
Jane Barter's *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*: Four Responses

Introduction

By Timothy Harvie

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Some academic works are able to blend prodigious learning, thoughtful rigour, moral clarity, and insight so as to merit discussion from those not only within the immediate sphere of research, but also from those outside. Such is the recent book by Jane Barter, Professor in the department of Religion and Culture at the University of Winnipeg. The book, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*,¹ examines the role of testimony and witnessing in the aftermath of mass atrocity. Using Walter Benjamin's theopolitics, which "is a type of reading ... that undermines sovereignty" (9), Barter examines the historical trajectory witnessing takes in the Shoah, in South African apartheid, and in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. In doing so, she charts the historical trajectory of the witness as a figure bearing testimony to something material and historical, and therefore external, to the internalization of testimony in its therapeutic and psychological uses. The role of lament in witness-bearing is foregrounded, highlighting that tragic reality that the most authentic witnesses to atrocity are unable to give testimony because their lives have been taken by the violence that was inflicted. Paul Celan and Primo Levi offer visions in which lament is a "counter-testimony to the complacent acceptance of God's justice" (27) and attempts of theodicy to make sense of the aporias of mass violence.

Barter charts the trajectory of witnessing in the post-Shoah era as a preservation of the concrete historical reality of the horrors and atrocities in the concentration camps. The move toward a therapeutic approach to witnessing shifts the ground of testimony from historical events to the inner lives and workings of the human psyche. This makes the recounted events current not only to the historical victims; instead, it becomes "a speech act that forges solidarity between listener and witness/victim so that they both become participants in the surfacing of the traumatic event" (64).

What Barter does so impactfully is to continually attune the reader to the material conditions in the aftermath of testimony. It is relevant that in striving toward reconciliation, it is possible to do so cheaply; in ways that function to placate perpetrators and acting as an enforcement of forgiveness and absolution from victims. It is relevant that decades after South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the material and economic conditions remain largely unimproved for Black South Africans (120). It is important to recognize in Canada the ongoing deficit of justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), the disproportional incarceration rate for Indigenous people, and the economic disparity between Indigenous Peoples and settler Canadians. Such attunement leads the reader to envisage the ongoing material deprivations and human degradations occurring in Palestine, even as we are capable of witnessing this atrocity in real time, live-streaming genocidal acts of destruction and death.

Barter's work is wide-ranging in both its research and its implications. To highlight this, the four respondents to *Theopolitics in the Era of the Witness* approach the discussion from a variety of perspectives, both academic and practical. Bringing together a constructive and critical dialogue that addresses concerns from politics, theology, ecology, psychology, and history not only exhibits the wide-ranging contribution of Barter's work but also the fruitful questions that may be posed to a book such as this. This exchange occurred originally at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society in Winnipeg in June 2026. The facilitated dialogue there was its own witness to the vibrancy of critical theology in Canada.

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¹ Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025). References to Barter's book are found in the text of this introduction.

Witness, Refusal, and the Vindication of the Oppressed

By Ryan Turnbull

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In 1940, Walter Benjamin articulated a vision of an angel bearing witness to the piled-up wreckage of the one long catastrophe of history.¹ In Jane Barter's 2025 monograph, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*,² we discover that Benjamin's angel does not merely have a temporality but also has an affiliated geography: the contested territories of settler-colonial nations. Barter persuasively weaves together accounts from the settler-colonial societies of Israel, Canada, and South Africa. In assembling these geographies, Barter reveals the subtle theopolitical structure of settler colonialism—especially how it routinely recruits the witnesses to and of mass atrocity into fodder for the “inventive settler”³ narration of these societies such that settler colonial nations prove immune to the critiques of even the most articulate witnesses.

Taking her cues from Benjamin's “weak messianism,” Barter articulates a powerful refusal of the “inventive settler.” The inventive settler, according to the settler-colonial triad of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, is the hegemonic narrator of settler societies that at once guarantees settler futurity and naturalizes structures of domination and oppression that define “slave” and “indigenous” in settler societies. Though not explicitly using these categories,⁴ Barter deftly reveals the various strategies by which the role of the “inventive settler” appropriates witnesses to mass atrocity and transforms the confessions of their trauma into a shared currency of exchange through which both victims and perpetrators can articulate their existence. This translation of trauma became excruciatingly clear in Barter's discussion of the Anglican Church of Canada Primate, Michael Peers, in his apology for the harms of residential schools. Peers' apology translated the wounds inflicted by a genocidal system operated by the Church into wounds that the Church itself bears and, more personally, wounds and grief that Peers as Primate vicariously bears in the performance of his apology (77). While it is undoubtedly the case that the Church is in need of healing, the blurring together of the wounds of those “sinned against” with the moral hazard wounds of those “sinning” in the moment of apology serves as an almost textbook example of a “settler move to innocence” that uses the cover of shared trauma to diagnose our common political challenge as one of “healing” rather than attending to the thornier questions of Indigenous sovereignty and Land Back.

