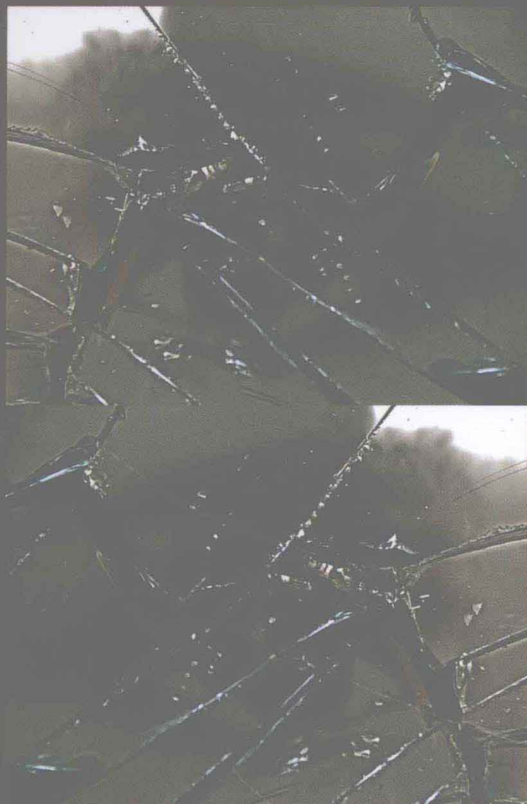
Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in South Africa

Interviews



Edited by

Ewald Mengel, Michela Borzaga, Karin Orantes

Matatu

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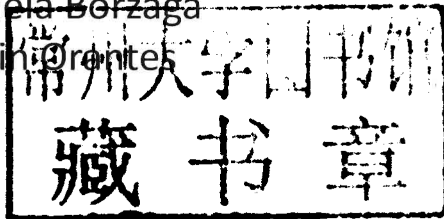

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Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in South Africa

Matatu
Journal for African Culture and Society

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Introduction

TWENTY YEARS after the fall of apartheid, South Africa is still struggling with the memory of its traumatic past. So it comes as no surprise that trauma literature has flourished in the last two decades. Trauma, memory and narrative are closely interrelated, because one way of coming to terms with a person's and/or a nation's traumatic past is by transforming traumatic memory (hot memory) into narrative memory (cool memory) through the telling of a story.

The interviews collected here were conducted in the Cape Town area between January and March 2009. Originally only intended to provide background information for our project "Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel,"[1] we soon realized that they are of interest to a larger readership because they provide fascinating insights into the present condition of the South African soul, the country's hopes and anxieties, and the state of a nation that is still struggling with the burden of the past.

In this context, 'trauma' is one of those concepts that have been heavily debated, torn apart, abused, and misused, similarly to other terms that have become popular in the past twenty years – for example, that of the 'postcolonial'. However, what emerges from the interviews is that 'trauma' is a fundamental category, from an epistemological, cultural, and – above all – human standpoint. All of the interviews testify to the fact that this term cannot be used glibly or in a facile way, but that it becomes most meaningful in conjunction with other predicates and adjectives, within a more accurate

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[1] The project is supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) and is based in the English Department, University of Vienna.

© *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in South Africa: Interviews*, ed. Ewald Mengel, Michela Borzaga & Karin Orantes (*Matatu* 38; Amsterdam & New York: Editions Rodopi, 2010).

syntax and grammar that attempt to capture its unpredictable temporality, its eclecticism, its complexity, its strengths and weaknesses.

In his recent book *The Trauma Question,* Roger Luckhurst writes:

> Without a multi-disciplinary knowledge, there can only be an unappetizing competition between disciplines to impose their specific conception of trauma. We need another model for understanding the tortuous history and bewildering contemporary extent of a paradigm that is an intrinsically inter-disciplinary conjuncture.[2]

Accordingly, the choice of interview partners was based on the conviction of the importance of this interdisciplinarity and the belief that trauma should be approached best from various perspectives, experiences, and disciplines. Therefore, the interviews were conducted with fourteen experts from various fields, including literature, psychology and politics.

As far as the prolific South African literary scene is concerned, the interviews are intended to examine the complex relationship between trauma and literature more closely. Roger Luckhurst describes this liaison as follows:

> Trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma.[3]

South African writers have certainly embarked on this challenge since the demise of apartheid, coming up with diverse novels, new styles and new playful forms. André Brink, for instance, sees trauma and all its related issues as something that South African writers cannot get away from, since they are too much a part of South African reality. He perceives literature as "a medium of sharing, of articulating the inarticulate, sometimes the inarticulatable." By "imagining the real," literature can, on the one hand, bear witness in a time of terror and trauma, and, on the other, reach out and touch people, narrating trauma from different perspectives.

In her interview, Zoë Wicomb reminds us of the tricky nature of memory and memorializing, of the permanent risk of 'misremembering'. She takes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a sophisticated example of how trauma can be

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[2] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008): 14.

