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**Literary Responses to the South African TRC:
Renegotiating ‘Truth’, ‘Trauma’ and
‘Reconciliation’**

Thesis submitted for DPhil in English

Francesca Mussi

Supervised by: Dr. Denise deCaires Narain

April 2016

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. However, a small section related to my analysis of Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* has already been published in the form of an e-book chapter:

‘Revising the TRC’s Concept of Forgiveness in Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*’, in *Forgiveness or Revenge: Restitution or Retribution?*, ed. by Sheila C. Bibb (Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2015), 77-86.

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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DPhil in ENGLISH

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‘Trauma,’ and ‘Reconciliation’

SUMMARY

My thesis examines the intersections between trauma and narrative in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was established in 1995 after the first democratic elections and aimed to assist the country in the transition from the apartheid regime to a democratic order. I investigate how literature responds to the reconciling project of the truth commission by exploring six exemplary post-apartheid novels: Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun*, Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*, Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*.

I argue that these texts supplement the work initiated by the TRC by challenging two core assumptions of the truth commission, namely, that the truth about the past is fully recoverable, and, if recovered would provide effective healing of the South African nation. Through the analyses of the selected novels, I expose the inadequacy of the TRC’s definition of gross human rights violations and the hybridity of the supposedly discrete categories of victim/perpetrator, thus suggesting that the truth about the past cannot be easily captured. I also question the healing power of testimony and confessional narrative by showing alternative, personal responses to the ‘public’ reconciliation as envisaged by the TRC.

The TRC failed to engage with the complexities and the hybrid dimensions which have characterised South Africa’s history and society during both apartheid and the transition period. This thesis then argues that literature becomes a site where those ambiguities and contradictions are addressed in ways that invite readers to reflect on the ongoing nature of projects such as ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation,’ as well as on new approaches to South Africa’s past and the present.

*To My Dearest Parents, Mamma Mariangela and Babbo Alfredo, and to
My Beloved Granny, Nonna Lucia, whom we miss every day. This is for
you.*

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List of Abbreviations

TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission

HRVC – Human Rights Violations Committee

RRC – Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee

AC – Amnesty Committee

ANC – African National Congress

PAN – Pan Africanist Congress

APLA – Azanian People's Liberation Army

NEC – National Executive Committee

CALS – Centre for Applied Legal Studies

NFWF – *No Future Without Forgiveness*

CMS – *Country of My Skull*

BF – *Bitter Fruit*

D – *Disgrace*

CWM – *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*

MTM – *Mother to Mother*

HG – *The House Gun*

PL – *Playing in the Light*

Epigraph

Come with me
Into the next moment
Let me shuttle you
But not too fast
And not too slow
'Cos some of these scenes
You've already seen and been
City to township
Mountain to flatland
Desert to sea
Yet each day is a chance to uncover
Another piece of the puzzle
We may have missed before
Some part of the picture we didn't see
Back into our collective memory
Let me shuttle you
Back and forward
With the beat and the feel of poetry
Celebrating our landscapes
Our inheritance
Our differences
Our common ground

Shuttle by Malika Ndlovu
(For the Cape Town Festival 2000 Poetry Bus)

Introduction

Starting from the historical and social context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), this thesis investigates how literature is able to critique and complement the work initiated by the Commission, by challenging its main assumptions in the truth-telling and reconciling processes. Although some scholars have speculated that with the demise of the apartheid regime the ‘subject’ of South Africa is now over, on the contrary, novelists and writers have been able to ‘reroute’ their creativity to the new contemporary context.¹ In this sense, the TRC constituted (and still constitutes) an intriguing and stimulating new source of writing. According to Njabulo Ndebele, one effect of the TRC has been ‘the restoration of narrative. In few countries in the contemporary world do we have a living example of people reinventing themselves through narrative.’²

Many works published in South Africa from the 1990s onwards, in fact, present stories focusing on themes such as memory and truth, guilt and confession, atonement and forgiveness. According to Shane Graham:

the challenge for writers and artists is to tell the story in such a way that it re-enacts its own paradoxes and displacements, but without displacing the survivors from their own tales altogether, and without locking these survivors into a fixed narrative formula.³

In the South African context, one fundamental aim of literature after the TRC is to represent the past, and particularly the victims of that past, trying to accommodate all the contradictions, opacities, and ambiguities unearthed by the truth commission.

The purpose of this thesis is then to explore a shortlist of novels, which, directly or indirectly, engage in a dialogue with the TRC and act as a chorus by challenging and

¹ In this regard see Jane Poyner, ‘Rerouting Commitment in the Postapartheid Canon: TRC Narratives and The Problem of Truth,’ in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millenium*, ed. by Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 182-193.

² Njabulo Ndebele, ‘Memory, Metaphor, and the Triumph of Narrative,’ in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

³ Shane Graham, ‘The Truth Commission and Post-Apartheid Literature in South Africa,’ *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 1 (2003): 28.

commenting on key issues of the truth commission's project: Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* (1998), Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998), J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), and Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006). Though there is already a large body of work dealing with *Disgrace*, this thesis must address this novel precisely for the critical attention it has received and for its evident relation with issues of truth and reconciliation. The other novels, by contrast, appear to have received less attention from the academic world, especially *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and *Mother to Mother*, if obviously compared to Coetzee's text. In connection with my choice to focus on *Playing in the Light*, I must say that another work by Wicomb, *David's Story* (2000), would have merited critical consideration. This novel too, as well as the others selected, addresses questions of representation of violence, racial identity, and ethical concerns about the narration of the Other. Partially due to the length-limits of the thesis, I have decided to primarily draw my attention to *Playing in the Light* because, unlike *David's Story*, which focuses on the revolutionary period before the 1994 elections, it makes direct reference to the work of the TRC. Nevertheless, I do briefly discuss *David's Story* and its ethical questions about truthful narratives in my last chapter. All the selected novels are set in the post-apartheid era, precisely during the years of the TRC public hearings, and they can be related to the Commission's healing project, either in a direct or metaphorical way. *Mother to Mother* represents an exception in this shortlist, because it is set in 1993, right before the official demise of apartheid, but its story, however, engages in an implicit dialogue with the truth commission. The novel, in fact, is based on the real events of the killing of Fulbright American student Amy Biehl by a mob of black youths, who were first convicted, and then released as part of the TRC process.

The literature on the TRC is vast and focuses on many aspects, offering both assessments of the successes and failures of the commission as a human rights and/or historical project, and investigations of the TRC's use of concepts such as truth, justice, amnesty, and reconciliation. This thesis distinguishes its contribution by deploying literature as a powerful critical lens through which to supplement, challenge and extend the work of the TRC. Given the fact that both literature and the truth commission rely on narrative, story-telling, and discourse, I argue that literature provides a productive and insightful source for investigating and responding to the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the TRC. There are, of course, fascinating studies that focus

on the TRC and on how literature engages with the South African reconciling project: Mark Sanders's *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the time of a Truth Commission* (2007), and Shane Graham's *South African Literature after the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (2009) are the most important critical works in this sense. In his prologue, for instance, Sanders emphasises the interdependence of the relation between literature and law by arguing that 'the forms taken by the testimony at the hearings make the Truth and Reconciliation Commission a singular occasion for thinking about the relationship between law and literature.'⁴ According to Sanders, the literary becomes essential to understanding the functioning of law, when 'its verificationary procedures are in abeyance';⁵ he carries on claiming that this especially occurs in the context of the testimonial practice because of the potential ambiguity underpinning the testimony itself. Hence, for Sanders, the South African TRC demands a cross-interdisciplinary area of investigation where literature plays a paramount source for critical analysis.

