serves the state to repress; the second to recall, to tell and to consider the recovered history through the lens of justice" (Block 2008). Therefore, Jones in *Sorry* chose to replay the traumatic scene of Nicholas's death three times, each time "from another angle" (Jones 2007: 123) – just as, as Callahan puts it in regard to "Other Places", "one decision Jones makes is to break the real into different accounts" (Callahan 2012: 137). In providing her reader with three different snapshots, each inserted at different moments in her narrative, Jones fashions a ruptured narrative line, one that mirrors the various symptoms of trauma, that is, "the will-to-forget or amnesia of the victim in relation to the terror of the occasion; the consequent dissociation and dislocation of the person which generally induces a sense of fragmentation, and, above all, the 'unspeakableness' of the

trauma itself” (Lloyd 2000: 214).³ So as to echo the “unspeakableness” of trauma not only on the level of the novel’s form (its fragmented style) and content (Perdita’s disrupted speech and mnemonic gaps) but also on a metadiscursive level, Jones explores the relationship between guilty amnesia or silencing and the “rupturing of language” that “ironically speaks what is being suppressed in the past”. *Sorry* in this sense “can best be read as an ‘allegory about cultural forgetting’” (Jones qtd. in Kossew 2013: 179).

As an alternative to today’s embattled conception of Australian national identity, Jones insists on the importance of cultural contrition as contributing to a “shared space of ethical understanding” and on the responsibility of writing as “perform[ing] a communal act of ethical engagement” (Kossew 2013: 181). By the same token, in her essay entitled “‘Difficult forms of knowing’: Enquiry, injury, and translocated relations of postcolonial responsibility”, Diana Brydon acknowledges the role of fiction in “entering and engaging with difficult ways of knowing and thus stretching our imagination in the ways that will be necessary for addressing the challenges now facing our interconnected world with globalization” (Brydon 2013: 16). She nevertheless expresses reservations about the “apparent mutual transparency” (Code 1998: 82) of the language or genre of expression, convinced as she is that “texts once studied within the confines of a national literature need to be read as involved in an emerging global dialogue, but in a manner that beware[s] of assumptions of easy translatability across different cultural situations” (Brydon 2013: 16). Similarly, as pointed out by Nancy Fraser in her article exploring the reframing of justice in a globalised world, in an age of globalisation justice does not confine itself to the nation-state anymore but opens up to issues of recognition beyond the territorial state: a shift in focus from the national to the international occurs, which goes hand in hand with a shift from first-order questions of substance (the subject matter, the “what” of justice) to meta-level questions of frame (justice as procedure, the “who” and “how” of justice). “Thus,”

³ For further reading on the allegory of trauma in *Sorry* see Herrero (2011).

as Fraser puts it, “it is not only the substance of justice, but also the frame, which is in dispute” (Fraser 2007: 170).

4.1 “Speaks true, who speaks shadows”: Justice claims and writerly elaborations

Jones seems to be thinking along the same lines when she claims that, as regards issues of justice and writing, “a kind of de-individualisation has to occur” on the part of writers as “it is their participation in cultural value, their more generalized contribution to the richly strange economies of imagination, that finally matters”:

The necessity of not “speaking for” others, not assuming the predominance of one’s own voice – possibly because it is louder, or more prestigious, or somehow more skilled – is part of this participation. In a multicultural community all voices matter and none should be silenced. Speaking from within a premise of solidarity is of the utmost importance. (Jones 2008: 82)