For Barter, the ubiquity of trauma—the trauma of victims, witnesses, and perpetrators—becomes the

shared medium through which recognition and, so the promise goes, reconciliation are made possible (92). Because Christian theology depends on redemption coming through trauma, faithful testimony to trauma seems to offer the possibility of transformation *through the testimony itself*. This transformative possibility of testimony, Barter argues, was particularly exploited in the South African context as Archbishop Desmond Tutu presided over the performance of testimony from perpetrators and victims alike, bent toward the shared project of healing South Africa and transforming it into the Rainbow Nation wherein all people are recognized. Yet, this performance of testimony leaves unaltered the political economy of the settler states that deploy these techniques. Land and capital are left undisturbed and the structural conditions of domination are left untouched even as discrete traumas are confessed and repented of. Barter goes so far as to note that this performance in fact forecloses on the possibility of unsettling those structures of domination, and so she refuses the false eschatology of transformative testimony, seeking to defer resolution indefinitely for the sake of the oppressed (149).

But is deferral enough? The “weak messianism” that Barter develops throughout her book to refuse the foreclosure of the inventive settler on the victims of history is vital. As Barter has elsewhere argued in an extended critique of Stephen Harper's 2008 apology, the inventive settler cannot be permitted to “turn the page” on various “dark chapters” of history in order to preserve futurities for the hegemon that once again consign the victims of mass atrocity to the piled-up wreckage of history.⁵ But while deferring foreclosure upon victims is surely necessary, when will they be vindicated? Barter's “remnant witnessing” is politically crucial, for it forestalls the closure of futurities wherein justice can be secured for victims, where missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls can be found, where Palestinian life is made possible. But while endlessly deferring the ability of the inventive settler to foreclose on these futurities seems necessary, can a future be realized where justice, even proximate justice, is realized for victims? Perhaps the bill is too big to ever be repaid, but it seems to me that without some account of even a penultimate vindication for the victims of mass atrocity, we risk setting in motion precisely the cycles of resentment that have transformed witnesses to the Shoah into perpetual justification for an Israeli nationalist project that is performing against Palestinian life in uncanny similitude many of the worst atrocities perpetrated in the Holocaust some 80 years ago. What might an iterative approach to victim testimony look like? Could there be a generational mechanism, such that no one event like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can ever fully move on from the wounds left by genocide, while also

offering new ways to achieve proximate justice now when the limits of the last settlement are realized?⁶

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1 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–64 at 257–58.

2 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025). References to Barter's book are found in the text of this response.

3 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 14ff.

4 Although Tuck and Yang are clearly in the background, see especially Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, 131.

5 Jane Barter, "When Sorry Is Not Good Enough: The Displaced Christology of Canada's 2008 Apology," *Modern Believing* 62, no. 3 (2021): 252–61, <https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2021.17>.

6 While Barter thoroughly critiques the logic of the politics of recognition, nevertheless some sort of procedural recurring recognition process seems necessary to avoid the build-up of resentment that indefinite deferral seems to inevitably require. See James Tully, "Recognition and Dialogue: The Emergence of a New Field," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (2004): 84–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369823042000269401>.

The Aims of Redemption and Jane Barter's *Theopolitics in the Era of the Witness*

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I am honoured to be in conversation with Jane Barter's *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*. It is the role of the scholar to apply a very particular lens onto a very particular problem. We do this not because it is the only lens available (and indeed it can confound those using a different lens), but because we might be able to see something new and incite change if we apply our honed strengths toward a critical question. Likewise, it is the role of the theologian to register why a particular question matters, and for whom, and to then demonstrate how the intellectual life can remain grounded in love. This brings us to Barter, who, using the lens of theopolitics, discerns a momentous question: How can the phenomenon of bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust have led a persecuted people to prop up a nation-state that goes on to duplicate those horrors onto others, with an impunity wrought by their very commitment to "Never Again"?¹