In a similar fashion, Graham too adopts literature as a line of enquiry into South Africa's process of memorialisation and preservation of the traumatic past and its re-organisation of the social space after apartheid. He focuses on literary or dramatic texts either that explicitly address the TRC as content or that 'have taken full advantage of the new narrative and dramatic possibilities generated in part by the Commission's processes.'⁶ In this way, Graham emphasises the importance and suitability of literature in investigating and challenging the collective memorial narrative and reconciliation processes carried out by the TRC. This thesis thus follows on from the steps of these two monographs and their unique approach of adopting literature as a critical source in the context of the South African TRC; however, my contribution distinguishes itself in the choice and the type of analysis of the literary texts deployed to reflect on the TRC's project. Sanders and Graham examine both more broadly discussed texts such as Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, and other less canonical novels such as Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and Magona's *Mother to Mother*. On the other hand, alongside discussing these four texts, I expand my selection to novels such as Gordimer's *The House Gun* and Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, which, among their

⁴ Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 4.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Shane Graham, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.

authors' oeuvre, have received much less critical attention, but that I argue raise fundamental questions with reference to South Africa's healing journey. Most importantly, I address some *hybrid dimensions* that characterised South Africa's past, interregnum, and the approach of the TRC in confronting that past. Where Sanders and Graham primarily focus on the linguistic difficulties of articulating trauma in the context of the TRC's testimonial process, and confront larger questions of memory and archive respectively, I adopt a wider approach: besides challenging the supposedly healing power of telling the truth, I investigate the underlying hybridities and ambiguities concerning the truth commission's definitions of trauma, victim and perpetrator – as I explain shortly.

Regardless of the authors' different backgrounds – in terms of ethnicity, religion, and historical conditions⁷ – these novels interrogate the restorative and healing power of truth, and question the nature and definition of both forgiveness and reconciliation. Hence, I conduct my research focusing on how these novels try to answer to the following questions: is the truth about the past recoverable? Is it ever singular? Who should be entitled to tell the 'truth'? Is truth a real precondition of forgiveness and reconciliation? Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators? Is there a definite boundary between them? These texts also address other important issues such as the definition of trauma, violence on women and its representation, and some ambiguities related to racial identity, in particular to the case of colouredness. It is then worth wondering: how did the Commission deal with these matters? Did women have the opportunity to share their stories of pain and violence? Was the public context of the TRC hearings the appropriate setting for women to articulate their stories of suffering? What kind of traumas could be spoken out? How were the issues of race and racism inserted in the TRC reconciling discourse? To what extent did the TRC raise and confront the historically ambiguous position occupied by coloured people during and after apartheid?

The first chapter is then concerned with the historical background of the establishment of the TRC, alongside an evaluation of its successes and failures. I discuss the heated debate surrounding the amnesty deal as proposed and carried out by the Commission; women's poor participation in the TRC public hearings as 'primary

⁷ Gordimer and Coetzee are 'white' South Africans, the former with Anglo-Lithuanian Jewish origins, the latter with Afrikaner parentage. On the other hand, Magona and Ndebele are both 'Africans,' while Dangor and Wicomb have mixed origins.

victims;’ the flaws of the interpreting and transcribing processes in dealing with people’s testimonies. Finally, I explore Desmond Tutu’s *No Future Without Forgiveness*, and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* which provide personal insights to the understanding of the TRC inner workings. *Country of My Skull* is particularly important due to its polyvalent nature as a creative non-fictional text, which lays foundation for the subsequent analyses of the novels.

The second chapter focuses on female trauma – both ‘extraordinary’, namely, single-event bodily violations, and ‘ordinary,’ everyday humiliations – and makes a comparison with the approach adopted by the TRC in addressing this sensitive issue. It explores four novels: *Bitter Fruit*, *Disgrace*, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and *Mother to Mother*. After a brief introduction, I first analyse *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace*, which address the kind of extraordinary trauma – sexual violence on women – and its ‘unspeakability.’ These texts propose silence as the only alternative to the articulation of such a private pain in the public context of the TRC hearings. Secondly, I explore more ordinary types of female trauma, those deriving from the apartheid policy and which were excluded by the TRC’s strict definition of gross human right violations. I discuss *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and *Mother to Mother*, which enacts alternative (private) settings where those women who were prevented from participating in (and benefiting from) the healing journey promoted by the TRC, because their traumas fell out the commission’s narrow definition of victimhood, can finally speak about their stories of ordinary suffering.

The third chapter resumes the discussion about *Mother to Mother*, *Disgrace*, and *Bitter Fruit*, along with exploring *The House Gun*. Here, I investigate the relation between truth and reconciliation, especially in connection with the TRC amnesty deal, its public usage of personal (and Christian) moments as confession and forgiveness, and the Commission’s overall assumption according to which ‘truth is the only road to reconciliation.’ Likewise in the second chapter, a brief introduction is followed by two main sections. The first section confronts the question as to whether the truth about the past is really attainable. The analyses of *Mother to Mother* and *The House Gun* undermine the recoverability of the truth by hybridising the boundary between the definitions of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ as identified by the mandate of the TRC, and, in so doing, these novels also challenge the healing power of truth and its contribution to actualising reconciliation. The second section scrutinises the reconciling power of truth with reference to the TRC amnesty process. Focusing on *The House Gun*, *Disgrace*, and

Bitter Fruit, I highlight alternative pathways to the act of forgiving after a perpetrator's public confession and manifestation of contrition: the trial system, a private form of expiation, and the option of revenge.

The fourth chapter mainly focuses on the analysis of Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*. Here, I discuss the issues of race and racism, with particular reference to the case of the category of 'Coloureds,' and how these topics were addressed by the TRC. I place particular emphasis on the hybrid and ambivalent condition of coloured identity, which was quite neglected by the TRC mandate and reconciling discourse. I also investigate the ethical implications of narrating the Other by addressing questions of authorship and ownership of the narrative, and making a comparison with the TRC testimonial practice. I conclude this chapter by making a short reference to Wicomb's *David's Story* in order to show the author's interest in exposing the shortcomings of any narrative attempting to establish the truth.

Finally, I draw my conclusions in a short section, where I resume the discussion on the issue of hybridity in contrast to the strict binary vision adopted by the TRC. Relying on my previous analyses of the novels, I foreground my vision of literature as a social means which is able to give the work of the TRC an afterlife, thus inviting the readers to keep the dialogue about the past open and carry on the discourse about reconciliation.

To carry out my research, I have decided to adopt several theoretical approaches, guided by the kinds of issues raised by the literary texts. Rather than exploring the texts through a single critical lens, my analysis is informed by a combination of different theories: from postcolonial to gender studies, from trauma studies to a historical and sociological approach. These critical theories have helped me to engage with the public story-telling and reconciling aspects of the TRC project, thus showing that literature can contribute to both supplementing the work of the truth commission, and expanding the meaning of some key theoretical terms. I have particularly relied on three postcolonial concepts: hybridity, subaltern, and the Other. As my discussion of the novels reveals, I try to use these terms in a flexible way, so that they can be more responsive to the shifting and volatile circumstances that surround post-apartheid South Africa. My understanding of hybridity is, indeed, polyvalent and goes beyond the three areas traditionally associated with the term – biology, ethnicity and culture. Concerning this, in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* Robert J. C. Young offers a long historical account of the term 'hybrid,' and observes that the word has developed

from biological and botanical origins; according to its Latin etymology, it meant the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, and hence, as the Oxford English Dictionary claims, ‘of human parents of different races, half-breed.’⁸ He carries on arguing that ‘in the nineteenth century [hybrid] is used to refer to a physiological phenomenon; in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one.’⁹

In postcolonial discourse, for example, the term ‘hybridity’ has been primarily associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose analysis of the interactions between the ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’ emphasises their interdependent and the mutual construction of their subjectivities in a shared culture. In *The Location of Culture* he suggests that there is a ‘Third space of Enunciation’ in which cultural systems are constructed:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory...may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of culture, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*.¹⁰

It is in this ‘in-between’ space that cross-cultural exchange occurs and *cultural hybridity* arises out of these interactions. In Bhabha’s view, hybridity thus seems to be essentially ‘in-between’ and ‘liminal,’ as is clear, for instance, from the metaphors that he uses – i. e. ‘the borderline culture of hybridity’¹¹ – and the way in which he uses in-between and hybrid interchangeably. Drawing on the works of social anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, and their formulation of the concept of liminality in connection with all rites of passage, Hein Viljoen and Chris van der Merwe also adopt the concept of liminality as synonym of hybridity in their volume *Beyond the Threshold*.¹² Here, they focus on the South African context and explore the formation of hybrid, liminal identities that are created through crossing boundaries in a selection of South African literary texts. Liminal entities are ‘neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there [...] and are at the very least “betwixt and between” all recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification.’¹³

⁸ See Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 225.