In writing *Sorry*, Jones “rehearsed [her] own concern [...] that the role of language, of what is said and unsaid, must be understood as contributing to the ethical life of individuals and of nations” (Jones 2008: 84). “It is,” she continues, “a cautious offering in the process of cultural contrition, and a wish, more personally, to see evident in Australian culture attempts at ‘*thinking with grief*’” (Jones 2008: 85; my emphasis). The phrase “thinking with grief”, or “admitting into our judgment of rights and abuses the informed sorrowfulness of mourning” (Jones 2008: 78), was first put forward by French philosopher Maurice Blanchot. Jones wrote her article “Speaking shadows: Justice and the poetic” for inclusion into *Just Words? Australian Authors Writing for Justice*, a collection of essays exploring the relationship between writing and justice in the light of the recent ethical turn undertaken by many Australian writers. In a nutshell, Jones departs from the poet Paul Celan’s view of literary language and poetry in matters of mourning

and justice. A Jew interned in a labour camp during the Second World War and suffering the loss of both his parents in the Holocaust, Celan “wished to vouchsafe literary language against historical ‘darknesses’, to insist on its capacity to hold meaning even against the depredations of fascism” (Jones 2008: 76-77), thus running counter to Adorno’s much disputed aphorism that “After Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric” (which he eventually revoked):

Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it still had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave no words for what was happening, but went through it. (Celan qtd. in Jones 2008: 77)

Wondering about the relationship between “the horrors of the world”, “so often blankly and brutally direct”, and “poetic indirection”, Jones then raises the question of “how such high-literary labour [might] address matters of justice” (Jones 2008: 77). To answer this question, she refers to Celan’s poem “Speak, you too”, which ends on the words “Speaks true, who speaks shadows”⁴ and where, according to Jones, “the poet seems to be recommending an openness of expression and a preoccupation with interstitial forms of knowing, with the struggle to tell the tenebrous uncertainties of history” (Jones 2008: 78). This is when Jones first introduces us to the notion of “speaking shadows”, which she equates to Blanchot’s above-mentioned “thinking with grief”. For Jones, speaking shadows then “is not just about the admission of mourning into history but also [...] about the inclusion of time in one’s imagining of other people’s sufferings”. Equally, “the wish for justice to prevail is linked with time past and time future, with imagining reparation for wrongs and the instauration of rights” (Jones 2008: 80). The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben similarly argues for a justice not of repentance but of recovery of “one’s own and other’s possibilities and potentialities”, which demands that one “imagin[es] backwards (to

⁴ Significantly, one of the short stories in Jones’s collection *Fetish Lives* is entitled “Speaks Shadow”.

regret historical mistakes) and forwards (to constitute a more just future)” (Jones 2008: 81). In justice, time past and time future are merged, and so are time and responsibility, and it is the responsibility of the writer “to learn what might stand in the way of right or wrong actions and thinking”, and therefore “to be self-critical” and “circumspect”. Again in Jones’s own words, “writerly elaboration – *naming* the past, speaking of it, offering an account – is one of our forms of negotiation” (2008: 80; author’s emphasis). However, the writer should not “succumb to luxurious – that is to say, debilitating – melancholy”, which, in Jones’s opinion, is “too close to political quiescence”; quite the reverse, “there must be a way of entertaining the darkneses that is not pathological but somehow creative and intrinsically resistant”. In this respect, “the insistence on affirming commentary, statement, symbol, voice, is fundamental, surely, to imagining otherwise”. All things considered, “the speaking of shadows is just this, the mouth that will go on shaping meaning in the face of senseless annihilation” (Jones 2008: 83).

4.2 “Occult relations”: Ethical listening and empathetic imagination

In *Sorry*, Jones fulfils her writerly role of imagining otherwise through her skilful use of metatextuality, a craft illustrated by the following extract:

For those who do not read, for whom reading is not part of the texture of knowing, the gorgeous complication, the luxurious interiority, the thrilling extrapolation from black marks to alternative reals; for those who might not understand what it is to collaborate in making a world, or building a thought, or consolidating, line by line, the salvage of something long gone; for those bereft, that is, and booklessly broke, those word-deprived, craving, caught in dull time, it will seem odd that two girls, with not much to do, spend a few hours of each day hidden in the valleys of pages. Proxy lives, new imaginings, precious understandings. (66)

