

*Now It's the Women's Turn:
The Art(s) of Reconciliation in Vonnegut's Bluebeard*

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Rabo Karabekian, fallen co-founder of the abstract expressionist school of art, has a secret in his Long Island barn: his immense eight-by-sixty-four-foot painting depicting in a highly realistic style (drawing on his training as an illustrator) the moment of his release as an American prisoner of war on the morning World War II ended. From a vantage point high above a valley, Karabekian depicts soldiers and gypsies—and yet also, more imaginatively, friends and acquaintances unstuck in time and placed in this specific historical moment. The literary critic David Andrews rightly points out that the painting demonstrates an aesthetic humanism. Here, Karabekian expresses himself in order to engage his audience ethically, exhibiting the ways in which art's purpose is instruction in kindness: to share a moment with Karabekian's tremendous image is to share in a life's experience in all its pain and wonder.

Life—at least political life—rarely imitates art in this way; that is, relations of this aesthetic-humanistic variety hardly ever seem to enter into the political sphere. More often, politics exist along Foucauldian lines, as discipline and punishment that preserve the dominant regime within an unequal power dynamic. Yet, very infrequently, a politics based on ethical humanism may emerge, especially through the increasing use of truth commissions. As government-sanctioned (though not always government-run) panels of inquiry and public confession, truth commissions see as their purpose the airing of some grievance, from social ills to human rights violations. While not every commission functions the same way or even in always-ethical ways—indeed, some are merely political theatre meant to produce the façade of justice and fairness while maintaining whatever corrupt regime brought it into existence—the equitable versions of truth commissions I would like to invoke produce an atmosphere of exchange and apology that aim to overcome feelings of ill will and reunite hate-torn groups.

By putting three ideas in conversation with one another, I consider the political efficacy of aesthetic humanism in relation to truth commissions and argue that through the version of humanism found in Vonnegut's *Bluebeard* (1987), although often read as a kind of treatise on artistic

movements, we can employ the novel as a kind of guide to future progressive politics. After exploring the ways Vonnegut's Karabekian invokes a double-relational apologetics that is both visual (his painting) and literary (his autobiography), I examine in this light the function of truth commissions by looking toward one of the first, and certainly most famous, cases, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that followed the fall of that country's apartheid in 1994. The centerpiece of both public confession and apology produce a model of justice in the world after the so-called American century in that their incitements to dialogue are a functional basis for social change. In this way, I suggest how we might engage Vonnegut in new contexts, in this instance using the writer's work as a stepping-off point for thinking about equity in a global context.

To understand how *Bluebeard* functions as a model for a more just society, we need to understand how relationality works for the protagonist artist. Many scholars—as well as Karabekian himself—have looked toward the idea of finding *soul* in the novel as that which offers Karabekian redemption. For Leonard Mustazza, *Bluebeard* is part of a larger trend in Vonnegut's work that appeals to the Genesis myth, where Karabekian's narrative illustrates a “fulfillment of a lifetime ambition as well as an attempt at reparation of all the damage humanity has done since the mythic Fall,” directed through positive personal rebirth (192). Similarly, Lawrence R. Broer's work on schizophrenia in Vonnegut's novels reiterates the personal redemption, this time as a mode of healing the psychic wounds, especially in the “psychodrama” of the potato barn canvas (171). And, addressing the formal elements of the written and oral narratives themselves, Jerome Klinkowitz has argued persuasively that Vonnegut's repetition of scenes from multiple vantages in Karabekian's autobiography enlivens the narrative for the reader, the iterations each expressing subtle nuance missed by the others, and, further, that the various characters' applications of narrative to otherwise static art objects (like Circe's little Victorian girls and the potato barn behemoth itself) directly enliven them (137-38). Each of these readings of Vonnegut's novel points out how soulfulness is a project of dynamism, of movement from narrowness to expansiveness, whether it is the freeing power of myth, the dissolution of the fraught and shuttered reality of psychological stress, or the revitalization of narrative through creative repetition.¹ More than this, however, this move to expansiveness plays out along Karabekian's shift from abstract expressionism to a directed, moral realism.²