[3] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 79.

narrated in the dialectical relationship between remembering and forgetting. According to her, the potential of literature lies, in fact, in the investigation of how memory operates:

> Perhaps one of the more naive assumptions of public memorializing was that the recounting of the past is about the natural flow of memory, akin to the natural flow of tears that will accompany the telling of atrocities. What is lost in that assumption is the remembering subject's organization of information into that which the listener understands as a story. So, perhaps writers in dealing with history are also responding to such misconceptions.

One of the authors who suffered greatly under the injustices of apartheid is Sindiwe Magona. In her interview, she passionately explains the irreplaceable role of (auto)biographies in the reconstruction of history: "Biographies give face, flesh, blood and heart and soul to whatever period of history you are studying." She points out that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) spurred and encouraged people to write, especially about their own lives, since autobiography can play an important role in the examination and the healing of psychic wounds: "There is something soothing about taking an ache and bringing it under the light, holding it to the light, and seeing it for what it is. In a way, it's a form of letting go." At the same time, however, she reminds us of the potential danger of (re)traumatization of painful stories of trauma and violence.

The author Susan Mann was interviewed on her novels *One Tongue Singing* and *Quarter Tones*. She explains that in her first novel she consciously used "traumatic" versus "narrative" memory in alternating chapters about the past and the present, which in the end resolve and meet "like an arrow." The female protagonist of *One Tongue Singing*, Zara, is a controversial and enigmatic character, who speaks through silences and powerful paintings, but who, until the very end, remains mysterious and cryptic. Mann seems to suggest that new modes of reading and listening are implicated if stories of traumatized and wounded characters are to be fully grasped.

The interview with Maxine Case deals with her first – very successful – novel, *All We Have Left Unsaid*. The particularity of this book is that it is fictional while it reads like a memoir, because of the first-person narration and its confessional tone. Maxine Case explains that it is precisely this interplay between concealment and disclosure allowed in fiction that enabled

her to break the silences and taboos of her childhood years, but also to unmask the patriarchy and hypocrisy of contemporary South African society.

In order to deal with trauma literature, trauma theory and its psychological implications are of great importance. Therefore interviews with various South African psychologists are included in this book. Miriam Fredericks and her team at the Trauma Centre in Cape Town, for example, work with the theories and practicalities of trauma, memory, and narrative in South Africa on a daily basis. Besides offering counselling to ex-combatants, ex-prisoners, and victims of torture, the psychologists at the Centre stress the importance of their preventative work. They cooperate with schools and communities in order to raise awareness of the damaging and traumatic effects of violence. Another section of the Centre, specialized in crisis intervention, is still active in supporting communities that were victims of the xenophobic attacks in May 2008. So, more often than not, the question is how to *contain* the latent explosive violence in South Africa, but also how to cope with the feelings of anger, hatred, resentment, and helplessness that are so intrinsic to the lived experience of trauma.

Conscious of our 'Western lens', the interviews seek to critically examine the way trauma is traditionally conceptualized in the West. All the psychologists who were interviewed, however, agreed that, although the DSM[4] description of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a construction with limitations, it would be inappropriate to dismiss it, since its symptoms – avoidance, hyper-arousal, and intrusive thoughts – are very much part of the South African syndrome. What most of the experts contest is the Western *diachronic* model of time in which an overwhelming event (mostly conceived as *particular and singular*), retrospectively seen as traumatic, seems to interrupt a temporality still perceived as linear. The psychologists interviewed speak of "*continuous* traumatic stress syndrome" and of *multiple events* that constantly entrench themselves in the lives of the more disadvantaged. So trauma in South Africa requires an analysis of complex notions of time, of collectivity, and of material conditions: racial inequality, abject poverty, and unemployment are 'violent' social structures that are doomed to produce and perpetuate trauma instead of interrupting it.

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[4] The acronym DSM stands for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders designed by the American Psychiatric Association (see American Psychiatric Association).

Another issue emerging from the interviews with psychologists is a critical and more revisionist stance with regard to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). All interviewees argue that the process did not last long enough and that only a very small percentage of the affected testified. Ashraf Kagee, professor of psychology at Stellenbosch University, argues that the TRC could not be cathartic and therapeutic, since "there wasn't any kind of on-going, systematic re-visiting of these traumatic events, prolonged exposure, imaginal exposure [...]. It was, rather, an official administrative event, a bureaucratic exercise."

The TRC is one of the issues that link the interviews with psychologists to those with other academics and people from the public sphere. Neville Alexander, for example, remarks that the TRC failed to put the apartheid system as such on trial. It follows that in South Africa trauma cannot be conceptualized as a simple disorder of memory, but it has to be seen as an historical problem, linked to the violent history of colonization and apartheid. Alexander's critique resonates with the words of the Marxist postcolonial critic Benita Parry, who argues that new psychic dispositions and new modes of consciousness can only develop on the basis of a "radical restructuring" of economic and social circumstances.[5]

Alex Boraine, now chairperson of the International Centre for Transitional Justice in Cape Town, re-visits his experience as deputy chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in his interview he talks about the psychological and emotional impact that the stories of victims and perpetrators had and still have on his daily life. He also discusses the initial feelings of enthusiasm and idealism that animated the TRC. Now he stresses the importance of seeing the Commission as the point of departure for a long reconciliatory process which has to take place throughout public domains in the still deeply divided South African society. He explains why something like the Nuremberg Trials was not an option for South Africa, and he speaks about his firm belief in a holistic approach to justice that entails accountability, truth-telling, acknowledgement of the victims' suffering, reparation, and coming to terms with the past in a systematic way, in the attempt to eradicate the deep divisions that were often imposed by religion, history, or various ideologies.

