

Trauma, Memory and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel

Abstracts

“To speak of this you would need the tongue of a god”: On Representing the Trauma of Township Violence (Derek Attridge)

It is winter, 1986, on the Cape Flats, and the elderly white lady finds that she cannot produce words equal to the horror of the scene she is witnessing in the shanty-town, where the shacks of the inhabitants are being burned by vigilantes. In J. M. Coetzee's 1990 novel *Age of Iron*, the author himself does, of course, describe the scene, reflecting in his choice of language Mrs Curren's familiarity with classical literature and its accounts of traumatic events. It is an outsider's description, evincing bafflement as well as shock. For what we are invited to read as an insider's description of a similar scene occurring ten years earlier, we can turn to *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, Elsa Joubert's transcription/rewriting of a black woman's experiences as narrated to her over a two-year period and first published in Afrikaans in 1978. This paper will compare the narrative strategies of the two authors in attempting to represent the trauma of township violence – marked not just by savage actions but by confusion as to who is friend and who is enemy – and consider the theoretical implications of their choices.

Trauma Refracted: J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (David Attwell)

J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* completes a cycle of autobiographical fictions which begins with *Boyhood* and continues with *Youth*. In the third and most recent of these works, the protagonist begins publishing his early fiction. Coetzee's account of this phase of the author's life emphasizes the personal trauma – the word does not seem exaggerated – of his forced return to South Africa after an attempted emigration. The portrayal of the young John is orchestrated through multiple voices brought into being by an English biographer, Vincent. The effect is a double refraction: the facts of the author's life are altered to suggest a particular condition, and the condition itself is rendered comic through the mediation of Vincent's various subjects. The paper explores the possibility of trauma being culturally disseminated, to the point of defining the terms of identity not only for victims and perpetrators, but also for witnesses.

Permanent Risk: When Crisis Defines a Nation's Writing (Elleke Boehmer)

Across the first decade of the twentieth century prominent critics of South African literature productively moved the focus of the country's literary debate beyond the Manichean oppositions and overriding preoccupation with race that had previously defined the field, and towards a concern with HIV/AIDS, conflicted space, the environment, and so on. Even so, underlying these important shifts, the mode

through which South African writing continued to be read was one of crisis – of crisis following crisis, virtually without let up. Drawing on the two ground-breaking collections of South African reportage, *At Risk* and *Load-Shedding*, this paper will speculate what is involved when a national literature is thus identified. Is the fixation on crisis and trauma a cultural and psychological overhang from the greatest trauma the country has known, apartheid? Do we here encounter, despite appearances, and despite critical protestations to the contrary, a form of resentment and repeating upon the present? Are critics as well as writers hooked on trauma and crisis as a mode of awareness? Following on David Scott's valuable work on the generic structures of postcolonial historiography, the paper will go on to investigate what other possible modes are released by the insightful and investigative future writing of *At Risk* and *Load Shedding*, 'writing on and over the edge of South Africa'.

**“Is not the Truth the Truth?”: The Political and the Personal
in the Writings of Gillian Slovo and Jann Turner
(Geoffrey V. Davis)**

The novelists Gillian Slovo and Jann Turner tragically have in common the fact that their activist parents – Ruth First and Rick Turner – were assassinated by agents of the apartheid regime. In her courageous biographical work, *Every Secret Thing*, Slovo has recounted how long after the event she undertook the traumatic task of returning to South Africa to confront her mother's killer. That such killings had a significant impact at the time is confirmed by the South African psychologist Don Foster, who, in a recent interview, explains that the assassination of Rick Turner was “an early catalyst for me in getting involved in the anti-apartheid movement.”

In this paper I want to analyse how both Slovo and Turner, who experienced terrible trauma in their own lives, represent in their fiction the traumas experienced by their fellow South Africans. The novels which best illustrate this are Slovo's *Red Dust* (2000) and Turner's *Heartland* (1997) and *Southern Cross* (2002).