This soul, in most cases, has everything to do with Karabekian's ability to find his artistic voice and by representing something truly and humanly expressive, a process we readers know takes many years, and even then the product of that process is relegated to the locked barn. As I see it, this soulfulness is not merely a meditative, internalized personal praxis, but requires a process of relationality, that is, of developing meaningful connections to others. We see this version of soul comingle with aesthetics in the quiet resolution of the novel, where the painting itself ceases to be a painting (in the sense of its being merely an object) at all but instead becomes a locus of interpersonal relations. As Karabekian describes it near the end of the book after he has begun exhibiting the painting in the barn,

There is a war story to go with every figure in the picture, no matter how small. I made up a story, and then painted the person it had happened to. I at first made myself available in the barn to tell anyone who asked what the story was of this person or that one, but soon gave up in exhaustion. "Make up your own war stories as you look at the whatchamacallit," I tell people. I stay in the house here, and simply point the way out to the potato barn. (283)

Karabekian's exhaustion reflected in this passage comes not only from the monotony of retelling the same stories to ever-new visitors, but also simply from the fact that telling his stories is no longer as necessary as it once was. As an artist, he has created an aesthetic artifact that continues to enliven other minds through contemplation; the horrors of his painting are now the raw material onto which others can project their own "war stories," the traumas that litter human experience. Further, in his capacity as author of another aesthetic object, his memoir, he has completed the project that the painting began: through writing he overcomes the return of grief caused by his second wife's death and makes public the record both of his life as well as the painting where he explicitly synthesizes his own (sometimes literal) war stories for public consumption, entreating the reader to connect with him as he has reached out to them through written narrative. At base, then, this double-relational telling forms the basis of Karabekian's search for soul: as painting and as story—and between viewer/reader and their creator.

This shift in attitude about the purpose of his art marks a simultaneous return to and departure from the mode of Rabo's abstract expressionist past. Recall the famous scene in *Breakfast of Champions* where

Karabekian defends his *Temptation of Saint Anthony* to a cocktail waitress enraged by the seeming amateurism and inconsequentiality of the work. Addressing the assembled audience at the painting's unveiling, Karabekian proclaims: "It is all that is alive in any of us . . . It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us" (221). More than just a defensive posture by one of the cultural elite to the non-elite, that reinscribes notions of high and low culture, Karabekian expresses his belief in the contentlessness of his painting as the space in which viewers might direct their own disillusionment with life—Rabo simply does not care if viewers like or dislike the painting. Judging its aesthetic qualities is not what is at stake. As Donald E. Morse insightfully points out about this moment, "Vonnegut satirically suggests that beauty no longer resides in the eye of the beholder, but artistic significance lies wholly within the head of the observer who looks at the painting and theorizes, whether that observer be an artist, critic, or gallery goer" ("Thinking" 297).

By the time we meet Karabekian again years later in *Bluebeard*, the structure of the artistic project has not changed, but rather the terms of what matters in aesthetic experiences have shifted. For Karabekian's project to be a success, as he himself points out, the requirement is for the viewer to determine what is meaningful about all this detail, without his intruding into the barn. Also, still, the new painting—a "copious composition" full to the top with activity and shifting areas of focus (Rampton 20)—does not determine the meaning; instead, the viewer determines meaning by reflecting in front of its sheer immensity of construction. What does change, however, is that the painting's illustrative power draws the viewer into the complexity of the work's wholeness. For the abstract expressionist mode that Morse describes, the seeming irrelevance of the composition (its lack of accessible content) is a one-way relationship that places the viewer as the arbiter of symbolic meaning. In the representational aspects of the barn painting, however, caught up as it is in its own particular material, historical, emotional, and aesthetic web of construction, *Now It's the Women's Turn*, with its hundreds of scattered human figures across the tremendous valley Karabekian envisions upon his release as a prisoner of war, refuses to let the viewer have the only say as it resists totalization in overwhelming detail, acknowledges the artist's skill and training that has produced such a thing, and begs hermeneutic questions about who the people are and what they mean. The painting engages the viewer in intellectual work that *St. Anthony's* blank field and single vertical line cannot, and that relationship is bidirectional, as the viewer is ultimately unable to say anything definitive