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[5] Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 183.

The interview with psychologist and University of Cape Town professor Don Foster is particularly interesting if read in conjunction with what scholars like Pumla Gobodo–Madikizela and Chris van der Merwe have to say. In both interviews, the importance of expanding the borders of their field in order to think in multiple directions is stressed, because trauma is about a complicated process of transformation and translation. It is seminal to transform traumatic memory into narrative memory so that it can be externalized, articulated, named, and thus controlled. But narrative should not be seen as a "quick fix" – as Chris van der Merwe points out – but as an attempt to progress down that long path towards healing in which closure can only be approached but never really achieved. And then there is the complicated issue of the body, that conflicted site where trauma resides, which forges its own language and narrative, with its rhythms and confusing signs, not free of ideology. Trauma is thus best accessed through a multiplicity of narratives – confessional, testimonial, literary – but also through what could be called 'body stories', which, as Don Foster argues, should be deconstructed exactly like actual stories and which must not be mistaken for 'authentic', 'true' tales, because "bodies don't speak pure languages, either."

According to Annie Gagiano, Emeritus Professor at the English Department of Stellenbosch University, the term 'trauma' – unless it is used in a superficial and 'mannerist' way – can open new horizons in literary criticism. Gagiano's precise and profound reading of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* shows the connection between trauma and power, and literature's potential for explaining the effects of trauma, in entering the labyrinth of the human psyche and body–soul. In this interview, she goes beyond the reductive approach of searching for PTSD symptoms on a narratological level and explores traumatic memory in its different manifestations. 'Memory as reincarnation', 'memory as contamination', the 'internalized perpetrator', 'psychological placelessness', notions of 'homecoming' and 'belonging' – these are only some of the terms emerging from this interview which show how careful, perceptive reading can enrich trauma discourse and its related issues of memory and narrative in a deep and meaningful way.

Associate Professor Sam Tlhalo Raditlhalo teaches in the Department of English Languages and Literature at the University of Cape Town. He has dedicated an extensive part of his work to autobiographical literature in South Africa, and in his interview he talks about the role which this specific genre plays with regard to coming to terms with the South African past.

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Finally, Helen Moffett's sobering and lucid comments make the reader alert to the trauma–gender nexus. There is no way of talking about trauma or violence in South Africa without mentioning this issue. Her major critique is that many stories of trauma are constructed as stories of race whereas, in reality, they are stories of gender. She argues that the power-imbalance between men and women in conjunction with the HIV pandemic is handing out a death sentence to many black women. She makes the point that apartheid alone cannot be blamed for the high rate of rape in the country but that poverty, joblessness, and drug addiction are certainly exacerbating factors.

Rather than claiming final answers to such a complex and controversial issue, this volume of interviews aims at opening up a debate and making a contribution to the already existing discussion about trauma in the South African context. Part of our claim is that these interviews should best be read critically, and sometimes even between the lines.

We would like to thank all our interviewees who agreed to talk to us. In particular, we thank Chris van der Merwe, who made our access to the University of Cape Town Library possible, Edwin Hees, for organizing accessibility to the Gericke Library at Stellenbosch, and the Science Fund, which supported us financially throughout the trip and beyond.

EWALD MENGEL, MICHELA BORZAGA, KARIN ORANTES
VIENNA, NOVEMBER 2009

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Interviews with South African Authors

Articulating the Inarticulate
— An Interview with André Brink

EWALD MENGEL: *There is an almost inflationary use of notions such as 'trauma' and 'healing' in contemporary South Africa. How do you feel about this, not only as a writer, but also as a critic?*

ANDRÉ BRINK: It seems to me that it's almost impossible to avoid that. It is so much in the centre of our preoccupations in literature, in the social sciences generally, that one just cannot get away from that. And I find it a particularly fertile field to try to explore at the moment of crisis, because it seems that when a society is placed under pressure of some kind of trauma which has either just passed, or one finds oneself in the middle of it, or there is a feeling that it is still going to happen, it is as if things which are normally, in a more relaxed society, under the surface start boiling up and become much more visible, much more tangible, and manifest themselves in a variety of strange forms.

Nadine Gordimer has a famous quote from Gramsci, I think it's in *July's People*, about all the strange phenomena that are released in a state of tension and emergency, and I think we are living right in the middle of that now. So it is a fascinating moment, sometimes almost too fascinating to keep up with.

EM: July's People *is an almost apocalyptic novel, isn't it?*

AB: Very much so.

EM: *The last phase of history seems to have come for the whites.*

AB: Well, that is one of the fascinating aspects of apocalyptic fiction. We lived through a very strong period of that, where it was illuminating to see how white fiction focused on one aspect of apocalypse and that is the end of

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