In this passage, irony serves indirection, and indirection serves empathetic imagination. After all, Jones quite ironically addresses a *non-reading readership*, yet one who, in order to read these lines, *must be reading*. Through this antithetical impossibility and self-reflexive instance, Jones, I believe, wishes to draw her readership's attention to its own identity as well as to the nature of the act of reading. Endowed with the shared knowledge of proxy lives, new imaginings, and precious understandings, Jones's readership may become part of a wider communal scheme. In other words, Jones's readership is constituted as a community through the reading of her novel. Jones thus metatextually recreates Mary's theory of a knitted readership:

Mary had a theory that when people read the same words they were imperceptibly knitted; that there were touchings not of the skin, and apparitional convergences. Some kind of spirit inhered in words that one might enter and engage with; there were transactions, comminglings, adjacencies of mind and of sense. [...] Mary extended to written words the forms of community she longed to express, just as, in their generosity, the creek people had bestowed on Perdita a relationship of skin. By this reasoning, too, David Copperfield was part of her and Captain Cook was part of Mary; and even in the world-weariness that reading sometimes induces, they absorbed irresistibly, naïvely, elements of the lives they imagined. A kind of family without limits. Occult relations. (73)

Mary's theory of reading is reminiscent of the Aboriginal model of inclusive kinship, based as it is on social obligation and affection, in that it generates an alternative family, one that is without limits as it is linked by book ties (as opposed to blood ties). Following this reasoning, reading allows for shared understandings to emerge between readers from different cultural, ethnic, political, and religious backgrounds. However, in addition to these horizontal understandings (shared by readers at a same period of time but in different places), there are

also vertical understandings (shared by readers of different epochs – think of intertextuality). Thus, in reading, time and space are merged. Paradoxical though it may seem, this merging goes hand in hand with a rupture in temporality and spatiality brought by hauntology and displacement, a phenomenon best illustrated by Mary's theory of knitted readership.

Mary's theory merits closer examination in the light of the recent wish for and move towards reconciliation and communality which has become such a preoccupation in present-day Australia. Interestingly enough, Mary develops this theory in relation to *The Lives of the Saints*, a Christian book – and her favourite read – dealing with martyrdom and sainthood, thus advocating the colonisers' religion, values and beliefs. The volume had belonged to a girl called Annie McCaughie, another *sister*, who had died of measles or diphtheria and who had, above all, “*read the same words*” (73; author's emphasis). Mary's favouring of *The Lives of the Saints*, however, does not mean that she rejects Aboriginality; it is quite the reverse, since “in blackfella stories, [...] things change[] all the time: a tree into a woman, a woman into a tree. There [are] rocks that ha[ve] been children and stars that talk[]. Spirit [is] everywhere, [...] not just in a church” (64). Mary's theory thus envisages the existence of a bond linking the white settlers' faith and Aboriginal beliefs. Similarly, her and Nicholas's shared readings of *Life of Captain Cook*, a book which figures importantly in the canon of white settler literature, also implies the existence of a bond between the Aboriginal community and the white colonial supremacists. It is indeed from Nicholas's “crate of miscellaneous books” (30), which is supposed to help him in his anthropological quest for the primitive man, that Mary came to read books in the first place. By the same token, while reading “side by side, together and separate”, “in the granular light of the shack”, Mary and Perdita are “*penetrated more by shadow than by light*, [...] their heads flared open like parasols, open and inclining with sisterly ease” (67; my emphasis). This passage, with its enveloping darkness which overshadows Mary's and Perdita's sisterly reading bond, could be taken to echo the ambiguity of the recent Australian attempts at reconciliation. To take another example, the first time Perdita enters into possession of Mary's copy of *The*

Lives of the Saints, she reads the book hoping for “a surrender to something as close as a kiss”, to “imperceptible continuities and inspiring revelations”; “the reading”, she believes, “[will] knit them together” (123). This ideal of reconciliation, however, is thwarted by the return of the book to Perdita, coinciding with the news of Mary’s death in prison: “When Perdita unwrapped the book, the past came rushing to meet her. And only then, turning the pages, peering at what Mary had read, did she begin to know, did she begin to open and grieve” (211). Significantly, it is only when receiving *The Lives of the Saints* that Perdita eventually starts to open and grieve, truly regretting her failure to apologise to Mary when there was time – “*I should have said sorry to my sister, Mary. Sorry, my sister, oh my sister, sorry*” (211; author’s emphasis). This instance then allegorically mirrors Jones’s wish for white Australia to finally acknowledge and apologise to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, but it also echoes her view of reading as a place of ethical listening and empathetic imagination.

