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Wor(l)ds of grief: Traumatic memory and literary witnessing in cross-cultural perspective

Considered in terms of a struggle over definitions of trauma and recovery, the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the criticisms levelled against it, and the literary response it has evoked shed an interesting light on the debate currently being waged by scholars in the field of trauma studies over the perceived monocultural bias of trauma theory in its 'classical', mid-1990s formulation and the fraught relationship between such tendencies and the commitment to social justice on which the field prides itself. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra reflects that the TRC 'was in its own way a trauma recovery center'.[1] The TRC attempted to uncover the truth about the gross human rights violations committed during apartheid and to promote national unity and reconciliation through a collective process of working through the past. I will demonstrate that, insofar as the TRC mapped Euro-American concepts of trauma and recovery onto an apartheid–colonial situation, it was subject to the same problems and limitations faced by trauma theory – problems and limitations which post-apartheid literature has not been slow to confront. The novelist André Brink has famously declared that 'unless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future'.[2] I will show that Sindiwe Magona's truth-and-reconciliation novel *Mother to Mother* assumes just this task: it can be seen to supplement the work of the TRC by critically revisiting its limits, exclusions, and elisions – and thus also to suggest a possible way for 'traditional' trauma theory to reinvent and renew itself.[3]

To develop this argument, I will proceed in four steps. I will start by discussing the background to the crisis situation in which trauma theory currently finds itself, then reflect at some length on the applicability of Western theoretical and diagnostic models of trauma and recovery outside

their contexts of origin, and, finally, move on to the 'applied' level of, first, criticism of the TRC and, second, the analysis of Magona's novel.

Trauma theory in crisis

A cursory glance through the trend-setting literary studies journals of recent years suffices to establish that the relationship between literature, trauma, and ethics is among the hottest research topics in the field today. Trauma theory, the interdisciplinary heading under which the work being done in this area can be subsumed, emerged in the mid-1990s as a product of the 'ethical turn' affecting the humanities, promising to infuse the study of literary and cultural artefacts with new relevance. Amid persistent accusations that literary scholarship, particularly in its deconstructive, post-structuralist, or textualist guise, had become indifferent or oblivious to 'what goes on in the real world', trauma theory confidently announced itself as an essential apparatus for understanding 'the real world' and even as a potential means for changing it for the better.

This epistemological and ethical programme is clearly laid out in the highly influential work of Cathy Caruth, one of trauma theory's founding mothers. In her landmark study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth argues that, rather than leading us away from history and into 'political and ethical paralysis',[4] a textualist approach – one which insists that all reference is indirect – can afford us unique access to history. Indeed, the rethinking of reference which it invites aims not at 'eliminating history' but at 'resituating it in our understanding, that is, at permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not'.[5] Following Fredric Jameson's dictum that 'history is what hurts',[6] Caruth tends to construe all history in terms of trauma; that is, as an overwhelming experience that resists integration and expression.[7] Conjoining a psychoanalytic view of traumatic memory with a deconstructive vigilance regarding the indeterminacies of representation in the analysis of cultural artefacts that bear witness to traumatic histories makes it possible, Caruth suggests, to gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation.

Moreover, this critical practice comes invested with ethical significance. Caruth claims that 'the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand' a 'new mode of reading and of listening'[8] which would allow us to break out of the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience. In 'a catastrophic age' such as ours, Caruth writes in the introduction to her important collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 'trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures'.[9] With trauma

forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, so the argument goes, listening to the trauma of another – which, for Caruth, involves a departure or leave-taking from oneself – can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community.

It is something of a surprise, therefore, to note that the founding texts of the field – including, besides Caruth's own work, writings by Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, among others[10] – largely fail to live up to this promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. They tend to ignore traumatic experiences and histories of currently subordinate groups both inside and outside Western society, and/or to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity. Rather than promote cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities as a result of this one-sided focus. If, as Caruth argues, 'history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, . . . history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas',[11] then traumatic histories of subordinate groups have to be acknowledged on their own terms and considered in relation to traumatic histories of people in socially dominant positions for trauma studies to have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness.

Beyond monoculturalism: A trauma is not a trauma is not a trauma

In *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Allan Young challenges the generally accepted picture of psychological trauma as a single, uniform, transhistorical, and universal phenomenon. This picture, Young argues, is 'mistaken': 'The disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources'.[12] Though today the concept of trauma is widely used to describe responses to extreme events across space and time, as well as to guide their treatment, it is actually a Western artefact, 'invented' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its origins can be located in a variety of medical and psychological discourses dealing with Euro-American experiences of industrialization, gender relations, and modern warfare.[13]

The far-reaching implications of the fact that trauma is rooted in a particular historical and geographical context have long been ignored by academic researchers, including activist scholars fighting for public recognition of the psychic suffering inflicted on the socially disadvantaged.