To begin to answer this question, Barter curates the robust scholarly conversation around the history of testimony as it produces the Christian-coded archetype of "the witness" and tracks the shifting demands of witnessing to the current mass atrocities against Palestinian life. This is an ambitious undertaking. We move from the early accounts of Holocaust survival in the written work of Primo Levi and Paul Celan, through the development of Holocaust archives, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions of South Africa and Canada. In our collective desire to *not* abandon witnesses to the unspeakable horrors they have faced—both Primo Levi and Paul Celan eventually succumbed to despair—witnessing to horrors takes a therapeutic, cathartic turn and thus gets caught up in the promise of redemption. Redemption itself as colonizer? Barter is careful here. She suggests that

atrocious and trauma have been colonized by a "faulty witness," one who hovers above history, beyond reproach because of their wounds, unquestionable and unquestioned, justified (and here we get specific) in their genocide of Palestinian people (140).²

Through the lens of theopolitics, Barter demonstrates how theological concepts such as redemption are "recapitulated in political formulations" and moves us toward a moral reckoning for the violence that has been wrought in the name of healing (8). This is particularly helpful in my own thinking, as Barter's moral reckoning is both concrete and temporal. I get the strong sense that the last thing Barter wants is for her scholarship in *Theopolitics* to produce another kind of "pure knowledge" that shuffles us beyond the structures at play within the demands of history (90). Using Walter Benjamin's vision of "remnant witnessing" and "weak messianic identity," Barter suggests that for us to become "better witnesses," witnessing must relinquish its forward-looking rush toward a new future and sustain, for a while longer than perhaps comfortable, a backward-looking posture of lament.³ Such attention to the past informs the necessary political analysis and organizing of the "better witness," one that resists atrocity without simply reproducing suffering in a new location. These two characteristics of a better kind of witness constitute, in part, what Barter suggests could be a new politics of the "tradition of the oppressed" (152). It is the third characteristic that I see as inhabiting the tradition of the apophatic in Christian theology in a way that lends itself to my own lens: the fundamental stance of the better witness is renunciatory. Barter uses the term "renunciatory" to describe the willingness "to reframe one's own cause for the sake of another who suffers" (152). In other words, the sufferer must resist the temptation to enshrine their (our!) vision of the future. As history has taught us, any vision of the human, of society, of the shared world may be good for some but not good for all. Therefore, the vision must be revisited and realigned toward the inclusively common good.

“Yes” to better witnessing (though as my own experience in the Fortunoff Archive and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada suggests, good luck trying to get an individual witness to conform to much of anything). But, why not better redemption? The theological category of redemption becomes the unexamined concept operating tacitly in these negotiations. The aim of redemption itself must certainly seek the kind of apophatic political practice that resists the workings of colonization.

I gesture toward the theological in part because it is not the scope of psychoanalysts mentioned in the text (Laub and Felman) to guide how symbols function in our society. But it is the job of theologians (60). Has not the Christian notion of redemption itself been “enveloped by mystique” and an easy futurity that obscures the mechanisms of harm?⁴ That humans hope in the midst of despair is remarkable, but the vision that hope affords can “crystallize” and be “weaponized.”⁵ Redemption, like the better witness, must be invested in the flourishing of *all* living things, and the human participation in redemption must be concerned with the here and now: Barter’s political analysis and organizing.⁶

The capacity to imagine our version of redemption as divinely sanctioned and beyond reproach is built into what Paul Tillich calls the “structure of ambiguity.”⁷ The human capacity to mistake the finite for the infinite is natural, as all the tools we have at our disposal exist in the finite realm. That realm, which includes language and symbols, is ambiguous, capable of being used for good or harm. It is the apophatic theologians who give us practices that help us to not cling to finite things too tightly, lest we cast them in the divine image. Redemption is associated with the infinite—however, to name it and aim at it is to forge it into a tool that, like any tool, acts imperfectly, often obscuring some lives, some living things, as less worthy. In our hands, there is no guarantee that redemption will enact the law of love.⁸ If redemption itself were to take on Benjamin’s “weak messianic identity,” if suffering was mourned and not colonized by some notion of a greater purpose, if redemption was cast as concrete and renunciatory in the ways Barter has described, could not redemption, distinguished from her description of the “aims of

redemption,” maintain its relationship to witnessing?⁹ I am hanging on for a couple of reasons. First, redemption and its association with the infinite realm is often only loosely interrogated. But second, and most fundamentally, I wish Primo Levi and Paul Celan had not been abandoned to their despair. Lament, and the better witness, are structured by ambiguity as well. They, too, are capable of good or harm.