4.3 “Ghostly disquiet”: Derridean hauntology and ethical mourning

Reading opens up spaces for new possibilities, for new ways of thinking, of taking into consideration other ways of living, other people’s lives. The novel, in Perdita’s words, is a place of “continuous thought”, a “completed world”, a “parallel universe” (206); “there is no refuge so private, no asylum more sane”, “no facility of voices captured elsewhere so entire and so marvelous” (31). In the novel, “all that [is] solid melt[s] into air, all that [is] air reshape[s], and gain[s] plausibility” (31), new imaginings and alternative lives materialise. Not surprisingly then, reading and haunting are closely related to each other; or, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida puts it in his *Specters of Marx*, “haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (Derrida 2002: 37). So it is that coming across her father’s signature in the books she reads, Perdita feels “the vague presence of something unthinkable. She read[s] her father’s books carefully, mindful of Mary’s superstitious opinion that mysterious and unwonted communions

occur between readers”, and wonders whether “from the reticent no-place of death, he [is] somehow nevertheless present, penetrating an eerie membrane to visit his daughter, here reading”, as if he were “nearby, metaphysically hovering” (144-145). Through her reading of Nicholas’s books (after his death), Perdita thus creates a bridge between the real and the metaphysical. In a similar instance, she ponders what she would say “if her father materialised here, like Hamlet’s father, to speak of murder and injustice” (208). Haunted by Nicholas’s ghost, which is seen as reproachful, defying her to speak and put in words all that remained unsaid or hidden, Perdita (as the child protagonist?, as the adult narrator?) then wonders: “Could any words utter the contents of so truant a heart?” (208). Reminiscent of Jones’s above-mentioned meta-commentary (see Jones 2007: 4), this question could work as a more general reflection on the part of the author on the issue of language vis-à-vis matters of justice. In her essay “A dreaming, a sauntering: Re-imagining critical paradigms”, Jones draws upon Derrida’s pun on “hauntology” and his use of *Hamlet* to tackle issues of anachronism and justice claims. Jones writes about Derrida:

He affirms that the time of revenant interception is always “out of joint” (to use Hamlet’s words). Just as the logic of haunting is the destruction of the opposition of “to be or not to be”, so too it rejects the sovereignty of the present (and the promise of the future) to re-present what we might call “apparitional subjects.” The no-longer-living rupture time – philosophically at least – in order to make a claim, to register ghostly disquiet. (Jones 2006: 16)

Ghostly visitations, then, amount to justice claims since “the ghost requires us not to forget the wrongs of history and to work for reparation in the future, for the *arrivants*, the not-yet-born or arrived” (Jones 2006: 16; author’s emphasis). According to Jones, this use of haunting constitutes “a wholly radical re-imagining of a kind of trans-historical community, an insistence that responsibility comes from the debt of what has gone before and extends into an obligation

to the future” (Jones 2006: 16). Not surprisingly, Perdita, who wonders “why she must now remember her forgetting” (208) and who in the darkness feels “vulnerable to the words of Shakespeare” as they “flow[] into her, insinuating, like unbidden memory”, “want[s] silence” and “seek[s] forgiveness”, thus shunning the responsibility of acknowledging her debt to the previous generation (208). It is this debt towards the previous generation, this burden of the past – “memories she [can] neither settle nor dispel” – that haunt Perdita in the darkness, and – viewed through the allegorical lens – most contemporary white Australians. *Sorry* was written precisely in response to Jones’s wish to acknowledge this debt to the previous generations and to admit ethical mourning.