¹² See Hein Viljoen and Chris N. van der Merwe, eds., *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

¹³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 97.

Discussing Turner's three stages in rites of passage such as initiations, Viljoen and van der Merwe identify the second stage – the stage of liminality – as the one where 'the old dies so that a new self can be born.'¹⁴ There is then a distinct resonance with Nadine Gordimer's conception of the interregnum. In her essay titled 'Living in the Interregnum' (1982),¹⁵ the South African author describes a period of transformation, of transition between the dying white order of apartheid and a new order, where all South Africans will benefit from the same rights irrespective of class, gender, and race. Gordimer is, here, obviously anticipating the interregnum period that South Africa actually experiences in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which will culminate with the official demise of apartheid and the first democratic election in 1994. This idea of interregnum is also reflected in the choice of the epigraph in Gordimer's novel *July's People* (1981): 'The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms,' a quotation from the Italian neo-Marxist theorist and politician Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

Within this context, I understand 'hybridity' as synonym of the liminal to the extent that both depict a condition which is ambivalent and contradictory, neither one thing nor the other, but maybe both at the same time. However, I do prefer employing the term 'hybrid' over 'liminal' in order to avoid suggesting any idea of transitory or temporary, which is inherent in the etymological meaning of liminality – from the Latin *limen*, threshold. The term hybrid, in turn, is more neutral in this sense, and it conveys an uncertain level of entanglement between two or more supposedly fixed categories without aiming to pinpoint any time reference. For this reason, I think that 'hybridity' – my understanding of hybridity – is more appropriate to address the post-apartheid South African context; indeed, although the interregnum is supposed to be over from a political viewpoint as the rise of a new democratic order seems to imply, the exploration of the selected texts will show that a more complicated cultural and conceptual understanding of the time of interregnum is needed, given the ambiguity and hybridity that still characterise South Africa during the years of the TRC and beyond. In this connection, I also expand the meaning of hybridity as derived from Bhabha's and Young's conceptualisations to other dimensions. Although my discussion of *Playing in the Light* places emphasis on racial and cultural hybridity underpinning Coloured

¹⁴ Viljoen and van der Merwe, *Beyond the Threshold*, 11.

¹⁵ See Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum' (1982), in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, edited and introduced by Stephen Clingman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), 261-284.

people's identity formation, the analyses of the other texts highlight other types of hybridity.

For instance, the crossing of boundaries between writing, storytelling and oral performance, between facts and fiction in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, or the melange of genres characterising the narrative *Country of My Skull*, hint at the potential of textual hybridity in challenging the objective and realistic approach of the truth commission's truth-telling account. *Bitter Fruit*, *Disgrace*, *Mother to Mother* and *The House Gun*, on the other hand, portray ambivalent characters, who turn from victim into perpetrator or vice versa, and, in doing so, they hybridise the boundary between the supposedly discrete categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' identified by the TRC. My focus on these varied hybrid dimensions of the texts distinguishes my contribution significantly from Graham's and Sander's approaches. Graham's analyses of *Mother to Mother* and *Bitter Fruit* are very perceptive, and draw attention to how the characters attempt to map out, spatially and temporally, the losses and traumas of the past – whether in the form of a letter (Mandisa in *Mother to Mother*), a private diary, or onto the physical space of the city (Lydia and Silas in *Bitter Fruit*, respectively). Sander's reading of *Disgrace* is equally fundamental for this thesis, as his linguistic analysis of the verbal aspect of the narrative provides significant insights about the character of the male protagonist, David Lurie, along with drawing readers' attention to the effective (un)reliability of both the narrator and the narrative focaliser, thus questioning the very act of narrating itself. Both critics, though, overlook the ambiguous and hybrid positions experienced by the characters in the novels. By contrast, I place great emphasis on how these characters encompass both the roles of victim and perpetrator, and on how this level of hybridity contributes to the critique of the TRC's reconciliation project. My third chapter is, indeed, primarily dedicated to the description of Magona's Mxolisi as a victim of historical circumstances and murderer of an innocent student, Dangor's Mikey as a child of rape and avenger of her mother's rapist, and Coetzee's David Lurie as guilty of sexual harassment and victim of a gang's assault. The ambivalence and arbitrariness of these positions invite readers to question the Commission's oversimplified discourses of achieving the *truth*, and highlight the necessity to continue the search for new approaches to South Africa's healing journey.

In addition to this, I also highlight the intertwinement between private and public, personal and political domains with reference to the articulation of sexual violence against women, especially in the case of interracial rape. In a country haunted

by colonial oppression and apartheid segregation, the private suffering experienced by women in relation to interracial rape cannot easily be separated from political and racial implications. The TRC failed to fully grasp this profound entanglement, and asked women to come forward and tell their private stories of sexual violence in a public context. Where the Commission proved not to be able to comprehend and foresee the risk of misappropriating these stories of interracial sexual violence by reading them through racial and political lens only – and, in this way, steering them away from a more personal, gender dimension –, literature succeeds in drawing attention to the hybrid border between private and public, personal and political, gender and race, and engaging in a productive understanding of silence as a valid alternative.

In relation to the other two postcolonial terms, I approach the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘Other’ with a similar attitude. In her seminal essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’,¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak conceptualises the term ‘subaltern’ to denote a subject that, in the context of colonial production, ‘has no history and cannot speak,’ a subject inferior of rank, education, deprived of the possibility to participate in the political discourse of power. Spivak further comments on the more complex case of the ‘female subaltern’:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is “evidence”. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.¹⁷

Ideas of the ‘subaltern’ are crucial to my understanding of the multiple ways that black South African women are oppressed by both apartheid and patriarchal subordination, as it is exemplified by the protagonists in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and *Mother to Mother*. The exploration of *Disgrace*, though, extends my use of the term ‘subaltern’ further. Although they cannot be immediately classified as ‘subaltern’ according to Spivak’s understanding, I argue that the term ‘subaltern’ can be applied to identify the condition of both Lucy and Petrus, two key characters in *Disgrace*. Despite being the black Other, in the context of the new South Africa, Petrus has been granted some

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’ in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. and intro. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), 66-111.

¹⁷ Ibid., 82-83.

money from the government to acquire a piece of land, build a new house, and improve his economic position. On the other hand, Lucy is an educated middle-class woman who has decided to live as a farmer in the countryside out of passion and love for that life style – and not out of necessity. However, the circumstances of the past (colonial and apartheid racism) and the present (sexual violence against women) position these two characters in a lower place in the social ladder, if compared to the dominant white male viewpoint, represented in this case by Lucy's father David Lurie, whose perspective the narrative foregrounds. The biased environment Lucy lives in will indeed impel the woman to embrace silence over the crime she suffers from. If her silence can be read as a legitimate form of protest against the male and still racially-inclined reality, it also invites us to reflect on the *actual* possibility for the woman to speak in such an environment, thus aligning Lucy's condition to Spivak's 'female subaltern' more than the woman's education and white identity might initially imply.

If, as I argue, the complex context of post-apartheid South Africa requires a more malleable idea of hybridity than that associated with Bhabha, then the concept of the 'Other' also requires a more nuanced and mutable identity than that provided by postcolonial theory. Within this critical lens, the 'Other' refers to the colonised subject, who has been marginalised by the imperial discourse, identified by his/her difference from the centre.¹⁸ Bill Ashcroft argues that the Other can only be constructed 'out of the archive of the "self"'¹⁹ – the Western coloniser –, and has, hence, in Edward Said's words, 'helped to define Europe (or the West)'²⁰ by identifying what is not considered Western. In relation to this, Ashcroft further suggests that 'in order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self, yet at the same time it must maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorize control over it.'²¹ Moving to a South African context during the years of colonialism and apartheid, the 'self,' the 'privileged centre'²² was represented by the white European-descendent minority, while the Other was the native

¹⁸ See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 154-158.