As Claire Stocks has recently observed, the latter typically argue that the distress experienced by the constituencies whose causes they champion – e.g., victims of sexual or racial abuse – is equivalent to experiences which are generally accepted as being traumatic, such as exposure to war-related violence.[14] The feminist trauma theorist Judith Herman, for example, insists that her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* is about 'commonalities: between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes'.[15] She is concerned to 'develop concepts that apply equally' to the experiences of these various groups.[16] Kalí Tal, another feminist trauma theorist, similarly highlights parallels and correspondences between traumatic experiences suffered by men and women in very different situations and contexts. For example, she maintains that 'the combat veteran of the Vietnam War responds viscerally to the transformed signs used by the survivor of the concentration camp since they mirror his or her own traumatic experience',[17] and that '[a]ll American women are threatened with violence, regardless of their race or class, just as all Jews were in danger in Nazi Germany'.[18]

This pervasive focus on similarity or sameness stems from a desire to gain recognition – in the double sense of the word – for the hitherto disregarded or overlooked suffering endured by disempowered groups. Noble as this goal is, such an approach risks erasing important differences and thereby ultimately doing more harm than good. It takes for granted rather than interrogate, hegemonic definitions of trauma which are not scientifically neutral but culturally specific, and which will have to be revised and modified if they are to adequately account for – rather than (re)colonize – the psychological pain inflicted on the downtrodden.

For example, there is a need to expand our understanding of trauma from sudden, unexpected catastrophic events that happen to people in socially dominant positions to encompass ongoing, everyday forms of violence and oppression affecting subordinate groups. While the meaning of trauma shifted from a physical to a psychic wound in the late nineteenth century, the concept continued to be thought of in terms of a single devastating blow, an acute stab that breaks the individual's protective shield, causing serious damage. The third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which was published in 1980, defined trauma accordingly as 'an event outside the range of usual human experience'.[19] The feminist psychotherapist Laura Brown has exposed the ideological bias of this canonical definition (which was revised in *DSM-III-R* and *DSM-IV*, though not very radically), which resides in the fact that the range of human experience

of which it speaks really means 'the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men'.[20] She points out that traumatic experiences of people of colour, women, gays and lesbians, lower-class people, and people with disabilities are routinely denied, dismissed, or disregarded because they fail to meet the criteria of singularity and exceptionality. Exposure to acts or threats of physical or psychological violence is a constant reality – the rule rather than the exception – for members of oppressed groups, who do not lead safe, sheltered, and protected lives. '[A] continuing background noise rather than an unusual event',[21] the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities is not recognized as being traumatic by those adhering to the dominant, event-based model of trauma, which assumes that trauma stands outside normal everyday experience. Brown therefore calls for the hegemonic 'event theory' of trauma to be supplemented with a notion of 'insidious trauma', a term coined by her colleague Maria Root to denote 'the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit'.[22] The extended model of trauma which Brown envisages would illuminate rather than obscure the repetitive and cumulative traumas suffered by society's disenfranchised.

Such traumas, moreover, tend to be collective experiences, whereas the study of trauma has traditionally focused on individual distress. For the psychological plight of the socially disempowered to be fully accounted for, the object of trauma research must shift from the individual to larger social entities, such as communities or nations. Refusing to move from the individual psyche to the social situation can only have damaging consequences. A narrow focus on individual psychology ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse. Indeed, the individualization of social suffering encourages the idea that recovery from the traumas affecting the members of marginalized groups is basically a matter of the individual gaining linguistic control over his or her pain. Trauma is typically seen as an experience which exceeds people's mental frameworks, and which, as a result, continues to haunt them, collapsing the distinction between past and present. The standard therapy for this condition, known as the 'talking cure', consists in having the sufferer confront their painful memory, relive the moment of violation, and integrate it into their life stories. The ultimate goal is to disarticulate the past from the present: the traumatized person must come to understand that the event is over and need not go on causing harm in the present. Thus, immaterial recovery – psychological healing – is privileged over material recovery – reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a

wounding political, social, and economic system. Insofar as it negates the need for taking collective action towards systemic change, the current trauma discourse can be seen to serve as a political palliative for the downtrodden. Survivors are pathologized as victims without political agency, sufferers from an 'illness' that can be 'cured' within existing structures of institutionalized psychiatry.[23]