What does all this mean for Palestine? For this is why Barter writes. Can we embrace the moral reckoning she calls forth and resist the further diminishing of life? As Barter suggests at the end of her work, we cannot do this alone. The Christian imaginary around what it means to witness has its limits, and the conversation must expand out from here.

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1 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 46–47. Barter discusses this responsive cry of the Shoah at length, including in her chapter on “The Witness as Bearer of History.” References to Barter’s book are found in the text of this response.

2 Barter speaks of faulty witnessing at several points in the text, notably in her discussion of the Palestinian slaughter in Gaza, the memory of which is framed by the kind of faulty witnessing she has established as her main argument.

3 Barter’s goal is not to denigrate the witness but to unmask the evolution of the production of the witness in service of some kind of aspirational future that glosses over the concrete structures of the past that gave rise to the harm and thus build capacity for a better witness. This restrained inclination toward the future is part of Benjamin’s “weak messianic identity.” See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 18, for example.

4 The witness as enveloped by mystique is discussed as part of what establishes a sacrality and untouchability around survivor testimony. See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 70.

5 Barter uses these words to describe what happens to the politics of witness, which she actively resists in her three suggestions. See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 151.

6 What the divine does with redemption, beyond the here and now, is, by definition, not our work.

7 This concept flows through Tillich’s writing and lectures. See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 32.

8 That there is no guarantee that anything we do will enact the law of love is a concept of Tillich’s.

9 Barter identifies the aims of redemption with the theodical impulse of witnessing. This impulse is seen when witnessing moves toward the vindication of suffering, a focus on futurity, tacit soteriology, and the conferring of new identity. See Barter, *Theopolitics*, 139.

Remnant Witness in a Time of Ungrievable Lives and Holocides

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Jane Barter’s *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* ends by telling us that the book has done very little in the way of “theology proper.”¹¹ This strikes an odd note, perhaps, for a book that is so strongly theological and that in style and tone calls to mind the concept of *par-rhesia*. Barter writes with urgency and boldness. The work itself witnesses. For theologians writing in this

present moment and even reflecting on the decade that has preceded us, we know we have been witness to countless violent and traumatic events.

For a theologian like Barter, who lives on occupied land and who, I am sure, reflects daily on what it means to live within the violence and trauma of such a space, the act of witnessing is built into the everyday. Calling our attention to the struggle to make sense of such “witnessing” also suggests that for political theology, a liberative act is performed in the writing or the telling. However, as Barter herself queries, when we bear witness publicly, what is really achieved? Is the confessing, the acknowledgement, collectively healing? Are the victims of these atrocities retraumatized through some of these processes of retelling and witness bearing? Who is allowed to speak, and how? Who is grievable? These are, of course, all questions that Barter, in much more eloquent terms, raises.

The great strength and the boldness of the book lie in the ways that Barter does not valorize witness, memorialization, or confession but demonstrates, through a variety of examples, how these can both harm and heal. Barter, importantly, reminds us of the danger of triumphant witnessing. For Barter, it is very clear that public trials and witness do not “end there” but must be a constant exercise, constant work, because the consciousness raising and solidarity that emerge from these is how political resistance is built. Importantly, this is also the role of theopolitics—to disrupt through reflection, humility, and spirituality, but not triumph.

It was a strange experience to read and be asked to reflect on Barter’s work in a time when we are witnessing, almost every day, terrible political atrocities the world over. By this, I do not only mean the genocide in Palestine, but also the atrocities being visited upon the populations of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Videos and photographs of women and scared children fleeing war competed for our attention. Poetry and written testimonies from collectives and human rights groups are readily available, providing excruciating detail of the grief, anger, and violence being experienced.² Not long after I received the printed copy of Barter’s text, we began to see the same techniques of carpet bombing and displacement that Israel had used in the Gaza Strip on Lebanon. A petrol storage facility in Tehran, Iran, was struck by an Israeli missile, burning the air around it and sending hot oily rain down onto the populace.

These are things that we are witnesses to but for which no trial, no confession, and no justice seem forthcoming. Journalists documenting these atrocities, from Palestine to Sudan, are being silenced. In the case of Sudan, for example, there is documented fact that each side—the Sudanese Armed Forces and

the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces—are supported by either the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia and that the country is a proxy for the war between these two nations.³ These resource-rich countries are powerful on the global stage.