4.4 “Another dimension of communication”: imagining reconciliation otherwise

Jones claimed about *Sorry* that “in writing such a narrative [she] rehearsed [her] own concern that the reconciliation process not be forgotten – since it has certainly faded from the political agenda since the bridge walk of 2000^[5]” (Jones 2008: 84). Reconciliation is indeed an all-pervading concern in *Sorry*, made manifest especially through the sisterly bond linking Mary and Perdita. When this bond is in danger of being broken by Mary’s bodily imprisonment and by Perdita’s mental and linguistic block, Jones introduces a new character into the narrative, Pearl Underwood. Pearl, “as rotund and smoothly white as her name suggest[s]” (197), is Billy’s instructor at the sign language training school and also his future wife. Through Pearl’s character, Jones introduces sign language, significantly described as “a form of poetry” (199) and “a language rich with hidden density, such as the body itself carries, and soulful as each distinctive, utterly distinctive, signer” (205), into her narrative. Ironically, this alternative language imagined by Jones is that of *those who do not speak with words*. In my view, Perdita’s

⁵ On 26 May 2000 an estimated 250,000 people – Jones included – walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of the Reconciliation process (see Jones 2007: 216).

realisation “that the speechless, the accursed, gradually vanish” (146) acts along the same lines. In like manner, she “notices with a kind of fear how frequently she [is] overlooked, how she [is] becoming dim and disregarded in the estimations of others. Less than a character in a book. Less than a fiction” (146). Where words fail and memory falters, existence is threatened, unless imagination fills the gaps. This is where Jones introduces a metafictional level, on which Perdita is given a voice by the author’s creativity. The latter intervenes to reanimate the dead and the speechless, to make them flesh and blood, to speak memory and fiction. More generally, Jones seems to advocate the importance of creation and creativity:

So she had been barely expressive when her stutter had maimed her and driven her to silence, and now she felt almost mystically extra-expressive. With Billy and Pearl she discovered another dimension of communication. There were meanings that could exist only in sign, connotations for which only the inventive body and a gestural repertoire sufficed. She loved the three of them together, watching each other’s faces and hands, as though the body itself was a kind of book. (199)

So it seems that, in sign language with its “new meanings” (206), Perdita might find an alternative to speaking realistic truth, after trauma has impeded her speech. This privileging of sign language seems to be in line with the discourse of silence that surrounds Mary’s fate as well as with the novel’s awareness that some things cannot be talked about or represented through traditional language so that a new, shared language between the victim and the guilty should be established in order for forgiveness to occur. As Pearl importantly claims, sign language “*is necessary for the progress of our friendship*” (199; author’s emphasis). Through this further meta-commentary, Jones, I believe, wishes to indict the silenced past and suggest that, in order to move on in the process of reconciliation, a new language is necessary. Hence the reference to sign language as a kind of intermediate language, as a new vehicle of communication favouring friendship and reconciliation.

5 Conclusion

Focusing on writerly elaboration and responsibility, Jones's novel then engages in a reflection about the ethics of reconciliation. Believing in the responsibility of the writer to denounce injustices, Jones addresses the past through her remarkable use of metatextuality. Endowing her readership through self-reflexivity with the shared knowledge of proxy lives, new imaginings, and precious understandings, she fashions a narrative that embraces new possibilities and fosters the empathetic imagination. In addition, to overcome the representational difficulties posed by the need to circumscribe the unsayable, Jones resorts to forms of indirection and alternative modes of narration. This is why she chose to inscribe her novel within the tradition of trauma fiction. Through its disruptive quality and its suspension of disbelief, trauma fiction encourages the reader to consider the unimaginable, thus opening up corridors of mental space in which the reader might take into consideration alternative modes of thinking. Written in response to her wish to acknowledge the debt to the previous generation, *Sorry* then offers new possibilities of ethical mourning, allowing the dead to return and the voiceless to speak, to fill in the blank pages of Australia's gaping history.