¹⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 102.

²⁰ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, reprint with a new preface (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 1. This influential volume can be said to inaugurate postcolonial criticism and expose Eurocentric universalism, which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not. Here, Said identifies Orientalism and Orient as Western-made products, as European cultural tradition of defining the East as 'Other' and, by default, inferior to the West.

²¹ Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back*, 102.

²² Ibid.

black, or their hybrid offspring – i. e. anyone non-white born from the encounter between the colonizer and the colonised. Abdul JanMohamed points out that the white European settler, in subjugating the native, ‘destroys without any significant qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, political, legal, and moral systems and imposes his own version of these structures on the other.’²³ In South Africa, this view caused the Other, whether Bantu, Coloured or of other mixed ancestry, to be marginalised, deprived of power, voice, rights and dignity for a very long time. The series of acts being enacted in the late 1940s and early 1950s, such as the Population Registration Act, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Amendment Act, the Group Areas Act, and the consequent Pass laws and forced removals, aimed to enhance apartheid separate development and affected every sector of life. The demise of apartheid following the first democratic election in 1994 changed the political situation, and, since then, the country has been facing overwhelming challenges in reinventing itself as a liberal democracy that respected those human rights which had been violated during apartheid. Within this process of nation-rebuilding, the relationship between the self and the Other, between the white minority and the non-white majority, has focused the attention of the new government, which has worked to restore the land and redistribute equal power to the Other; the TRC too has contributed to bridging the divide between these two parties by uncovering the conflicts and traumas caused by apartheid. This thesis does not aim to evaluate the successes and the failures of the new policy though. My focus is, instead, on how literature – exemplified in this case by *Disgrace*, *Bitter Fruit* and *The House Gun* – once again provides a productive platform to reflect on these changes in the political background of the new South Africa and to voice the country’s intention of shifting the power relation between the old idea of Self and the Other: as mentioned earlier, the black Other Petrus turns from a gardener to a farm owner; Silas Ali, one of the main characters of Dangor’s novel, is coloured and working for the Ministry of Justice in the new South Africa; likewise, the defense of the white perpetrator, Duncan Lingard, of Gordimer’s *The House Gun* is entrusted to the black lawyer Hamilton Motsamai. These novels further problematise and convey the complexity of the term of the Other by emphasising the hybridity and ambiguity of the transition period – as well as the years of the truth commission’s project. In this context of uncertainty, for example, Dangor’s character of Lydia Ali, a rape victim, is Other

²³ Abdul R. JanMohamed, ‘The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature,’ *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 66.

within her own family, because of her impossibility to connect and rely on her husband's comfort in the aftermath of her rape; Coetzee's character of Lucy, a white woman victim of interracial rape, can be considered Other because of her gender and because of her becoming the *tenant* of her own farm, a consequence of her compromise with her former assistant Petrus.

In addition to renegotiating these three key postcolonial terms, my selection of novels also engages with trauma theory and the very definition of trauma. The TRC was indeed founded on the fundamental assumption that telling the truth about past traumas could heal and promote reconciliation among the people of South Africa. This assumption seems to rely on trauma theorist Cathy Caruth's argument that 'the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another.'²⁴ This notion that trauma can only be understood when it is enunciated and, more significantly, when it is heard by another is also suggested by the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub; they, in fact, emphasise the importance for the victim of articulating the traumatic experience as unheard testimony inhibits healing and traps the survivor in a painful repetition of the event.²⁵ Concerning this, I agree with Rebecca Saunders's argument that 'while trauma theory has primarily been produced in Europe and the United States, trauma itself has, with equal if not greater regularity and urgency, been experienced elsewhere.'²⁶ This is particularly relevant to the type of traumas that occur in a postcolonial, racially-biased reality such as that of South Africa, and it is then necessary to wonder whether the tools of trauma theory and its Eurocentric-American bias are adequate to address such a condition. Stef Craps underlines that the very concept of trauma, which is used to describe responses to extreme events across space and time, is a Western artifact, and fails to properly address the specificities of trauma that have occurred in Non-Western settings. He thus calls for alternative conceptualisations of trauma that need to be more attuned to (post)colonial conditions and encompass notions of race and racism.²⁷

Besides relying on the European-American assumption that the practice of testimony could heal people's suffering, the TRC also adopted a Western definition of

²⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

²⁵ See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁶ Rebecca Saunders, *Lamentations and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 15

²⁷ Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bonds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

‘victim of gross human rights violations,’ which is primarily based on single-event bodily violation. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995, states that gross violations of human rights include ‘(a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill treatment of any person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit an act referred to in paragraph (a).’²⁸ This definition is closely reminiscent of the description provided by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the American Psychiatric Association of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder):

The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which [...] the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others.²⁹

In this connection, I agree with Laura Brown’s observation that this description tends to ignore ‘the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma in the lives of many oppressed and disempowered persons.’³⁰ In other words, it fails to understand the impact of everyday racism, classism, homophobia, and sexism, which characterised (and to a certain extent continues to characterise) the reality of South Africa. On the other hand, literature, as my subsequent analyses of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, *Mother to Mother*, and *Playing in the Light* clearly show, contributes to reshaping and expanding the definition of trauma in ways that comprise the quotidian, ordinary oppressions and humiliations that non-white South Africans suffered during the colonial and apartheid eras but that were overlooked by the mandate of the truth commission.

The aim of this project is not to demolish nor to deny the achievements accomplished by the work of the TRC though. It must be acknowledged that the Commission made an important contribution to the process of healing and reconciling South Africa. However, I argue that literature provides a productive and insightful source for supplementing, extending and critiquing the implications of the TRC’s strengths and weaknesses. The selected novels thus become an *exemplary* shortlist of literary texts at two different levels: first, they enact the multivalent hybrid dimensions which characterised South Africa’s past, but also the ways in which the TRC addressed that past; secondly, they exemplify the wider function of literature as a powerful critical

²⁸ ‘The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report,’ Vol. 4, Ch. 10, Para. 17, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm>.

²⁹ See Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, 24.

³⁰ Laura S. Brown, *Cultural Competence in Trauma Therapy: Beyond the Flashback* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2008), 18.

lens of society. The establishment of the *truth* through testimony was fundamental to the project of reconciliation, reparation and renewal in the new so-called ‘rainbow nation’ of South Africa. In this sense, Nadine Gordimer points out that ‘testimony creates the conditions. It is a re-examination of the past to which, whether or not we were direct protagonists, we all find ourselves subject.’³¹ The promises of the TRC were the promises of both speaking out and listening, but not all South Africans had the opportunity or were willing to tell their stories, nor all the voices that spoke could be heard in and through that process. In the same essay, Gordimer, in fact, also acknowledges the fundamental role of literature in our society by emphasising that ‘both the testimony and the literature are vital.’³² She even claims that ‘the imagination has a longer reach [...] When testimony has been filed, out of date,’ literature ‘continues to carry the experience from which the narrative has fallen away.’³³ Through the analyses of the selected texts, I show then how literature, without any pretense of objectivity or closure, can contribute to the reconciling project initiated by the truth commission by opening up new questions, and by casting light on new perspectives in terms of trauma, truth, reconciliation, gender, and racial identity.

³¹ Nadine Gordimer, ‘Hanging on a Sunrise: Testimony and Imagination in Revolutionary Writing,’ in *Writing and Being*, by Nadine Gordimer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 29.