Through the medium of the thriller, where “nothing is as it seems,” all three texts address – partly with reference to the deliberations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the problem of uncovering and coming to terms with the truth about the past. They deal with the deep divisions within South African society both during and after apartheid, the institutional violence of a system of dispossession, the complicity of the wider society in the crimes of apartheid, the legacy of betrayal, the anguish of personal loss, the trauma of shared guilt, and the often harrowing experiences of the liberation struggle and of exile.

What do these novels reveal to us of the trauma of whole communities and of the possibility of healing? How do these narratives, often focused on the pain of the individual members of small communities, embrace the trauma of a whole nation? And what hope do they hold of reconciliation, of change, and of overcoming the multiple traumas of the past?

**Stylistic and/or Affective Considerations: Emblematic Depiction of Apartheid
Trauma in Mongane Wally Serote's Novel *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981)
(Annie Gagiano)**

While Serote's novel was criticised by Nick Visser (in terms of certain stylistic qualities), Kelwyn Sole (for its political vision) and Njabulo Ndebele (in terms of its

affective dimension), this paper will argue that among South African apartheid narratives this text stands out for its complex, powerful yet subtle delineations of varieties of trauma inflicted on the psyches of South Africans. It will argue also that at a time when the ways in which the apartheid past should be recalled, or the memory surmounted, are being debated, Serote's text (along with his early poetry) remains an important tool of imaginative, ethical and political education.

By scrutinising the perceptions and experiences ascribed to a variety of characters, the paper will delineate Serote's demonstration of apartheid's traumatising power – a quality of demonstration of affective damage that matters profoundly for its ability to teach how the apartheid system penetrated far more widely, deeply and damagingly than the revelations of the system's grossly violent abuses of human rights have indicated.

An examination of how the interactive effects of the text's stylistic and its affective dimensions (can) serve to help readers *realise* how apartheid influenced minds and emotions; memories, lifestyles and actions is the main undertaking of this paper.

**The Embodiment of Trauma:
"Speaking" Trauma in Public Testimony and Research Narratives
(Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela)**

This paper is based on public testimonies of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and research case material. The paper argues that trauma studies have been dominated by the notion of the "unspeakability" of trauma. In order to deepen understanding of the meaning of traumatic memory, at least from the perspective of victims and survivors of trauma, the discourse on trauma should shift lens and focus on others forms of representation of traumatic memory other than speech. In the conclusion section, the paper will consider ways in which images of the body have been used as part of the working through of trauma.

**Approaching the Public in Archive: Reflections on Violence, Narrative and
Official Mechanisms of Transitional Justice
(Yazier Henry)**

The public representation of witnessing, recovery and testimony after administrative, legal, historical and political violence always exist within certain socio-cultural, structural, economic, interpretive settings and narrative settings. The inherent and intersecting relations of power including the persistence of narratorial structures of dominance relate also to the post colonial experience of violence. Representations of violence are conversely impacted by these discursive mechanisms of narratorial power. This in turn has direct bearing on simultaneous and complex influences of contextual representativity accounting for both the representational experience and the actual experience of acts of trauma on the economics memory. This paper will reflect critically on the political, psychological and socio-economic inflections contained in the process of testimony, the experience of voice, and the complex meanings and framings attached to methodological abysms of space, time and location in the work of representing testimonies to violence in the literary realm of the public and the official record. It will address the difficulties associated with social and political elements of this process and focus directly on the ethical and methodological polemics embedded in the rights to appropriation, interpretation, representation and

the commoditization of the testimony to historical events of trauma for poetic licence, media freedom, academic freedom and discourse analysis. My paper will address these narratorial complexities as meta-ethical, meta-analytical and meta-theoretical questions related to subjective hearing locations and layers of listening (proximity, relationality) as these relate to positionality and the location of power to authorship and self-authorship. It will also critically explore the imbrications of voice and the politics of audibility as they relate to intentionality where such intentionality exists at the virtual nexus of multiple speaking positions and varying social locations. For this purpose I will consider carefully the work of Antjie Krog in *Country of My Skull*. I will also explore my own public testimony to the South African TRC and specifically its representation in the narrative production of this acclaimed text. I will focus my attention on the South African TRC with aim of drawing lessons for other such processes of its kind.