about the painting, but nonetheless recognizes that something has happened in the experience of viewing it. Shifting between the particularity of individual people and the grand spectacle of the painting as a whole, here the expansiveness extends its overflow of detail to the viewer as an invitation to speculate about the artistic significance, but also about how the painting fits into the post-war era in which it appears. The viewer comes to the painting responding to its basic incitement to communication, making the work postmodern in Brian McHale's sense that it takes up ontological concerns. In other words, as the autobiography enlivens an ethical relationship with text for the reader, the painting is a second ethical enlivening where viewers come to terms with an excitable work. And, to be sure, the literary representation of the painting in the novel-autobiography itself (as *ekphrasis*) begins a process by which the reader of Vonnegut's "hoax," too, forges a meaningful relationship with the painting. Where once viewing and reflecting internally were all that matters, post-abstract expressionist Karabekian requires the artist to embrace his skills to tell his own story. What remains compelling about *Bluebeard*, then, is that we get multiple tellings: as novel, as autobiography, as painting, and retellings of scenes within the narrative from different periods in Karabekian's life. To this telling, the viewer-reader comes, and with it she engages the *summa* of those experiences.

Truth commissions

As a mode of political discourse, the engagement with a given person's story becomes a powerful approach to working across complicated and hazardous terrain. Indeed, telling—especially in the public sphere—is the center of the truth commission. Following the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, the unified South African government sanctioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in order to provide a forum in which to air the horrors committed under apartheid, and in some small way forge a path to heal the nation. Instead of suffering silently, victims were asked to come forward to give testimony of their abuses, while perpetrators, too, were invited to describe and apologize for the crimes they committed; during the hearings, apartheid government agents and liberation forces found themselves appearing in both subject positions, as abuser and abused. The commission, chaired by Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was given the authority to provide reparations to the wronged as well as grant amnesty from government prosecution to those confessing. The hearings themselves were shown on South African television, providing

transparency to a narrative that from its outset was meant to unify a war- and hate-torn country.³

To be sure, there have been critics of the South African truth commission, and, indeed, the movement toward truth commissions that the South African example instigated in general.⁴ Yet, there remains something intuitively appealing in the idea that letting one tell one's story arrests a cycle of violence by turning to narrative. Instead of committing yet another crime against humanity (say, corporal punishment perpetrated by the new regime against the old) that will no doubt receive redress in subsequent regime changes, truth commissions suspend time and the law and craft a space where new relations might form. Claire Moon, in a recent study of the South African commission, writes, "The TRC was remarkable for bringing into the political domain the more usually private rituals of apology, remorse, and atonement, gestures of the formal acknowledgment of past atrocities perpetrated by the state and its agents on the one hand, and opponents of the apartheid regime on the other" (1). As Moon describes it, the TRC acted successfully as intermediary to a new public political climate, one where the secrecy of the shame of victimhood and the regret of victim-making was not to be tolerated. Though tense and highly contentious moments existed during the commission's hearings, by bringing the past to light, the South African government forged a space out of which it could face the future openly, without the looming threat of unresolved fears and the violence they might foster.