³² *Ibid.*, 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

Chapter 1

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: History, Truth-Telling, and Reconciliation

«We seek the truth not for the purpose of prosecution. We seek the truth for the healing of our land»
Desmond Tutu

«I'm busy with the truth...my truth. Of course, it's quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I'm telling the story to» Antjie Krog³⁴

1. 1 The establishment of a truth commission in South Africa: 'truth' versus 'justice'

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in the final report of the TRC:

Having looked the beast in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let us shut the door on the past – not in order to forget it but in order not to allow it to imprison us. Let us move into the glorious future of a new kind of society [...] founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex.³⁵

After the first democratic elections in April 1994 and the win of the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa faced overwhelming challenges in reinventing itself as a liberal democracy that respected those human rights which had been violated during apartheid, and the establishment of the TRC in 1995 played a fundamental role in this process of political and social definition. Authorised by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995, the TRC was set up 'to provide for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature,

³⁴ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (New York: Random House, 1998; London: Vintage Books, 1999), 259. Citations refer to the Vintage edition. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *CMS*.

³⁵ 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report,' Vol. 1, Chap. 1, Para. 91.

causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed³⁶ during a 34-year period of South African history (1960 to 1994).

In *A Country Unmasked*,³⁷ Dr Alex Boraine – one of the main architects of the South African truth commission – depicts all the procedural stages that resulted in the institution of the TRC, whose main task was to assist the whole nation in dealing with its painful past. In the first chapter, ‘The road to reconciliation: The genesis of the TRC,’ he highlights that the idea of a truth commission came first from the African National Congress: while working at the negotiation for a new democratic government, the ANC was accused of having perpetrated human rights violations in some of its training camps in Tanzania and other parts of southern Africa. The response of the party was to set up its own internal inquiries – these included the Stuart, the Skweyiya, and the Motsuenyane Commissions –, whose findings confirmed that gross human rights violations had taken place in the camps during the period of exile.³⁸ Its report was presented to the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC, which called for an independent truth commission investigating those human rights abuses committed by both the state and the liberation movements:

It is because we believe that there must be full disclosure and accountability that the NEC has proposed that a truth commission be set to investigate all abuses that have flowed from the policy of apartheid. Instead of self-indemnity, we need the whole truth, so that all the victims of disappearances, murder, torture and dirty tricks or other families know what happened.³⁹

Boraine also mentions two fundamental conferences held in Somerset West in the Western Cape in February 1994, and in Cape Town in July 1994, respectively, which helped South Africa to work out its own approach in coping with the past among the many models provided by other countries experiencing similar political transitions from dictatorship to democracy (e. g. Argentina and Chile).

He underlines the importance of the democratic nature of the procedures leading to the establishment of the TRC: in fact, the parliamentary Portfolio Committee on

³⁶ ‘Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995],’ accessed October 8, 2015, http://www.fas.org/irp/world/rsa/act95_034.htm.

³⁷ Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 2000).

³⁸ For a more detailed account of the human rights violations occurred in the ANC prison camps see Paul Trehwela, *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the Exile History of the ANC and SWAPO* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2010). This book also includes some articles that Trehwela published with *Searchlight South Africa* – a journal that he co-edited with Baruch Hirson and focused on exposing the atrocities committed by the ANC during the years of the anti-apartheid struggle.

³⁹ Abdul Kader Asmal, ‘After Motsuenyane,’ *Mayibuye* 4, no. 8 (1993): 15, cited in Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*, 12. *Mayibuye* is an ANC newsletter.

Justice – consisting of members of all political parties represented in the South African Parliament – held public hearings to frame the bill instituting the Commission.⁴⁰ Another appointed committee was asked to draw up a shortlist of possible commissioner candidates, before Mandela made the final decision in consultation with the cabinet of his Government of National Unity. He chose seventeen people composing the Commission's members, and the Archbishop Desmond Tutu was appointed Chairperson, with Dr Alex Boraine as the Deputy Chair.

Grounded on the postamble to the Interim Constitution 1993 (National Unity and Reconciliation) the mandate of the Commission – carried out through three committees, Amnesty, Reparation and Rehabilitation, and Human Rights Violations – specified the following goals: to investigate past gross human rights violations, afford victims an opportunity to relate the violations they suffered, grant amnesty to persons who committed abuses during apartheid – as long as crimes were politically motivated and there was full disclosure by those seeking amnesty –, take measures toward restoring human dignity, report to the nation about its findings, and make recommendations aimed to prevent gross violations of human rights in the future. According to the postamble:

This Constitution provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex. [...] The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, and a need for Ubuntu but not for victimisation. (emphasis added)⁴¹

Between 1996 and 1998, the TRC took statements from more than 21,000 victims documenting allegations of over 38,000 human rights crimes, including 10,000 murders. Indeed, the most effective way to identify victims was to invite them to complete a statement which would have given the Commission the relevant

⁴⁰ The Bill was signed into law on 19 July 1995, and came into effect on 15 December 1995 when the commissioners were appointed.

⁴¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Rider Books, 1999; Reprint, London: Rider Books, 2000), 45. Citations refer to the reprinted edition. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *NFWF*.

information, and provided them with a permanent record. There were three approaches to secure statements from victims: firstly, trained statement-takers were based in the four main offices of the TRC, and victims were invited to go to those offices and complete statements. A second way was to go directly into the communities and to take statements in a public hall, in a church, or in people's homes. However, since these two approaches seemed to be inadequate to reach all those who wished to make statements, the Commission appointed 'designated statement-takers' drawn from non-governmental organisations who acted on its behalf.

The statement-taking process was no simple issue due to the several different languages spoken by victims, alongside the traumatic experience of listening to gruesome stories. Moreover, because of the huge number of people who made statements, not all of them had also the opportunity to tell their stories at the public hearings; on the other hand, many of those who submitted written statements were not keen to appear in public. The Commission, therefore, had to select a 'representative group based on types of victims, places, occasions, and dates on which the alleged offences and abuses took place.'⁴² Finally, once the statements were completed, it was the turn of the Investigative Unit, whose task was to corroborate the essential facts. As a result of this long and demanding process, approximately just 10 per cent of the deponents testified before the Human Rights Violations Committee.

The hearings, however, gave victims the opportunity to speak in public and have their grief and anger heard by perpetrators and the nation. Furthermore, to ensure that victims were received with dignity and empathy, the TRC appointed 'briefers' to accompany and assist them before, during, and after the hearings. The Commission also introduced simultaneous translation – a matter which will be discussed more in detail later in this chapter – to allow victims to tell their stories in the language of their choice.

In *A Country Unmasked*, Boraine emphasises the uniqueness of the South African model, both in nature and in form. First of all, it was one of the first truth commissions to take place in the public eye. Not only were the hearings held in front of a live audience, but they were also broadcast throughout the country for the sake of transparency, and as a fundamental part of the restoring and reinventing process that was meant to engage all South African people. Secondly, the Commission also decided not to hold public hearings in the major centres only, but travelled around the country

⁴² Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*, 109.

permitting people to attend and participate personally in the proceedings. Besides hearing victims of human rights abuses and perpetrators applying for amnesty, a third unique feature was the decision to hold special hearings and institutional hearings – business, health sector, legal community, media, faith community –, in the attempt to respond to the pervasiveness of the apartheid regime, which affected every area of life. A fourth feature refers to the choice to make public the names of alleged perpetrators: before including names in the final report, the Commission sent notices informing people of their intention, and invited them to respond in writing if they had any objections to being so named.

However, the most unique feature is related to the provision of amnesty permitted by the postamble of the Constitution. In fact, the South African TRC has been the only truth commission to have included amnesty as part of its proceedings. Differently from other earlier truth commissions which had granted general amnesties, the South African model required amnesty to be applied for on an individual basis, and all applicants to complete a prescribed form. Applicants also had to make a ‘full disclosure’ of their human rights violations, and only those acts which were demonstrably political – according to strict criteria – could be qualified for amnesty. In most cases, applicants appeared before the Amnesty Committee (AC), which was autonomous in its decision, and those hearings were open to the public. In connection with the time limits, there was a debate among the AC on both the cut-off date – deeds committed beyond this date would not be considered for amnesty – and the amnesty deadline – applications for amnesty would not be accepted after this date. Initially, it was established that the cut-off date was 6 December 1993, and the amnesty deadline on 14 December 1996; but, in order to meet the requests from political and police leaders, whose cooperation was necessary for the Commission to fulfil its tasks, those fixed dates were extended by President Mandela: the new cut-off date was 10 May 1994 and the new deadline was 10 May 1997.