From all this it emerges that Jones, like a funambulist, walks the tightrope of narrativising injustice, skilfully avoiding the pitfalls of vocal appropriation. In *Sorry*, she offers a complex picture of the ethics of reconciliation, namely one that includes – to quote her one last time – “an admission of uncertainty, a calculation of difficulty, and an awareness that justice – and human relations – is rarely written in black and white” (Jones 2008: 86). Thus, in *Sorry*, Jones too speaks shadow.

Primary data

Jones, Gail. 1992. Other Places. *The House of Breathing*. New York: George Braziller.

Jones, Gail. 2007. *Sorry*. London: Harvill Secker.

References

Baronian, Marie-Aude and Mireille Rosello. 2008. Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity.

Gregory Elliot (tr). *Art & Research : A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2 (1): 1-10.

Block, Summer. 2008. Interview: Gail Jones. *January Magazine*.

<<http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/gailjones.html>>.

Brydon, Diana. 2013. "Difficult forms of knowing": Enquiry, injury, and translocated relations of postcolonial responsibility. In *Postcolonial Translocations: Cultural Representation and Critical Spatial Thinking*, Marga Munkelt, Markus Schmitz, Mark Stein, and Silke Stroh (eds.). Amsterdam: Rodopi, 3-28. Cross/Cultures 156.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.

Callahan, David. 2012. Failing to meet in the middle: East Timor and Gail Jones's "Other Places". Brooklyn, NY: *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature* 26 (2): 137-142.

Code, Lorraine. 1998. How to think globally: Stretching the limits of imagination. *Hypatia* 13 (2): 73-85.

Derrida, Jacques. 2002. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. 1993. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge.

Fraser, Nancy. 2007. Reframing justice in a globalizing world. In *Nationalism and Global Solidarities: Alternative Projections to Neoliberal Globalisation*, James Goodman and Paul James (eds.). London: Routledge, 168-186.

- Gelder, Ken and Jane M. Jacobs. 1998. *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. Victoria: Melbourne.
- Gooder, Haydie and Jane M. Jacobs. 2000. "On the border of the unsayable": The apology in postcolonizing Australia. *Interventions* 2 (2): 229-247.
- Hosking, Susan Elizabeth. 2011. Water, soap and sanitation: Assimilationist whitewash and Stolen Generations narratives in South-West Australia. In *Landscape, Place and Culture: Linkages between Australia and India*, Deb N. Bandyopadhyay, Paul Brown, and Christopher Conti (eds.). Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 218-236.
- Jones, Gail. 2006. A dreaming, a sauntering: Re-imagining critical paradigms. *JASAL* 5: 11-24.
- Jones, Gail. 2007? (see footnote 5)
- Jones, Gail. 2008. Speaking shadows: Justice and the poetic. In *Just Words?: Australian Authors Writing for Justice*, Bernadette Brennan (ed.). St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland, 76-86.
- Kossew, Sue. 2013. Saying sorry: The politics of apology and reconciliation in recent Australian fiction. In *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres*, Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (eds.). New York: Routledge, 171-183.
- Lloyd, David. 2000. Colonial trauma/postcolonial recovery? *Interventions* 2 (2): 212-228.
- McCrea, Michele. 2012. *Collisions of Authority: Nonunitary Narration and Textual Authority in Gail Jones' Sorry*. Proc. of the 17th Annual AAWP Conference.
- McGonegal, Julie. 2009. The great Canadian (and Australian) secret: The limits of non-indigenous knowledge and representation. *ESC* 35 (1): 67-83.
- Murray, Jessica. 2008. Tremblings in the distinction between fiction and testimony. *Postcolonial Text* 4 (2): 1-19.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2000. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*.

Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Vice, Sue. 2000. *Holocaust Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wachtel, Eleanor. 2012. *Five Bells* with novelist Gail Jones. *Writers*

and Company. CBC Radio. <[http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Writers+ and+Company/
2012/ID/2313221830/](http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Writers+and+Company/2012/ID/2313221830/)>.

Whitehead, Anne. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.