Avatars and Proxies: Memorialising the Pain of the Past Through Creating Alternative Worlds (Mandla Langa)

In 1996, Mark Gevisser conducted an interview with me on the slaying of my brother by operatives of the ANC, one of whom had been in my platoon when we did our military training in Angola.

One of Gevisser's questions was if I'd present the case to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and I replied that I wouldn't, for the simple reason that I feared to break down in public. In my mind, however, I'd already grappled with the horrific memory, through sublimating Ben's life's experience - including the shooting, the treachery that forms a major subset of an intimate crime of murder - into fiction. *The Memory of Stones*, published in 2000, deals with memory and the crisis of forgiveness; the *Lost Colours of the Chameleon*, 2009, is about a fictitious island ruled by a dynasty that's mortgaged its humanity to self-inflicted amnesia.

Trauma and the Turn to Affect (Ruth Leys)

In my paper I shall be asking: Is today's "affect theory" the new trauma theory? And what are the general implications of the recent turn to affect in the human and social sciences? I will argue against the idea of "affect" as a category that is inherently independent of thought and cognition, and against the idea that literary narratives and other representations of traumatic violence can be understood "affectively" without regard to what they mean.

It is in the blood (Sindiwe Magona)

What is trauma? What is the South African novel and who is writing it?

Psychiatrists, psychologists, and other social scientists define trauma as "an emotional shock that creates substantial and lasting damage to the psychological development of the individual." This, we are told, "can lead to neurosis ... it jars the mind or emotions..."

Given the South African situation, one would assume, therefore, that not all events were regarded as traumatic by the variously-classified peoples of apartheid South Africa. However, all South Africans were affected by apartheid albeit in different ways and/or to varying degrees. Today's writers cannot help but be informed by the past; thus the heart of it is in the telling. And that telling, the narrative, illustrates remembered or experienced trauma.

IT IS IN THE BLOOD will examine how the past is remembered [memory] in three novels: *Disgrace* (1999), *Mother to Mother* (1998), and *Coconut* (2007).

Out of the Mouths: Voices of Children in South African Literature (Susan Mann)

Why is it that writers often use children as vehicles of narration in the story-telling process, or as the protagonists in novels through which serious social issues are interwoven? Is it that the purity of a child's vision is refreshingly simple when juxtaposed against the shifting complexities of evolving societies? Is it the unabashed wonder that the child embodies, the legitimised capacity for the magical that buoys up a world weighed down by post-modern malcontent? Is it the vulnerability of a child, or even some of childhood's darker aspects that create intrigue?

In this paper, I will briefly contextualise the topic against some historical perceptions of children, before honing in on the possible function of several childhood characters in contemporary South African literature.

Replaying Trauma: Sue Williamson's and Zoë Wicomb's Dialogic Aesthetics of "Disconnected Images" and a "Mixed-up Tale" (Michael Meyer)

Sue Williamson's and Zoë Wicomb's dialogic aesthetics respond to the psychology of the traumatized individual, who involuntarily replays his/her terrible experience with psychosomatic immediacy (Van der Kolk & McFarlane), and to the "collective" therapy of the TRC, which aimed at integrating the trauma suffered under apartheid in a national narrative of reconciliation and progress. The artist and the writer aim neither at a transparent "imitation" of individual trauma in an art of commitment, which might invite the voyeuristic indulgence in horror and political correctness, nor at a linear narrative and closure, which would allow for detachment and the return to the ordinary (Ndebele). Williamson and Wicomb deliberately replay trauma in a dialogic aesthetics, which foregrounds the process of negotiating the past and its disruption by trauma. Their self-reflexive and dialogic explorations of "sharing" trauma in visual and verbal interaction reveal the difficulties – for the traumatized individual as well as for the various groups and the nation – of "coming to terms" with the past. Williamson's and Wicomb's works point out the gaps in the national project of coping with trauma, and complement the kind of historiography harnessed by ideology by focussing on individuals and groups neglected in the big picture.