There were more than 8,000 applications for amnesty from prosecution (although only a small minority of these were approved). Of course, the amnesty hearings were arranged differently from the human rights violations ones: while the latter had to avoid any hint of a courtroom atmosphere and allow victims to restore their ‘human and civil dignity,’ perpetrators could be cross-examined by both the AC and the family or the relatives of the victim.

Despite the uniqueness of its amnesty provisions, the South African Commission has not escaped some criticism from the international human rights community, and the provision of amnesty still remains a source of controversy and heated debate. Many critics have raised some questions and objections about a truth commission's endeavour and its achievements in comparison with the criminal justice system: can justice in its different forms be served equally well with truth commissions? Should standard forms of prosecutions, such as trials, be preferred? Does the amnesty process satisfy various criteria for justice, or does it distort the trial system?

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that the truth commission method carries a heavy moral burden which cannot be ignored: these commissions sacrifice the pursuit of justice as usually understood for the sake of promoting other social purposes, such as historical truth and social reconciliation. They go on to assert that:

justice is not achieved when a murderer or a rapist publicly acknowledges his crimes but is not brought to trial and suffers no further punishment. (This is true whether one believes that the aim of criminal justice is retribution, deterrence, rehabilitation, or some other purpose.) Even if the victims received financial compensation, the demands of justice (on virtually any theory of punishment) would not be satisfied. Nor would the kind of public shaming that perpetrators are said to experience in testifying to the commission count as satisfying justice.⁴³

They also point out that not only did the choice of a truth commission fail to accomplish the main aims of criminal justice, but the TRC also rejected a less punitive alternative such as lustration – denying perpetrators the opportunity to hold public office – which could have represented a sort of minor punishment for the oppressors.

Sharing the same point of view, David Crocker stresses the necessity that ‘the either/or of “truth v. justice” must be avoided; but truth commissions and trials have distinctive and mutually supplementary roles in achieving the multiple goals of transitional justice.’⁴⁴ Crocker, in fact, acknowledges that truth commissions are more suitable for addressing the causes and the consequences of systematic abuses as well as outlining the pale contours of collective responsibility. On the other hand, the trials seem to be more appropriate as sites to deal with individual political leaders’ responsibilities in engineering the apartheid regime. He goes on to say that, although it might be argued that truth commissions are ‘designed precisely as a morally second-

⁴³ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 164.

⁴⁴ David Crocker, ‘Truth Commissions, Transitional Justice, and Civil Society,’ in *Truth v. Justice. The Morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg, and Dennis Thompson (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 105.

best alternative’⁴⁵ in case of fear that legal prosecutions could further divide a new-born democracy in need of healing and reconciliation, the works of truth commissions can be compatible with trials and punishments.

However, even though the Amnesty Committee of the South African TRC recommended prosecution for those people whose amnesty requests had been denied because they did not meet all the compulsory requirements, and those who never applied for amnesty could be subjected to legal prosecutions and civil suits, much criticism was related to the fact that if perpetrators were granted amnesty, victims could not sue them anymore. As highlighted by Nkosingithi Biko, the families of Bantu Steve Biko, Griffith and Victoria Mxenge, and Dr and Mrs Rebeiro were the first public voices to challenge the amnesty clause of the act authorising the TRC.⁴⁶ He explains that some South Africans were satisfied by the granting of amnesty, but there was a significant number who would have preferred to confront their perpetrators in courtrooms. Biko’s and other victims’ families tried to oppose the provision of amnesty by turning to the Constitutional Court, which dismissed their application. In his paper, Nkosingithi Biko wonders ‘whether the process was about truth and reconciliation at all. For some it was about amnesty – as a basis for ensuring that those directly implicated in the atrocities of the past were able to join the ranks of the indifferent.’⁴⁷ He also underscores that many families found that the TRC failed to treat the amnesty decisions with the deserved (and expected) sensitivity: this was the case of the family of Ashley Kriel,⁴⁸ for instance, who came to hear of the decision to grant amnesty to his killers through the media.

On the other hand, the advocates of truth commissions – especially the TRC – argue that they represent a better alternative way of linking ‘truth’ and ‘justice’ than the structure of the criminal justice system because they put victims first. Comparing the TRC amnesty hearings and the traditional criminal trials, Ronald Slye underlines that in case of a trial the state, or the victim, initiates the process that demands the presence of the accused, who is placed, of course, in a defensive position.⁴⁹ The purpose of a criminal trial is to determine whether the evidence presented against the accused is

⁴⁵ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁶ In this regard see Nkosingithi Biko, ‘Amnesty and Denial,’ in *Looking Back Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (London: Zed Books, 2000), 193-198.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 196.

⁴⁸ A 20-year-old South African activist who was killed by police in Cape Town on 9 July 1987

⁴⁹ See Ronald C. Slye, ‘Amnesty, Truth, and Reconciliation. Reflections on the South African Amnesty Process,’ in *Truth v. Justice*, 170-188.

sufficiently compelling to permit the court to feel justified in imposing punishment; whereas the main concern of the accused is obviously to escape conviction and raise as much doubt as possible about the claims of the state or of the accused's alleged victims.

Conversely, the South African amnesty hearings worked according to different conditions: it was the accused who had to take the initiative to come forward and, in this way, started the Commission's proceedings. Besides, he could be cross-examined by both the members of the AC and the alleged victims or their families. The major point was that an amnesty process had already made the decision not to punish the guilty – at least, not to punish him in the traditional way – so that its issue was to evaluate if the applicant was making full disclosure of the violations for which amnesty was requested – and if these acts were politically motivated as well. This does not mean that the information produced by the amnesty hearings was not flawed, but, compared to the information which would have been elicited from criminal trials, Slye asserts that the quantity and probably also the quality of the information elicited from the amnesty hearings was higher, especially in a country like South Africa, where the perpetrators were still part of the government (out of a peaceful negotiation) and much information implicating individuals was not readily available (deliberately hidden, destroyed, hard to find, and so on).

Martha Minow too rejects the view of truth commissions as a 'second-best alternative' only in those cases in which traditional prosecutions are not possible for practical reasons – for instance, when the offenders are part of a military regime that remains in force, or the new leaders try to avoid the confrontational atmosphere created by trials.⁵⁰ She makes the point that trials, as means to respond to injustice, have their own internal limitations: they focus on perpetrators, not on victims who are consulted and even cross-examined only to illustrate the facts of the defendant's guilt. Besides, she argues that truth commissions and the therapeutic process share some similarities, because in both contexts victims are placed in the foreground and are given the opportunity to tell their stories to someone who listens seriously and who validates them with official acknowledgement.

A great example of the restorative powers of truth-telling and of the amnesty process is provided by the mother of a victim: in *Looking Back Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, Ginn Fourie

⁵⁰ See Martha Minow, 'The Hope for Healing: What can Truth Commissions Do?,' in *Truth v. Justice*, 235-260.

recounts her experience with the perpetrators of her daughter's death at the Heidelberg Tavern, Cape Town, on 31 December 1993. Although the murderers were sent to prison, the amnesty hearing in October 1997 allowed Mrs. Fourie to confront them. During the hearing, in addition to describing her daughter's generosity, she claimed that she was ready to forgive and had no objection to the granting of amnesty. This episode is particularly meaningful because it shows the extraordinary capacity to forgive and reconcile displayed by many victims, often elicited by the works of the Commission. As she recounts, Mrs. Fourie was profoundly moved by her daughter's perpetrators' acceptance of her gift of forgiveness, and she also recognises 'that this was another step in the healing process.'⁵¹

Another aspect to focus on, and deeply connected with the granting of amnesty, is the issue of reparations. According to the National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the mandate of the Commission also consisted of 'taking of measures aimed at the granting of reparation to, and the rehabilitation and the restoration of the human and civil dignity of victims of violations of human rights,' and reparation was defined as including 'any form of compensation, ex gratia payment, restitution, rehabilitation or recognition.'⁵² The TRC, but more specifically the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee (RRC), has been often criticised for its inadequacy (financially speaking) and the delay in the delivery of reparation to victims. Particularly when contrasted with the 'immediate' delivery of amnesty – where perpetrators could walk free as soon as the favourable decision was made by the Amnesty Commission – victims saw no tangible sign of reparation for months and even years after having made a statement or testified at a hearing.