The TRC and the persistence of the past

Many of the objections raised to the uncritical export of Euro-American models of trauma and recovery bear a close resemblance to criticisms which have been levelled at the TRC. It, too, has been accused of downplaying, individualizing, pathologizing, and depoliticizing the lived experience of subjection. For example, Mahmood Mamdani has noted that the TRC's decision to individualize the victims of apartheid sits uneasily with its formal acknowledgement of apartheid as a 'crime against humanity' which systematically discriminated and dehumanized entire communities:[24] 'If the "crime against humanity" involved a targeting of entire communities for racial and ethnic cleansing and policing, individualizing the victim obliterated this particular – many would argue *central* – characteristic of apartheid'.[25] By defining as victims only 'those whose rights had been violated through acts of killing, torture, abduction and severe ill treatment',[26] the TRC failed to adequately address the injustices of apartheid as a legalized system of oppression which had blighted the everyday lives of many millions of South Africans. Mamdani claims that the TRC displayed 'a systematic lack of interest in the crime which was institutionalised as the law' and was 'interested only in violations outside the law'.[27] To bring to light the truth about apartheid, it would have had to 'put centre-stage the experience of apartheid as a banal reality'.[28] Mamdani's criticism of the TRC clearly resonates with our observation that the current trauma discourse has difficulty recognizing that it is not just singular and extraordinary events but also 'normal', everyday humiliations and abuses that can act as traumatic stressors.

The TRC's pursuit of reconciliation has proved no less contentious than the modalities of its truth-finding mission. Its deployment of therapeutic and theological ideas of healing and redemption in the service of an explicit nation-building agenda led to accusations that the TRC attempted to impose premature closure on the past. The TRC did in fact emphasize the cathartic role of victim testimony and the closure it must bring: 'We open wounds only in order to cleanse them, to deal with the past effectively and so to close the door on that dark and horrendous past forever'.[29] In his foreword to the TRC's final report, chairman

Desmond Tutu similarly recommended 'shut[ting] the door on the past' or 'clos[ing] the chapter on our past' once we – South Africans – had 'looked the beast of the past in the eye', 'asked and received forgiveness', and 'made amends', so that we could 'move into the glorious future of a new kind of society' unencumbered by past wounds.[30] Christopher Colvin has drawn attention to the opposition by victims of apartheid-era violence to the therapeutic ethic informing the work of the TRC: 'For the members of the [Khulumani Victim Support] group, their key assertion is that things have not changed and that to ask victims to tell their stories of (and thus recover from) *prior* suffering for the good of the nation is premature, insulting and politically suspect'.[31] These members feel as if they are being asked to do the hard work of retrieving and recounting painful memories for the benefit of others. While their testimony is used to reconcile and redeem the South African nation, their own suffering – which is only partly due to the acutely traumatizing events about which they testified – remains largely unalleviated. Colvin quotes one victim as saying: 'It does no good. . . . I tell my story to the TRC, I tell it to the Trauma Centre and still I have nothing. I am so frustrated. Why do they want to know my story if they don't do anything for me, they give me nothing except, oh, we are so sorry, Mrs. H . . . no, I will not tell my story again. They are just laughing at me'.[32] In another interview, Mrs H voices her suspicion that the only purpose which her testimony served was to help ease the conscience of bleeding-heart liberals, for whom providing psychological support to victims of apartheid represents an attractive alternative to the kind of real socio-economic and material change that would see them lose their privileged status: 'They [Trauma Centre facilitators] just want us to be victims and tell our stories so they can help us. I am sick of telling my story. It makes them feel good to show that they are helping us, that things are really OK. They don't really want to change things and what good does telling our stories over and over and over do?'[33]

Mrs H gives eloquent expression to the sense of anger and frustration felt by many witnesses at the perceived depoliticization of their testimony. Allen Feldman reminds us that this was hardly the intent of the TRC, and that it would be misguided to simply dismiss the TRC as a politically naïve exercise in therapeutic uplift: 'The popular and media-generated view that the TRC hearings were planned and conducted by weepy psychotherapists was far from reality'.[34] According to Feldman, the TRC staff were well aware that the talking cure is no panacea: 'Truth telling and fact setting were seen as correctives to the apartheid era's official mendacity, historical falsification, and clandestine counterinsurgency, but not as activities that would mechanically bring resolution, comity, or conciliation'.[35] They were under no illusion that holding hearings, letting people talk, and publishing reports would automatically bring about social healing; in their

thinking, this goal was 'intimately tied to social movement notions of disability rights, societal integration, and economic empowerment'.[36] The survivors of human rights abuses who testified before the TRC perceived themselves, and were perceived by the commission, as political actors:

> Many witnesses rejected the biographical nomination of 'victim,' with all the passive and depoliticizing connotations this term implies, choosing instead the term 'survivor,' which allows for a sense of political agency. Submitting testimony was not therefore seen as wounded persons showing their scars in public, but rather as an act of political and historical intervention: setting the record straight after the systemic mendacity and disinformation of the former regime.[37]

However, as Feldman points out, the TRC's tendency to see recollection as 'inherently beneficial' – because of its need for data and because the act of recall so effectively counterbalanced the repression of memory under apartheid – 'could easily slip into a metaphysics of the talking cure'.[38] According to Feldman, the TRC did in fact end up 'stressing memory's therapeutic possibilities at the expense of establishing its pathogenic connection to institutional violence and that violence's inherence in economic racism'.[39] This was *a fortiori* the case with subsequent representations of the TRC in media, human rights, and other discourses, which reduced its proceedings to 'a ceremony of cathartic trauma exposure' and 'rewrote the complex story of the research and the hearings in terms of the transnational cultural intelligibility of trauma narratives and confessional talking cures'.[40]

There are, of course, pragmatic reasons why the TRC focused on individuals involved in specific acts and on psychological recovery rather than on the wholesale degradation of millions of people and on material recovery. The kind of exacting political critique of the power dynamics at work in society called for by the latter approach would have seriously complicated the achievement of the objective of reconciliation, which was strongly foregrounded in the TRC process, as demanded by the compromise legislation which created the TRC and set the limits of its work (i.e., the 'Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act' of 1995). Since psychological healing and interpersonal reconciliation seem easier to deliver in the short term than their material and political counterparts, it made pragmatic sense from a government point of view for the TRC to stress the former dimension at the expense of the latter as a way of playing for time. As Giuliana Lund observes, 'the pacifying nature of the discourse of healing and reconciliation may be productive to the extent that it helps maintain peace in the land, reassures foreign investors, and

keeps the economy running, all important for the long-term welfare of the people'.[41]

However, there is a thin line between helping along the inevitably slow process of improving the material living conditions of the majority population by staving off social unrest, and bolstering the status quo by bending over backwards not to alienate white South Africans or international capital. Quite a few commentators are of the opinion that the latter is what has actually happened. In a recent paper, Yazir Henri and Heidi Grunebaum, for example, express their disillusionment with the outcome of the TRC process, which, they argue, 'nurtured . . . the possibility for those who benefited and continue to benefit from colonial and Apartheid rule to consolidate socio-economic relations of power informed by direct socio-economic structuring based on previously legally defined "race" categories'.[42] Little has changed when the peace bought by the TRC 'translates as the wholesale suffering of the majority of Black South Africans and the continued protection of "white" privilege and benefit whilst colonial and Enlightenment histories of destruction in the name of progress and civilisation are gradually cast into obscurity'.[43]

Bound in sorrow: Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* as a literary response to the TRC

In the final section of this essay, I will analyse the inscription of traumatic memory in Sindiwe Magona's novel *Mother to Mother*, which seems to me to be a particularly relevant literary response to the TRC as a trauma recovery project. Published in 1998, *Mother to Mother* is a fictionalized account of the Amy Biehl killing which can be seen to negotiate the different conceptions of trauma elaborated earlier. Amy Biehl was a young white American Fulbright scholar and anti-apartheid activist who had come to South Africa to assist in the process of preparing the country's first non-racial democratic election. On the day before her scheduled return to the USA in August 1993, her vehicle was attacked as she was driving friends home in the township of Guguletu, and she was stoned and stabbed to death by four black youths who were returning from a meeting of the Pan Africanist Students' Organisation (PASO) where militant slogans such as 'One settler, one bullet' had been chanted. The murder of Amy Biehl brought an overwhelming public outpouring of grief and outrage, and received considerable media attention at the time. When the four killers, who had been convicted and sentenced to 18 years each, later applied to the TRC for amnesty, Amy's parents surprised many by supporting the application. In July 1997, the four testified before the amnesty committee of the TRC,[44] and amnesty was granted to all of

them in July 1998.[45] The Biehls also met with the family of Mongezi Christopher Manqina, one of their daughter's murderers, after Mongezi's mother had sent Mrs Biehl a message expressing sorrow at her son's responsibility for Amy's death. These dramatic events were not only widely reported in the media but also documented in *Long Night's Journey into Day*, an award-winning documentary film which follows four high-profile cases brought before the TRC.[46]