Art-as-narrative serves an identical function in Vonnegut's work. The culmination of Karabekian's "soul search" in the painting *Now It's the Women's Turn* is the reconciliatory-aesthetic object *par excellence*. First, it synthesizes all of Karabekian's relations, crystallizing them in a single aesthetic object. Figures from his life (such as Terry Kitchen and Jackson Pollock) and figures from the Karabekian family history without whom he would have never existed (the dead woman from whom his mother retrieved the jewels with which his family escaped massacre), and even wild temporal displacements (a Japanese soldier) appear side-by-side; in representation, people appear on equal levels, as images within a single, unified frame. Further, as a reconciliation of art history, Karabekian fuses the realism of his youth—as homage, he says, to his mentor Dan Gregory—to the postmodern mode still lauded by his abstract-expressionist friends. Tellingly, then, Karabekian himself appears in the painting and mirrors the synthetic work it undertakes: dead center, his back to the viewer, Rabo is split by the intersection of the center panels, reproducing

his conflicted mindset, and denying a unified or absolute point of reference. Even the title itself suggests the tension of changing mindsets, of a masculine worldview that no longer seems valid in the face of the trouble it has caused.

Taken in this way, we can also read Karabekian's written autobiography as the move to making trauma—as both victim and perpetrator—public. On the one hand, he portrays himself as a victim. As the son of Armenian immigrants who narrowly escaped genocide (especially in his father's guilt with "Survivor's Syndrome"), who were swindled in the escape and suffered through the apparent poverty and shame the swindling brought, Karabekian carries with him an historical burden of victimhood. Beyond this, he's a victim of circumstance, as both a wounded war hero, a sufferer of Survivor's Syndrome himself as one of the last members of the abstract expressionist school to remain alive, and a hapless user of the defective Sateen Dura-Luxe paint that ruined his career. At the same time, he portrays himself as the perpetrator of a number of misdeeds: he's a supremely negligent father, intensely insensitive toward the women in his life, elitist to a fault, and, dispositionally speaking, he transcends curmudgeonly.

In the end, Rabo's project of personal reconciliation—of finding a connected soul through art—recuperates his past, but requires the exposure of art and narrative to do so. In a roundabout way, he seems to have finally learned the lesson his mentor Gregory was trying to teach him years ago during his apprenticeship. As Gregory asserts: "Painters—the storytellers, including poets and playwrights and historians . . . They are the justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil, of which I am now a member, and to which you may someday belong" (140-41). Though Karabekian rejects the dogmatic practice of his master—a realist vision meant forcefully or coercively to instruct the public in morality, which logically ends with Gregory's fatal enchantment with Italian fascism—he, too, ends up rejecting the abstract expressionist school he helped to found, understanding the impossibility of the Genesis Gang's postmodern approach, finding it inconceivable that paintings could ever be "about absolutely nothing but themselves" (8). As works of art, they exist both in and apart from the world; as aesthetic objects, however, they are always subject to a plurality of meanings. Karabekian thus rejects absolutism as well as its absence, preferring finally to leave meaning up to the viewer. As David Andrews rightly points out about Karabekian's response to art, "[t]aken to extremes, mimesis and abstraction become equally formalistic,

equally inhuman” (21).⁵ Or, in moral terms, equally *inhumane*. The soulful—that is, interconnected—version that emerges combines both aesthetic practices Karabekian has learned in order to highlight the relational aspects. By sticking to Gregory’s realism, he connects the viewer to a familiar world; by imaginatively figuring these people within this locale, he invites the reader to consider their ethical relations. Neither abusive (Gregory’s mode) or elusive (abstract expressionism’s mode), Vonnegut shows how art can be instructive without being totalizing in its vision, or, as Morse writes, “Vonnegut thus suggests that the true artist will use technique in the service of human beings and their human feelings” (“Joy and Acceptance” 97). In neither case does Karabekian assert his own moral sense of things into the work, but instead simply allows those elements to bring about the viewer’s contemplation, overlaying the painting, as it were, with new layers of meaning. By enlivening aesthetic response through his own relationships—both to other people and to art—Karabekian engages ethically with the world. At the same time, operating at another aesthetic level, Karabekian’s autobiography produces the moral narratives that make the painting personally meaningful. As an autobiography, the work catalogues the factual pieces of his life and relations. At the same time, it also provides ethical commentary and evaluation of these same relations. Presented as a published work (with Vonnegut’s note preceding), no doubt the implied publication after Karabekian’s death makes it an invaluable companion to the painting (as a mimetic and by no means required guide), as well as an immensely readable account on its own (as literary work open to critical analysis).