Protesters who are demanding an end to these brutalities are being gaslit or arrested. In the United Kingdom, where I live, terrorism charges were brought against Palestine Action activists. A trial held for some of these individuals also denied the defence barrister his closing speech—thus effectively silencing the possibility for any spoken or written witness to the atrocities these individuals were protesting.⁴ This raises the question: What happens when witness is not allowed? What happens when the perpetrator of an atrocity is excused their brutality? What is a theopolitics of witness when only certain lives can be witnessed to, when only certain events are grievable, and when memorialization is denied?

As I was reflecting on the human cost, my thoughts also turned to those costs that perhaps are less recognized. When we speak of what is grievable, there is a hierarchy in terms of which human lives are attended to and also the seriousness with which non-human life is drawn into these conversations. In all these places where brutalities are being inflicted on human populations, other parts of the created world are also suffering.

In Ukraine, for example, aside from facing death from bombs and other missiles, birds are often caught in the protective nets placed above roads. Sometimes these birds are rescued, but many suffer major injuries to their wings and limbs. After the Vietnam War, it was found that nearly 50% of mangroves had been destroyed, along with natural habitats for rare species such as leopards and bears. From Ukraine, to Sudan, to Congo, to Lebanon and Palestine, missile fire damages forests and vegetation, trenches destroy natured habitats; animals are often seen shaking because of trauma from constant bombs, and the deliberate targeting of economic assets like factories and refineries pollutes air, soil, and water. The use of chemical weapons in Gaza has destroyed olive groves and farmlands for generations. When Donald Trump wages war on the Persian Gulf, he is also making more precarious the lives of a marine community of reefs, hawksbills, 700 species of fish, green sea turtles, and the world’s second-largest population of dugongs. It is because of what war does to the environment that activists and academics have long pressed for the recognition of ecocide as a war crime in and of itself. First appearing in international discourse as a desire to enhance the protection of the environment during armed conflict, it now also includes the need to curtail the excesses of corporate crime and extractivism and to respond to

the ever-more urgent climate crisis. It remains a complex conversation within international law because it interacts at the various levels of international humanitarian law, international criminal law, and domestic law. International lawyers have demonstrated how pathways for criminal accountability involved charges of a crime against all kind, or what some activists and academics term *holocide*—the deliberate annihilation of an entire social and ecological fabric.⁵

The point of what might seem like a strange tangent is to call back to Barter's thoughts on the remnant. For Barter, the remnant is the "trace of the dead," where loss and death are not converted into meaning but where suffering speaks into the present. The scorched lands, the unusable orchards, the silence of areas that once bustled with multiple species are also an important remnant for us to take into account because when the humans are dead, the land may remain scorched for generations. The land speaks. The land screams. So, too, do the decimation of dugong populations, the burning petrol on a jasmine tree, the chemicals leached into soil. These material harms turn an accusatory gaze upon human atrocities.

Ecotheologians often turn our attention here to the cosmological Christ, the Christ who entered *into all of Creation*: God's incarnation in Christ reaches into the heart of material, biological, and social existence. How do we think about solidarity and remnant witnessing

in this cosmological sense? Where we as humans have caused holocides, Barter is correct that we need to remain with unresolved grief but also anger and sinfulness for the almost incomprehensible nature of violences that have occurred.

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1 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 160.

2 See Atef Alshaer, "Writing Gaza during a Genocide," *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 16 (2024): 6–12;

Nisrin Elamin, "The Politics of Hunger in Sudan," *Transition* 138, no. 1 (2025): 109–27, <https://doi.org/10.2979/tra.00077>.

3 Bilal Irfan, Eyad Ali, Amal Elamin, et al. "What Are the Drivers in the Neglect of Sudan's War and Humanitarian Crisis? Reframing Global Disengagement," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 42, no. 1 (2026): 176–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2025.2572942>; Abigail Kabandula and Federico Donelli, "Drivers of Influence of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in East Africa: Evidence from Sudan," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 31, no. 4 (2024): 389–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2025.2457061>.

4 Nandini Archer, "Inside the Palestine Action Trial that Could Redefine Protest as Terrorists," *Open Democracy*, June 10, 2026, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/inside-the-palestine-action-trial-that-could-redefine-protest-as-terrorism>.

5 For further reading on these topics, see Rachel Killean, "Ecocide's Evolving Relationship with War," *Environment and Security*, June 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796251347111>; Matthew Gillett, "Ecocide, Environmental Harm and Framework Integration at the International Criminal Court," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 29, no. 6 (2025): 1009–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2433660>.