Magona, who grew up in Guguletu herself but was then living in New York, learnt 6 months after the murder that Mongezi's mother was her childhood friend Evelyn Manqina, a discovery which moved her for the first time to empathize with the killers' families.[47] She started writing *Mother to Mother* in 1996, the year in which the TRC began its hearings, and the book came out in the year in which the TRC concluded its work and presented its report. Looking beyond the book's production history, we find that its close association with the TRC is also borne out by its thematic preoccupations. In the 'Author's Preface', Magona explains that her aim in writing the book was to describe not the world of the victim, which had been much talked about already, but 'the other world', that of the perpetrators, which had attracted far less interest:

> And yet, are there no lessons to be had from knowing something of the other world? The reverse of such benevolent and nurturing entities as those that throw up the Amy Biehls, the Andrew Goodmans, and other young people of that quality? What was the world of this young women's [sic] killers, the world of those, young as she was young, whose environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity and who, instead, became lost creatures of malice and destruction?[48]

In addition to drawing attention to the world of the perpetrators, *Mother to Mother* also seeks to bring the two worlds into contact. The novel retells the events of the day of the murder and the day after to Mrs Biehl in the voice of the fictional Mandisa, the mother of Amy's killer Mxolisi, a character based on Mongezi Manqina (in Magona's novel there is only one murderer). Rather than lock herself up in her own world of pain, Mandisa evokes their connection as mothers: 'My Sister-Mother, we are bound in this sorrow'.[49] While expressing her grief over Amy's death, Mandisa also asks for understanding for her son from, Mrs Biehl but by extension also from the reader: 'you have to understand my son' (p. 1). Mandisa's narrative is a moving attempt to reach out and share grief, offer comfort, and foster mutual understanding across racial, ethnic, and cultural boundaries.

An important point which Mandisa seeks to drive home, and which could be viewed as an implicit criticism of the TRC, is that a proper

understanding of Mxolisi's murderous act requires a full appreciation of the traumatizing impact of apartheid on the people it reduced to second-class citizens. It will not do to consider sudden eruptions of violence such as the one that resulted in the death of Amy Biehl in isolation from the larger context in which they occur and which, indeed, produces them. Mandisa's memories of the fateful day of 25 August 1993 are interwoven with flashbacks which illuminate the rest of her and her son's life. She describes her family's forced removal from Blouvlei and the break-up of the Blouvlei community; her unwelcome teenage pregnancy and its dire consequences, including denial of schooling and entrapment in domestic servitude; the misery, hardship, and bleakness of township life; the constant threat and reality of police brutality; and the ubiquity of intra-ethnic violence. As Meg Samuelson – one of the very few academic critics who have given Magona's novel sustained attention – points out, the focus of Mandisa's memories is on the 'everyday': 'Mandisa's story becomes a liturgy of the "ordinary" violence inflicted on her by *both* the apartheid state and local patriarchies'.[50] As her story unfolds, the reader comes to share Mandisa's lack of surprise at Mxolisi's act, which she repeatedly emphasizes: 'Let me say out plain, I was not surprised that my son killed your daughter' (p. 1); 'Nothing my son does surprises me any more' (p. 88). After all, but for the skin colour of the victim, this murder was hardly an unusual event in Guguletu: 'For years ... many, many years, we have lived with violence. This was nothing new to us. What was new was that this time, the victim was white' (p. 69). In the world of the township, violence is the rule rather than the exception, the norm rather than the departure from it – quite the opposite, that is, of the ordinary way of the Biehls' world.[51] When Mandisa at one point speaks of 'an ordinary day' in Guguletu, she immediately adds the following clarification: 'ordinary, in the context of our lives that have become quite complex and far from ordinary' (p. 73). With this context in place, Mandisa represents the murder of Amy Biehl not as the senseless action of one atomized individual, but as '[t]he enactment of the deep, dark, private yearnings of a subjugated race' (p. 210). Mxolisi, in this view, did not act autonomously but was only 'an agent, executing the long-simmering dark desires of his race' (p. 210).