As objects of reconciliation both the literary work and the art piece incite dialogue because of their material contexts. As a book, the reader is drawn into the “shaggy dog” hermeneutics of the potato barn’s plot. As a painting of a single historical moment, the viewer begs for the explanation of just who all these people are, begetting Karabekian’s concern about putting the painting in the longest bar in the world because “the customers would be climbing up on the bar all the time, trying to see what was really going on” (292). His concern intuits a natural human desire simply to know *why*, to understand things of epic proportions. In much the same way, explaining how he has been able to hold on to hope for the future despite having heard so much gruesome testimony leading the TRC, Archbishop Tutu explains, “The reason we are shocked by evil is because it is an aberration” (“Evening”). In other words, in both cases the provocation is to language, to ask the question, “Why would anyone do this?” In

Karabekian's case, it is a question of scale and complexity. In the South African case, it is a question of unfathomable motives. To think that there would be any right answer to questions such as these misses the point; instead, from the aesthetic and political standpoint, the goal is simply to open the discussions, to defuse aggression, and, ultimately, to find routes to better, more just relations.

To be clear, that Karabekian finally gets *soul* does not absolve him of past wrong deeds—just as one's standing before the TRC didn't guarantee either amnesty or reparations. Instead, he simply makes peace with them by bringing them to life in narrative. He notes in the book that by writing his autobiography, he has thought of things he has not for years, and begs (to himself, of course), "Let me off this hellish time machine!" In this way the autobiography functions for him as a kind of talking cure (not unlike that of his much less successful and contemporaneous fictional counterpart, the fallen minister Tom Marshfield in John Updike's *A Month of Sundays*), a psychologically comforting practice personally, but not one that instantly repairs all the schisms in his life. Art—whether narrative or visual—clearly has the power to channel anger and sadness, reminding us always of its place in the modern world as mediator of ethical concerns.

To understand this phenomenon we need look no further than a real work of art. In January 2003, when they approached the United Nations Security Council with the US government's case for a preemptive Iraq invasion, the delegation, headed by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, spoke in front of a blue tarp covering that day the usually-displayed textile reproduction of Picasso's haunting painting *Guernica*—an abstract representation of the 1937 German bombing massacre of that Basque city. One US diplomat said it would have been "inappropriate" for such images to accompany the day's discussion. Inappropriate, perhaps, but certainly providing rhetorical friction to the United States' message of incursion on that day. It was as if the conversation *Guernica* would have wanted to start with its viewers would have overpowered the competing political message of directing nations to war, a conversation the US delegation needed to stop. Such is the power of art to shame us, to stand as permanent witness, to tell the truth of our forever-interrelated human experiences, and draw viewers into contemplation about their places in the world. One can only imagine that this is the same feeling of shame and sadness—and, yet, hope—that those passing through Karabekian's potato barn take with them and talk about with others in their own life, a spinning out of the rhetorical

brought to the fore by just viewing one person's apologetic acknowledgement.

Archbishop Tutu, in recollecting his experiences with the TRC, has said that "[i]t is not the weak who are able to say sorry—it is the strong" (7.30 *Report*). Apologies acknowledge unequal power relations, implant action into memory, and, through language, expose our actions and mark the historical record. By narrating our relations, we empower both ourselves and those who have been wronged.⁶ However, to work within language and apology, in the way that Tutu and others have, searches out forgiveness without forgetting. Here art—either visual or literary—provides a mode of remembering actions and bringing them to light and life in perpetuity. Likewise, for all that he has done, Rabo may not be forgiven, but his acts of contrition in the novel and in the painting are the acts that make forgiveness and healing an option; without them, even the bare possibility of recovery from trauma closes off forever. As such, what we see from putting Vonnegut and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into discussion with one another is that though apologies and admissions of guilt may not ever be enough, they are what every person has to offer.