Trauma, Woundedness, Suffering, and the Witness: Reflections and a Question

By Doris M. Kieser

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I thank Jane Barter for writing this very thought-provoking book.¹ Her work invites us into her world of theopolitics and inspires in me reflections and questions from my commingled theologian and therapist self.

As I made my way through Barter's book, I was struck primarily by how frequently trauma, suffering, woundedness, healing, and reconciliation were adjoined in her exploration of the witness giving testimony to mass atrocities inflicted by humans on other humans: the Shoah, apartheid, and Canadian Indian Residential Schools. And the hunch that somehow the trauma, suffering, and woundedness would be healed and reconciliation effected, individually and corporately, by the very fact of giving public voice to the experiences.

She refutes this possibility by naming the social and institutional structures that maintain the scaffolds

of oppression systemically imposed upon human persons, which she names "racial capitalism and Neo-imperialism,"² even while the witnesses give testimony. These structures and the perpetrators within elude scrutiny when the vocal witness, the individual, is foregrounded as the victim (which they are) somehow separately from the whole of humanity. We are invited to enter the articulation of the survivor's trauma and work toward healing and reconciliation, without the benefit of dismantling the master's house (or scaffolding), precisely because the work is undertaken with the master's own tools, as Audre Lorde observes.³

Barter outlines the many factors and reasons why such a task is generally destined to fail: why healing and reconciliation will not be manifest by public testimony alone. Not because public testimony is necessarily an unworthy effort (it might or might not be), but because disclosing trauma is, in the first instance, a private act of fortitude. While I cannot speak to the experiences of the many witnesses who have attested to their wounds of trauma, I can say that the shame, guilt, and anger that frequently accompany trauma are meant, first and foremost, to be explored in a space that will hold those emotions sacred in the heart of the survivor. When

such feelings are indiscriminately open to the scrutiny of the hoi polloi, they are made profane. They become less about the victim/survivor and the circumstances that brought them to that place and more about the spectacle of public indignation. Thus, as Barter notes, the *event* of their trauma is the focal point to the hearers, and the survivor's personal self is a vehicle to denounce the event.

Fundamentally, however, the event itself is not the trauma: it is the cause of the trauma. That is why people who experience the exact same event respond differently over time. My trauma is not your trauma. My woundedness is not your woundedness. My suffering is not your suffering. And none of these experiences (trauma, woundedness, suffering) are interchangeable. When we confuse the event with the trauma, it is far easier to promote healing and reconciliation because the event has passed. The trauma is over. But for the person living in trauma, the event is embedded in their psyche, their body, their relationships, their future—and memory of the event regurgitates the trauma, often in unexpected and uncontrolled ways. Once victim/survivors' own trauma is disclosed, they are left not to find healing for themselves but to forward the communal healing of the rupture from the event. Reconciliation becomes, as Barter points out, performative and largely to the benefit of the perpetrators managing the drama of disclosure.

Thus, the individual, concrete, and lasting experience of trauma is lost in the spectacle and rush to reconciliation (noticeably absent the atonement). Trauma is not a monolith easily carved into a *pietà* of compassion. It is rather more slippery and gelatinous, finding its own way into the cracks and crevices of the human spirit. It shapeshifts its way from living being to living being, inviting the personal exploration that attends to woundedness. This ought not to be, I suggest, the stuff of public consumption: personal trauma adjudicated, in the first instance, in the public sphere rarely ends well for the survivor. For until the survivor is at home with their trauma (sees it, understands it, enters it, and wanders through it), public consumption will serve to diminish them, their story, and their possibility for healing.

Arising from this perspective is my attention to trauma itself and how the term is used in disparate ways.

My one question for Barter is: What exactly do you mean by “trauma” in the context of theopolitics? It is unclear to me how you understand the term and the reality. As a therapist, I do not equate trauma with suffering or woundedness. Suffering and woundedness frequently accompany a person's trauma, but not all suffering and woundedness arise from trauma. The indiscriminate use of the word “trauma” in our general vocabulary makes it susceptible to reduction to a concept. It is, rather, I suggest, a reality that extends from a rupture in one's equilibrium, one's expectation for life experience, one's sense of self, one's sense of community, one's possibility for joy, one's capacity for trust, one's very body. It does not require another's mirroring of self to be real.⁴ Rather, it is manifest in the day-to-day-ness of living in an unpredictable, fragile, and hostile world that is not of one's own making. Although it can be addressed (trauma need not have the last word), the survivor of the trauma, the one who has endured the traumatic event(s), ought to be our focus, not necessarily their witness. As Bessel van der Kolk posits in *The Body Keeps the Score*,⁵ trauma is held in bodies: in the vigilance of the hyperactive amygdala, the neurological rewiring that diminishes memory capacity, the chronic physical illness regularly recalling the trauma, or the draw to self-harm from the diminished hippocampus managing logic and regulation; trauma often invokes a messy and angry survivor. In this sense, we do not witness trauma well or easily. Our social discomfort with the traumatized survivor is manifest in our paltry resources available to survivors of all manner of traumatic events, precisely based on the political will that allows merely for the performance of the survivor rather than the reality of their expression of trauma.