Dr Wendy Orr, a commissioner and a member of the RRC, remarks on the fact that one of the major quandaries was to deal with 'the huge gap between the expectations of victims and the understanding of reparation by Government and its capacity (and even willingness) to deliver.'⁵³ Orr also points out that another challenge was to define victims eligible for receiving reparation. According to the Act's definition of a victim, just those who had been found to have suffered a gross violation of human rights could have had access to reparation, and, among them, just those victims who had made a statement by the time the Human Rights Violations Committee closed the

⁵¹ Ginn Fourie, 'A Personal Encounter with Perpetrators,' in *Looking Back Reaching Forward*, 235.

⁵² 'Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995].'

⁵³ Wendy Orr, 'Reparation Delayed Is Healing Retarded,' in *Looking Back Reaching Forward*, 241.

statement-taking process on 15 December 1997. This means that millions of South Africans were excluded, because either they may not have suffered a gross abuse of human rights in terms of the Act – but, nevertheless, suffered the daily violation of living under apartheid – or they could not have accessed the TRC, without the chance to make a statement before the Commission. Furthermore, some debates took place within the TRC itself, especially concerning whether the amount of money due to victims should have been differentiated according to the severity of need and/or the present financial status. After many objections, it was decided that victims should receive the same amount of money, regardless of the degree of suffering. In addition to individual grants, the RRC also made several recommendations relating to service provision, community reparation and broader symbolic reparation. However, Orr highlights that the mandate of the RRC was to draft policy recommendations to be presented to the President, but it was the Government which had the power and the resources to implement those recommendations. Nonetheless, she admits that one of their failures as the RRC was the inability to deliver immediately some forms of reparation or supportive intervention without waiting for the end of the Commission's works.

Besides the criticism with reference to the provision of amnesty and the question of reparations, the TRC had to cope with many troubles during its works, which could have undermined its integrity and credibility. Surely, one of the most difficult challenges was connected with P. W. Botha's attitude; he made it very clear from the outset that he would not cooperate in any way with the Commission. Since his past offices as Minister of Defence, Prime Minister, member of the State Security Council, State President and his involvement in the implementation of the apartheid policy, the Commission believed it was essential to have Mr Botha's testimony. His refusal to cooperate with F. W. de Klerk, when the latter was preparing the National Party's submission to the Commission, thus drove the Archbishop Desmond Tutu to go and see Mr Botha in person at his retirement home in the town of George, on the southern Cape Coast, in an attempt to persuade him to collaborate. Furthermore, Tutu even attended Mr Botha's wife's funeral to demonstrate one more time that he – and the TRC – had no animosity against him. Despite Tutu's and the Commission's efforts to appease Mr Botha, which also aroused much criticism from the black community, the former State President refused to appear before the TRC disobeying the subpoena. As a consequence, the Attorney-General decided to act against Botha and took him to court.

Although the final result did not live up to the Commission's expectations – since Mr Botha succeeded in his appeal – the TRC achieved some important goals: first of all, it was proved that no one was above the law because even Mr Botha had to accept he was answerable to the law; secondly, during the trial the TRC was also able to outline many of the questions and allegations that would have been posed to him in a normal public hearing.

Undoubtedly, the nine-day hearing concerning the Mandela United Football Club and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's ambiguous involvement in the violent actions of her group of 'bodyguards' represented another critical moment. Madikizela-Mandela had started the Football Club to assist young people who were victims of the violent conflicts in the townships, but, in the course of time, they became a gang of thugs who terrorised people, abducting and killing those they regarded as 'sell-outs,' those who were collaborating with the police. Winnie Mandela was particularly involved in the abduction of four youths from a Methodist mission house by members of her football club, and one of the abducted youths, Stompie Moeketse Seipei, was subsequently found dead. This hearing was very contested, especially by the African community, for the Commission's treatment of Winnie Mandela, who had come to be known as 'the Mother of the Nation.'⁵⁴

On the other hand, Archbishop Tutu was criticised for his impassioned plea at the end of the hearing: appealing to his close relationship and long-standing friendship with the Mandelas, Tutu acknowledged Mrs Madikizela-Mandela's role in the history of their struggle against the apartheid regime, but, he also begged her to admit 'there are things that went wrong and I don't know why they went wrong [...] and say "I am sorry, I am sorry for my part in what went wrong"' (NFWF 135). Most of the media were very critical of Tutu's final statement and interpreted his gesture as an attempt to give her a way out, in the wake of her tenacious denial of any responsibility for the alleged crimes. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu confesses he 'did not have time to think about the consequences of a rebuff from Mrs Mandela. My impassioned plea could so easily have fallen flat on its face' (NFWF 136). However, she responded fairly positively by saying she was deeply sorry, even though many felt she had made no real

⁵⁴ See Emma Gilbey, *The Lady: The Life and Times of Winnie Mandela* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993). Drawing on newspaper and magazine reports, court records alongside her own research, Gilbey tells the story of one of the most controversial figures of South African history, Winnie Mandela, by focusing on both her hardship and her alleged crimes.

concessions at all and had not sufficiently acknowledged her involvement in those ‘things which went wrong.’

The TRC had to face further troubles a few days prior to the public handing-over ceremony of the Commission’s report to the then President Mandela: the ANC insisted on meeting with the Commission face-to-face – an opportunity denied to everyone else – to discuss the findings on the party. After a protracted debate, the proposal was rejected and the ANC decided to take the Commission to court: the party had applied for an interdict to prevent the publication of those sections of the report which contained the findings on the ANC. If the judge had ruled against the Commission, the report could still have been handed over to the President but the ceremony would have been in private, spoiling and depriving victims and survivors of this meaningful moment signalling the end of the works of the TRC. The court, however, dismissed the ANC’s application and the ceremony could take place as planned. The Commission’s five-volume report was handed over to President Mandela on 28 October 1998, even though the amnesty hearings were still at work. Indeed, the Amnesty Committee completed its mandate at the end of May 2001 and published its final report early in 2003, as part of the TRC’s final report.

I think it is undeniable that the TRC did not always achieve its aims to uncover and acknowledge the truth of South Africa’s past and reconcile victims and perpetrators. The TRC could not deliver ‘healing,’ just as it could not deliver ‘reconciliation.’ Moreover, it failed in attracting the bulk of the white community, as well as it might be argued that it was not able to provide psychological and emotional support for those who testified before the Commission. Some victims, in fact, reported that after their testimonies they suffered flashbacks, sleeplessness, and depression. But, as many scholars have highlighted, reconciliation is a process which takes time and goes through several phases, and there are some limits to what a truth commission can do in two years. For this reason, it is acknowledged that, despite its evident limitations, the TRC made an important contribution in the process of healing and reconciling South Africa by encouraging perpetrators of both sides to come forward, confess and take responsibility for their crimes, as well as fostering mutual forgiveness as the only basis to move on and build a better future.