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Notes

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¹ Indeed, this soul-as-expansiveness might be thought of as a keener awareness of one's place in a world, a notion Vonnegut returns to a decade later in the ending of *Timequake*, where Kilgore Trout's goodnight speech conflates "awareness" with "soul" itself (214).

² Much has been made of the abstract expressionist connections in Vonnegut's work that cannot be addressed in the limited space of this essay. For a brief overview, see Kopper; on Vonnegut's own take on the ethicality of various aesthetic modes, see McCarthy (esp. 174-76).

³ For the authoritative summary of the move to and implementation of the TRC, see Davenport and Saunders 690-703.

⁴ Criticisms of the TRC range widely and were expressed by both whites and blacks: condemnation of invoking Christian values and rhetoric in a Christian-minority nation; the South African government's use of the TRC to avoid large-scale prosecutions; the unconstitutionality of the TRC; the inability of translation to accurately depict victims' suffering; and the government's inadequate explanation of amnesty to victims, and those victims' feelings that amnesty was an insufficient response to apartheid. For a third-party

report on the criticisms, see the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and Khulumani Support Group's "Suggestions and Final Report."

⁵ Even when high-concept art attempts to eschew moral fascism—by being about nothing but themselves, the Genesis Gang might have said—the impulse remains to fill that void with fascistic meaning nonetheless. As David Rampton compellingly argues, it is the uncovering of soul, that is, the final painting, that brings to bear the Bluebeard tale's *verboten* locked door and expresses Karabekian's warning to artists against the hubris of high-concept, in that Rabo rejects the inventive, but morally vacant, notions of abstract expressionism (23).

⁶ For a concise and eloquent depiction of his philosophy and experiences with the TRC, see Tutu's interview with TV's Craig Ferguson, which won a 2009 Peabody for Excellence in Television.

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Postmodern Infundibula and Other Non-linear Time Structures in *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Sirens of Titan*

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The article investigates Vonnegut's use of time as a means to communicate value constructs in three novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Sirens of Titan*. Even while time manifests in all three works on the continuum of the fantastic, Vonnegut uses fantastic time to communicate the banal, while real time seems to become fantastic. Vonnegut's combination of the fantastic and the ordinary create a new understanding of what it means to be a human being, as he scrutinizes racism, greed, sexism, and violence as juxtaposed against the values of human kindness. Vonnegut exposes the peculiar human inability to decipher real value and meaning when faced with choices involving mundane or materialistic goals. The questioning of traditional values, exposed as meaningless, contradictory, and nonsensical when viewed from the alienated perspective of defamiliarization causes a rupture which is emblematic of a corresponding need for new ways of reading and interpreting. (SLS)

Now It's the Women's Turn: The Art(s) of Reconciliation in Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*

Tom Hertweck

This reading of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard* (1987) with the late-twentieth-century move to Truth Commissions uses the post-apartheid South African TRC as key example. In both cases the enlivening of past misdeeds—through testimony in South Africa and through visual art and narrative in the novel—brings about not only personal reconciliation (as confession), but also a new way of thinking about ethical relationships, where acts enter into the symbolic, interpretive order for the public's negotiation and reflection. While narration (in whatever form) cannot undo, or even properly atone for, past acts, the openness expressed by narrating one's actions—a capacity all people carry within themselves—offers an alternative to command-and-control models of politics, which locate power with a small group and appear solely to perpetuate more misdeeds. Here Vonnegut's novel poses a compelling, democratic ethical humanism we might embrace in the twenty-first century. (TH)

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