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1 Jane Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

2 Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, 4.

3 Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Toronto: Penguin, 2018).

4 Barter, *Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness*, re: Caruth, 88ff.

5 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2014).

Theopolitics and the Era of the Witness: Author's Response

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I want to begin by thanking my colleagues for taking the time to read my book so carefully and for responding with such depth and clarity—I am humbled and honoured—and to the organizers and editors who made the panel and publication possible.¹ Through their responses, I have discovered new questions and new paths to follow as I continue to think through the tangled web of memory, testimony, theology, and politics.

I will begin by responding to Anupama Ranawana's intervention. When I read Anu's response, it evoked in me profound gratitude for her steadfast challenge to contemporary theology, including critical theologies, for its failure to address massive suffering in Palestine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and—as is evident in this fulsome response—this suffering planet and all its creatures.²

My project takes for granted what Anu aptly identifies as the asymmetrical structures of relation that treat some lives as grievable and others as dispensable, and it insists that these affective and symbolic asymmetries are material and political in nature. The lives not testified to in our memorial reckonings are the very lives deemed inconvenient to the march of colonialism and racial capitalism. She names them: birds, olive trees, frightened animals shaking in the aftermath of carpet bombing, disappearing sea turtles, and skies raining hot oil, seeping into and contaminating the earth for generations to come. In short, this *is* holocide: the deliberate and unceasing destruction of life, a death that eclipses the possibility of regeneration or healing for generations.

Ranawana is correct when she suggests that the politics of the remnant wishes to grieve these losses, too; indeed, it wishes to prophesy over the valley of dry bones. What is compelling to me about Walter Benjamin's messianic remnant is that hope is not contingent upon the redemption of these subjects of violence into a renewed humanity or ecology. Rather, hope is contingent upon the *interruption* of present structures that would render them contingent and expendable. This other register is one that sees each sparrow fall. It remembers and bears witness, not for the sake of any calculated political end but because it grieves all life, and it grieves especially the ungrievable.³

I would like to treat the challenges of Christina Conroy and Ryan Turnbull together, since they offer complementary critiques. Both press me to articulate a

positive theology of redemption grounded in a hope beyond wide-scale suffering that I seek to attend to in my work.

Despite its sweeping (one may say hubristic) engagement with diverse moments of contemporary politics and biblical, theological, and philosophical conceptions of testimony, my book has a rather modest aim. The question I sought to interrogate was not whether there can be redemption—divine or political—from atrocity, or what redemption looks like, but rather how testifying to trauma and atrocity becomes captured⁴ by the very forces it seeks to unsettle precisely through its truncated accounts of redemption.

My interlocutors are nevertheless right to ask why I choose to remain apophatic about the nature of redemption. My own sense is that any articulation I might give risks reproducing colonial notions of redemption's temporality and end. And yet, throughout the book, I defer to those who, I think, have earned the right to speak into a future beyond the endless replication of human violence and despair. These prophets include Frantz Fanon, whom I will discuss in a moment, Dian Million,⁵ Glen Coulthard,⁶ Karl Marx (*passim*), and, above all in this book, Walter Benjamin—who ties redemption not to a specific community or temporal telos but to the breaking down of such forms. Redemption does not belong to a single people, nation, or identity. It cuts across them. Identity here is neither denied nor *recognized*,⁷ to use Turnbull's terms, but de-captured—detached from nationalism and sovereignty and reoriented toward solidarity with all those presently subjected to violence.

Proximate justice can and must be sought and even achieved. Chapter 5 offers the example of the Khulumani Support Group, which demanded reparations for victims of apartheid and even sought to bring to trial large international corporations, including IBM, that directly benefited from apartheid. But we cannot confuse such proximate ends with the material transformations required for a fuller form of justice to occur. In South Africa, as in Canada, that fuller justice would involve the utter transformation of the enduring and wily settler colony.