The novel makes it clear that these dark desires have been simmering for centuries rather than decades. The insidious traumas inflicted by apartheid and the violent reaction these provoked are connected with the 'abomination' of colonialism and the Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856–1857 (p. 178). These links are established in an episode in which Mandisa as a child is instructed by her grandfather about Nongqawuse's prophecy and the cattle-killing movement, which led to mass starvation and ushered in a new era of colonial expansion and domination. Mandisa's

grandfather sets out to disabuse his granddaughter of the notion, implanted in her by her schoolteachers, that the Xhosa people lent the 'false prophet' Nongqawuse a willing ear '[b]ecause they were superstitious and ignorant' (p. 175). He points out that what had prompted the Xhosa nation's decision to burn all their fields and slaughter all their cattle was the hope that this radical measure would 'drive *abelungu* [white people] to the sea, where, so the seer had said, they would all drown' (p. 178).[52] In his view, the extreme nature of the Xhosa people's actions testifies to the gravity of their suffering at the hands of the white colonizers and the depth of their resentment: 'How deep the resentment to have spurred them to such terrible sacrifice. How deep the abomination, to trigger such a response' (p. 178). The change in Mandisa's perspective on the cattle-killing incident which her grandfather's history lesson brings about mirrors that wished upon the addressee and the reader of Magona's book with regard to Amy Biehl's death: 'Tatomkhulu was a fund of facts that, although seemingly different, made a whole lot of sense of some of the things we learned at school. He explained what had seemed stupid decisions, and acts that had seemed indefensible became not only understandable but highly honourable' (p. 183). Thus, in addition to apartheid, the novel commemorates another history of destruction in the name of civilization which has been cast into obscurity, to repeat Henri and Grunebaum's words. Moreover, by taking a long historical view and highlighting the continuity between the colonial and the apartheid era, it can also be seen to question the wisdom of the TRC's exclusive focus on the period from 1960 to 1994.[53]

Apart from uncovering hidden histories of violence and oppression, *Mother to Mother* also critically reflects on the possibilities for healing and reconciliation in the wake of the traumas of colonialism and apartheid. The novel's invocation of biblical rhetoric, which recalls the TRC's religious underpinnings, suggests confidence in the likelihood of a redemptive outcome. Indeed, not only is Amy's death discussed in terms of sacrifice and atonement for the sins of the white race (p. 201, 210), but Mxolisi, who turns out to be the product of a virgin birth and whose name means '[h]e, who would bring peace' (p. 136), is also portrayed as a Christ figure – despite being referred to as '[t]he perfect host of the demons of his [race]' at one point (p. 201).[54] However, the hope of an end to the bloodshed and a new era of peace aroused by these religious overtones is dashed by Mandisa's stern warning that:

> the same winds that gouged dongas in my son's soul are still blowing
> . . . blowing ever strong. There are three- and four-year-olds as well as
> other children, roaming the streets of Guguletu with nothing to do
> all day long. Those children, as true as the sun rises in the east and

> sets in the west – those young people are walking the same road my
> son walked. (p. 199)

In other words, as long as there is no significant improvement in the
material well-being of the black population, of which the novel paints
such a grim picture, the cycle of violence will continue unabated. The
storm, an image which is put to good use throughout the novel to evoke
the centuries-old strife and turmoil caused by racial divisions in South
Africa, shows no sign of dying down.[55] Offering a sobering assessment
of the aftermath of the victory of the anti-apartheid struggle, *Mother to
Mother* demands sustained scepticism regarding some of the illusions
attaching to 'Truth and Reconciliation' in the 'new' South Africa.

It does so, however, not in a spirit of fatalism or despair,[56] but in the
stubborn belief that there is hope in crossing boundaries to witness the pain
of others. In trying to find words of grief to bridge worlds of grief,
Magona's novel maintains faith in the idea that trauma provides the very
link between cultures, and that working towards a fuller appreciation of
the nature, extent, and ramifications of the pain of others can, indeed,
help efforts to alleviate it. Still, it must be borne in mind that the addressee
in *Mother to Mother* is a white American, not a white South African. As
Samuelson notes, this raises the question of whether 'this "conversation"
[would] have been possible for Magona if Biehl had been a white South
African'.[57] Indeed, '[o]ne could query the choice of this specific event as
opposed to, for example, the similar story of Lindy-Anne Fourie, the
white South African girl killed in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre'.[58]
Samuelson detects a contradiction in *Mother to Mother* between 'a wish
to cross barriers' and 'a lingering reluctance to make affiliations with
white South African women'.[59] While Magona identifies important weak-
nesses of the TRC and suggests ways of overcoming them, she appears
unable or unwilling – as yet – to take on the task of imagining cross-
racial alliances in South Africa. If, as I have argued, her novel heralds the
establishment of a new, more inclusive and culturally sensitive kind of
trauma theory, it also makes clear the long road that remains to be
travelled.

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Notes

1 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 43.

2 André Brink, 'Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-Apartheid Narrative' in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 30.