Rethinking Religion in a Time of Trauma (Chris van der Merwe)

In the revised edition of *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, the editors, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue that "analyses of the sacred have been one of the most neglected, and may be one of the most rapidly expanding areas of post-colonial study". In South African literature, there are significant examples of literature on religious themes, especially produced in times of traumatic change. In my paper, I will discuss two novels which deal with the sacrifice of the innocent to save the community.

André P Brink's novel *Looking on Darkness* (published in Afrikaans as *Kennis van die aand*) was published three years before the decisive Soweto uprisings of 1976. At that time, Protestant Christianity mixed with Afrikaner nationalism formed the dominant ideology of Afrikaners. In his novel, Brink uses the suffering and death of the innocent Jesus, central in the world view of his readers, to undermine the conventional religion which condoned political injustice and focused on a life hereafter. The writings of the 16th century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, especially *The Dark Night of the Soul*, form the matrix of this novel. In the depiction of the love between the main characters, the "Coloured" man Joseph and his "white" beloved Jessica, the mystic quality of erotic love is explored and the inhumanity of the "Immorality Act" ruthlessly exposed.

In Etienne van Heerden's novel *Dertig nagte in Amsterdam* ("Thirty nights in Amsterdam" – 2008), the central character, Henk de Melker, a rather dreary museum assistant from the Eastern Cape, travels to Amsterdam in connection with the estate of his "deceased" aunt Zan (as he thinks). However, the aunt makes a reappearance, the two of them confront their past and re-imagine their future before they return to South Africa. Their journey ends on the grave of Wehmeyer, the aunt's lover of long ago. Wehmeyer, like Joseph in *Looking on Darkness*, has many characteristics of the archetypal scapegoat. He is an innocent victim, betrayed by his lover as well as by his comrades of the struggle. However, it is on his ashes that a new life becomes possible for Zan, and maybe also for Henk. Her dance on Wehmeyer's grave combines elements of various religions; it is an expression of mystic ecstasy, spiritual liberation and the discovery of her true self.

Especially in times of trauma, it seems, the archetype of the innocent scapegoat reappears; yet always in a new variation, shaped by the nature and needs of the times.

‘Postcolonialising’ Trauma: A Reading of Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (Anne Whitehead)

My paper opens by outlining the main issues in recent attempts to ‘postcolonialise’ trauma studies, an endeavour identified as central to the project that frames this conference. First, then, is the predominant focus of trauma studies on Euro-American events and histories, paradigmatically the Holocaust; second is the question of whether diagnostic models of trauma developed in the West remain culture bound, and the particular critical attention paid to the ‘event’ based model of trauma; finally, there is the question of whether individual psychology is appropriate to more socially and materially based traumas such as colonialism. The main body of the paper reads Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (1998) as an important corrective to the TRC,

which engages with many of the issues that have also defined the emergent 'postcolonial' trauma studies. Her narrative focuses on the harm caused to communities as well as to individuals, and she emphasises in particular the lasting and devastating effects of the forced removals. Magona also makes clear that the impact of such systemic forms of violence is felt most keenly by women in their everyday, material struggle to raise children in the townships, thereby asserting a more 'insidious' than 'event' based understanding of trauma. I also analyse Magona's resistance to homogenising narratives, both through her emphasis on the particular effects of apartheid on the women of the townships; and through her reference to the Xhosa Cattle Killing, which suggests that particular groups have distinct resources through which to interpret or understand the recent past. My paper concludes by opening up three broad questions which arise from my reading of Magona's novel, and which aim to provide a framework for wider discussion.