I also should say more about the Nietzschean concept of resentment here,⁸ which Turnbull presses me to consider. When Israeli UN ambassador Gilad Erdan appeared before the General Assembly wearing a yellow Star of David badge, explicitly invoking the Shoah in defense of Israel's military actions in Gaza, he was making a case for proximate justice, which he, like his fellow Likud party members, understood to be nothing less than Israel's full control of the Gaza Strip.⁹ While Nietzsche locates resentment historically among the powerless, modern states frequently weaponize the language of victimhood and historical injury

to renounce power even while exercising it without restraint. The question becomes not resentment vs. justice, but rather, *whose* justice and how are affects such as resentment deployed in testimony to entitle already dominant nations' "will to power"?

To return to Christina Conroy's suggestion that an account of redemption is what enables us to resist despair: that may be true, but I would not conclude from this that Primo Levi and Paul Celan were "abandoned to despair." Both displayed, in my view, a kind of hope: not in a futurity in which all Jewish life would be safe from persecution and death, but precisely its opposite, namely that Jewishness survives in its traces, in diasporic state, which regards an ethnonationalist state as the very antithesis of Jewish redemption. While it is true that both men died by suicide, as did Walter Benjamin, I think we make a grave and moralizing leap when we say that these acts, known only to them and to their God, are signs of despair rather than, for example, a hope that transcends this world and the tragic political possibilities available to them. I am haunted, for example, that Paul Celan visited the newly formed State of Israel only once and never returned. As Kafka put it, "Oh, there is hope, an infinite amount of hope, just not for us."¹⁰

I now wish to turn to Doris Kieser's practical challenges to the theoretical work I bring. Her critique is an important one as she asks the question straightforwardly: "What exactly do you mean by 'trauma' in the context of theopolitics?"

The task I set before myself in writing this book was, again, rather limited. It had to do with exploring the nature of testimony to atrocity and its relationship to theological forms of witnessing. In this context, the notion of trauma became a prominent one, especially within post-Christian settings such as South Africa and Canada during their Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Here, I am not examining the phenomenon of individual trauma itself, but rather how the concept of trauma is used by theorists and, eventually, becomes deeply embedded within public consciousness. Following the work of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk¹¹ and Cathy Caruth,¹² trauma becomes ubiquitous. I use the term "discourse" intentionally because I believe, following Michel Foucault,¹³ that even psychiatrists are caught up in regimes of power/knowledge when classifying such a seemingly self-evident concept as trauma. I am not alone in this critique of the "Empire of Trauma."¹⁴ I rely heavily on critics of the turn toward trauma, such as Dian Million, Didier Fassin, and Richard Rechtman.

If I were so bold as to reground the concept of trauma, I would do so through Frantz Fanon, who, in his clinical practice as a psychiatrist in Algeria, refused to isolate the victim of trauma from the political circumstances

of colonial harm. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he explains that when it comes to traumatic injury, "the events giving rise to the disorder are chiefly the blood-thirsty and pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices and the firm impression that people have of being caught up in a veritable Apocalypse."¹⁵ It is such analysis that I find wanting in many trauma theories today.

That many live in a veritable apocalypse today there can be no denying. To seek to attend to these lives is a fraught and delicate task, one that I cannot claim to have accomplished adequately in my book. For this reason, I am grateful to my colleagues, whose careful witness to this work has no doubt brought me closer.

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1 I thank Timothy Harvie, Ryan Turnbull, and Nick Olkovich for their behind-the-scenes labour.

2 Anupama Ranawana, *A Liberation for the Earth: Climate, Race, and Cross* (London: SCM Press, 2022).

3 The term *grievability* is borrowed from Judith Butler, who states: "Without grievability, there is no life, or rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead 'there is a life that will never have been lived,' sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost." Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 15.

4 On the concept of capture, see chapter 13, "7000 B.C.: Apparatus of Capture," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, ed. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 424–73.

5 Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

6 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

7 See Glen Coulthard, chapter 1, "The Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts," in *Red Skin White Masks*, on the problems with the Hegelian politics of recognition. See also Frantz Fanon, chapter 7, "The Black Man and Recognition," in *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

9 Anna Barsky, "'Full Israeli Control of Gaza': Likud Members' Plan for Post-Hamas Rule," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-782884>.

10 Franz Kafka, "Conversation with Max Brod," quoted in Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 141.

11 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

12 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

13 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

14 Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

15 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 202.