3 Sindiwe Magona, *Mother to Mother* (1998; Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

4 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 10.

5 Ibid., p. 11. Italics in original.

6 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 102.

7 Caruth's (and Jameson's) tendency to conflate history and trauma – which has been criticized by Dominick LaCapra for obscuring 'crucial historical distinctions' (LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 23) – appears to be symptomatic of the contemporary moment, of which Michael Lambek and Paul Antze have noted: 'Increasingly, memory worth talking about – worth remembering – is memory of trauma' (Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, 'Introduction: Forecasting Memory' in Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (eds.), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. xii).

8 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 9.

9 Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and Experience: Introduction' in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 11.

10 See, for example, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies', *New Literary History* 26.3 (1995), pp. 537–563; Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

11 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 24.

12 Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 5.

13 See Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (eds.), *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Rebecca Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie, 'Introduction: Mourning and Memory', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.1 (2005), pp. 16–29.

14 Claire Stocks, 'Trauma Theory and the Singular Self: Rethinking Extreme Experiences in the Light of Cross Cultural Identity', *Textual Practice* 21.1 (2007), pp. 75–76.

15 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 3.

16 Ibid., p. 4.

17 Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 16.

18 Ibid., p. 20.

19 Quoted in Laura S. Brown, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma' in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 100.

20 Ibid., p. 101.

21 Ibid., p. 103.

22 Quoted in ibid., p. 107.

23 Many of the criticisms of, and corrections to, canonical trauma theory discussed in the previous paragraphs were anticipated by Frantz Fanon in his pioneering work on the psychopathology of colonialism, especially in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) and the last chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), pp. 181–233. On Fanon as a trauma theorist, see Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, 'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels', *Studies in the Novel* 40.1–2 (2008), pp. 1–12; E. Ann Kaplan, 'Fanon, Trauma and Cinema' in Anthony C. Alessandrini (ed.), *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 146–158; Rosanne Kennedy, 'Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity, and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*', *Studies in the Novel* 40.1–2 (2008), pp. 86–107; Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture*; and Saunders and Aghaie, 'Introduction', pp. 16–29. In recent years, mental health professionals have become increasingly aware of the need to acknowledge traumatic experiences in non-Western settings and to take account of cultural differences in the treatment of trauma. See, for example, the following essay collections, whose titles clearly reflect these concerns: George F. Rhoades, Jr and Vedat Sar (eds.), *Trauma and Dissociation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Not Just a North American Phenomenon* (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2006) and Kathleen Nader, Nancy Dubrow, and Beth Hudnall Stamm (eds.), *Honoring Differences: Cultural Issues in the Treatment of Trauma and Loss* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1999). Also worth mentioning in this context is Patrick J. Bracken and Celia Petty (eds.),

Rethinking the Trauma of War (London: Free Association Books, 1998), a collection of essays by humanitarian disaster relief experts which is highly critical of the extension of Western trauma models into African conflict zones.

24 This acknowledgement, and the motivation behind it, can be found in Vol. 1, Ch. 4 of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998), viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/report/>.

25 Mahmood Mamdani, 'Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC)', *Diacritics* 32.3–4 (2002), p. 34. Italics in original.

26 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1, Ch. 4, Para. 53.

27 Mahmood Mamdani, 'Reconciliation without Justice', *Southern African Review of Books* 46 (1996), p. 3.

28 Ibid., p. 4.

29 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Interim Report* (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1996), p. 1.

30 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1, Ch. 1, Para. 91, 93.

31 Christopher J. Colvin, '"Brothers and Sisters, Do Not Be Afraid of Me": Trauma, History and the Therapeutic Imagination in the New South Africa' in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2006), p. 164. Italics in original.

32 Ibid., p. 165.

33 Ibid., p. 165. That the debate about the merits of the psychotherapeutic framework adopted by the TRC is still far from settled became clear at a University of Cape Town conference marking the tenth anniversary of the start of the TRC in November 2006. See the ensuing polemic between Kay Schaffer and Jaco Barnard in the e-journal *borderlands*, which revolved around the question of whether a psychotherapeutic approach to healing and reconciliation is compatible with political commitment: Kay Schaffer, 'Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness: Reflecting on Ten Years of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, University of Cape Town, 23–27 November 2006', *borderlands e-journal* 5.3 (2006), viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www. borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol5no3_2006/schaffer_memory.htm>; Jaco Barnard, 'Reflecting on Achievements, Celebrating Failures: A Response to Kay Schaffer', *borderlands e-journal* 6.1 (2007), viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol6no1_2007/barnard_ reflecting.htm>; and Kay Schaffer, 'Response to Jaco Barnard', *borderlands e-journal* 6.1 (2007), viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www.borderlandse journal.adelaide.edu.au/vol6no1_2007/schaffer_response.htm>.

34 Allen Feldman, 'Memory Theaters, Virtual Witnessing and the Trauma-Aesthetic', *Biography* 27.1 (2004), p. 175.

35 Ibid., p. 180.

36 Ibid., p. 180.

37 Ibid., pp. 178–179.

38 Ibid., p. 181.

39 Quoted in ibid., p. 181.

40 Ibid., p. 184.

41 Giuliana Lund, '"Healing the Nation": Medicolonial Discourse and the State of Emergency from Apartheid to Truth and Reconciliation', *Cultural Critique* 54 (2003), p. 113.

42 Yazir Henri and Heidi Grunebaum, *Re-historicising Trauma: Reflections on Violence and Memory in Current-day Cape Town*, DACPM Occasional Paper Series No. 6 (Cape Town: DACPM, 2005), p. 2.

43 Ibid., p. 2.

44 See 'Killing of Amy Biehl', *Amnesty Hearing Transcripts*, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Cape Town, July 8–9, 1997, viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/amntrans/capetown/capetown_biehl01.htm>; <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/amntrans/capetown/capetown_biehl02.htm>.

45 See Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 'Amnesty for Killers of Amy Biehl', July 28, 1998, viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/pr/1998/p980728a.htm>.

46 Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann (dirs.), *Long Night's Journey into Day*, DVD, Iris Films, 2000.

47 Magona talks about this in David Attwell and Barbara Harlow with Joan Attwell, 'Interview with Sindiwe Magona', *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000), pp. 283–284, p. 287 and in Eleonora Chiavetta, 'A Modern Storyteller', interview with Sindiwe Magona in Siphokazi Koyana (ed.), *Sindiwe Magona: The First Decade* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004), p. 173. See also 'Penetrating Hearts and Minds', *Amy Biehl Foundation Newsletter* 4.2 (1999), viewed January 23, 2008, <http://www.amybiehl.org/newsletter_4-2.php#_Toc440968605>.

48 Sindiwe Magona, 'Author's Preface' in *Mother to Mother* (1998; Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), p. v.

49 Magona, *Mother to Mother*, p. 201. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

50 Meg Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition* (Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2007), p. 166. Italics in original.

51 Samuelson goes on to observe, as I do here, that Magona 'render[s] visible the "ordinary" structural violence underpinning the "spectacular" event of Biehl's death' (Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?*, p. 167).

52 Italics in original.

53 In fact, the *TRC Report* itself can be seen to gently rebuff the temporal limits placed on the commission's mandate. It opens, after the chairman's foreword, with a chapter on history, which states that the period from 1960 to 1994 was only 'the climactic phase of a conflict that dated back to the mid-seventeenth century, to the time when European settlers first sought to establish a permanent presence on the subcontinent' (Vol. 1, Ch. 2, Para. 5). It points out that the National Party government did not 'introduce[] racially discriminatory

practices to this part of the world' and is unlikely to have been 'the first to perpetrate some or most of the types of gross violations of human rights recorded in this report' (Vol. 1, Ch. 2, Par. 6). Indeed, the atrocities committed during the period falling within the TRC's mandate have to be put in the context of previous violations (Vol. 1, Ch. 2, Para. 7). 'It is also important to remember', the report goes on, 'that the 1960 Sharpville massacre (with which the mandate of the Commission begins) was simply the latest in a long line of similar killings of civilian protesters in South African history' (Vol. 1, Ch. 2, Para. 8). Moreover, the report recognizes that the social engineering dimension of the policy of apartheid did not mark a radical break with the past either: 'Again, it needs to be made clear that the National Party was not the first political party or group to have been accused of social engineering on a vast scale in this part of the world' (Vol. 1, Ch. 2, Para. 10).

54 On the numerous religious references in *Mother to Mother*, see also Meg Samuelson, 'The Mother as Witness: Reading *Mother to Mother* alongside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in Siphokazi Koyana (ed.), *Sindiwe Magona: The First Decade* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004), pp. 135–136.

55 See also Samuelson, 'The Mother as Witness', pp. 140–141.

56 The novel's reliance on storm imagery, which naturalizes racial conflict as a normal and unavoidable state of affairs, seems to suggest otherwise, though.

57 Meg Samuelson, 'Reading the Maternal Voice in Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* and *Mother to Mother*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000), p. 234.

58 Ibid., p. 234.

59 Ibid., p. 234.