1. 2 Women's voice in the TRC hearings

Following this brief account of the achievements and failures of the TRC, it is necessary to examine the gendered approach underpinning the structure of the truth commission. It is, indeed, no coincidence that the question 'Does Truth have a Gender?' was at the centre of a debate initiated at a meeting organised by a feminist lawyer, Ilse Olckers, in an organisation called Lawyers for Human Rights in Cape Town in December 1995, after the setting up of the TRC. Gender activists were particularly concerned that a gender-neutral approach by the Commission would miss 'the specificity of how apartheid structured identities not simply along the fault lines of race, but also along those of gender.'⁵⁵ The issue of the gendered nature of the experience of human rights violations during the apartheid period was also foregrounded in a workshop entitled 'Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission' and hosted by the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) Gender Research Group at the University of Witwatersrand in March 1996, as the Commission commenced its hearings. The workshop resulted in an in-depth and formal submission to the TRC (the CALS submission) that discussed the ways in which the Commission should address the gendered dimension of apartheid to fully understand how differently women and men experienced life under the regime, including also the different impact of gross human rights abuses on them. Though the term 'gender' comprises both men and women, the submission's main focus was on women in the belief that their voices in particular often went unheard. Observing a line of continuity between patriarchal subordination and the oppression of women under the conditions of the apartheid regime, they highlighted how critical the intersections with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion were to understand South Africa's past. The submission discussed extensively how South African women's conditions were also deeply affected by patriarchy:

Patriarchy refers to the social, political and economic system which provides men with unequal power and authority in relation to women in society. Patriarchy existed in pre-colonial societies, and interacted with colonialism to create specific forms of gender subordination in South Africa. Interlaced with the racial and class development of our country, patriarchy has wound its bonds around South African women. As with other forms of social and political control, dominance of women has often been enforced by violence. While apartheid defined blacks as secondary political and civil subjects, women were

⁵⁵ Sheila Meintjes, "'Gendered truth'? Legacies of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' *African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)* 9, no. 2 (2009): 102.

given an even further diminished social and legal status through both the customary and the common law and other social mechanisms. It is this social imbalance which has enabled men to devalue women and which can be linked to the prevalence of abusive and oppressive treatment of women and girls in our society.⁵⁶

The different kind of oppression and abuses experienced by women and men was also reflected in two distinctive patterns in testimonial practices, which emerged from the very beginning of the public hearings and continued throughout the work of the Commission, as pointed out by Fiona Ross in her fascinating study of the process of bearing witness:

The first was that although approximately equal in proportions of men and women made statements, for the most part women described the suffering of the men whereas the men testified about their own experiences of violation. The second was that women who had been active in opposing the Apartheid State seldom gave public testimony.⁵⁷

Ross also observes that as a result of those patterns, women were frequently regarded as ‘secondary witnesses’ by the media and Commissioners themselves. Thus, both concerned by the relative lack of women’s voice as direct victims of apartheid brutalities, and prompted by the CALS submission, the TRC called two public meetings in which it was considered how the Commission could better solicit women’s statements about their experiences of suffering, particularly those related to sexual abuses. The discussion led to the Commission’s decision to hold ‘Special Hearings on Women’, which took place in Cape Town (8 August 1996), Durban (24 October 1996), and Johannesburg (29 July 1997). Besides further training statement-takers ‘to question victims sensitively,’⁵⁸ and including specific questions about sexual abuse so as to secure more testimonies about violations suffered by women, the Commission even modified the human rights violations protocol by adding a cautionary note to women deponents:

IMPORTANT: Some women testify about violations of human rights that happened to family members or friends, but they have also suffered abuses.

⁵⁶ ‘Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ point G, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/submit/gender.htm#B>.

⁵⁷ Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness. Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 17.

⁵⁸ ‘Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ point G.

Don't forget to tell us what happened to you yourself if you were the victim of a gross human rights abuse.⁵⁹

As it emerges from the special hearings, women did experience human rights violations, and they were interrogated and detained in jail as well as men. In many women activists' testimonies, in fact, detention becomes 'a space of ugly intimacy, a zone where particular violence and its resultant pain challenged women's identities and senses of self.'⁶⁰ In *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog quotes Thenjiwe Mthintso, chairperson of the Gender Commission, in her opening speech at the special hearings on women held by the TRC in Gauteng, where she emphasised the psychological violence, humiliations and indignities undergone by women in interrogation rooms and cells:

Behind every woman's encounter with the Security Branch and the police lurked the possibility of sexual abuse and rape. [...] When they interrogated, they usually started by reducing your role as an activist. They weighed you according to their own concepts of womanhood. [...] And they said you are in custody because you are not the right kind of woman – you are irresponsible, you are a whore, you are fat and ugly, or single and you are looking for a man. (CMS 272)

These testimonies suggest that the violence perpetrated against women operated at both the physical and the psychological level, aiming to destroy their sense of womanhood. In this regard, I will now discuss some extracts from Ms Yvonne Khutwane's testimony about her period in detention. As highlighted by Ross, her testimony deserves close attention for several reasons: she was one of the few women activists to bear witness before the Commission, and the only woman activist in Zwelethemba to testify in a public hearing of the HRVC (24 June 1996). Moreover, she was the first woman to include a description of sexual abuse in her public testimony, a matter of considerable significance for the Commission and gender activists, given the reticence shown by many other women in sharing publicly their stories of sexual harm. The resonance of Ms Khutwane's testimony is also proved by the telling and reinterpreting of her story in media reports and academic studies, along with being cited four times in the Commission's final report (Volume Three: 448; twice in Volume Four: 300, 304; and Volume Five: 352-3).⁶¹ I will analyse some extracts from Ms Khutwane's testimony transcript, especially in connection with the sexual abuse she suffered in detention

⁵⁹ 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report', Vol. 4, Ch. 10, Para. 5.

⁶⁰ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 59.

⁶¹ For my analysis of Ms Khutwane's testimony I mostly rely on Ross's study, *Bearing Witness*, with particular reference to chapter four 'Narrative Threads'.

because of her involvement in the ANC struggle.⁶² My focus is on the way the narration of her sexual abuse has been elicited by Ms Khutwane's questioner and how this account has been foregrounded in other retellings of the woman's testimony.

Ms Khutwane begins her testimony warning the Commission that her memory for dates is failing; she then carries on describing a political meeting held at the community hall in Zwelethemba after returning from the funeral of the 'Cradock Four' in Cradock 1985. At this point, Ms Gobodo-Madikizela – a psychologist and the HRVC member appointed to assist Ms Khutwane in her testimony – interrupts the witness and asks 'Are you trying to clarify how do you get involved into politics? [sic].' Ms Khutwane replies:

I started in 1960 to be involved in the ANC struggle, I was still a young girl. We worked underground, and it was very difficult for us even to hold meetings. I became prominent specifically when the Municipality offices were establishing community councillors, as you see this lady next to me on my left, we were the people who didn't like that. I was one of the people who were - who had a car. I had a Dyna lorry and I was hired to go around campaigning and publicising the meeting.[...] That was the first time when I was arrested, I was together with Abel [indistinct] and Vallie Moosa was our lawyer.

Ms Gobodo-Madikizela's first intervention is very significant because it anticipates a pattern which characterises the woman's whole testimony; indeed, Ms Khutwane's detailed description of her interrogation and subsequent arrest in 1985 is punctuated by prompting questions from Ms Gobodo-Madikizela, whose aim seems to be to tease as much detail as possible out of the witness. After being hit in the face and verbally abused by a white policeman – who 'could be as old as one of my children' –, Ms Khutwane was pushed in a 'yellow' police van and driven to her place where policemen were searching for weapons and the makings of petrol bombs, which could have connected the woman with the burning of the municipal bar in Zwelethemba in June 1985:

MS GOBODO-MADIKIZELA:

What were they looking for?

MS KHUTWANE

They said they were looking for something which I didn't know. One of the policeman said to me they have used - they use sand to make petrol bombs so they started insulting me again. They kept on searching and then they stated that they were looking for weapons at my place.

MS GOBODO-MADIKIZELA:

Excuse me mamma - can you please tell me what did they do to you?

⁶² Ms Khutwane's testimony is fully transcribed in the official website dedicated to the work of the TRC, from which the extracts I discuss have been taken. See <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/worcest/ct00530.htm>, accessed October 8, 2015.

MS KHUTWANE

I can just explain that they were just searching at this period and they were going at the backyard and searching the premises and they were tearing the ceiling down. One of the **kommandant** said no the ANC members would sue do [sic] - do not destroy his property and damage anything here - then I was arrested and detained again. [...] So I was afraid but at the same time I was having the hope that they were going to take me back home. One of them called me and said - called my name - when I was about to take my baggage they said no I must leave it behind. So we went through the same passage which I walked through during the day. When we were up the stairs I was taken down again and I was ordered to board this **hippo**. I had to get on and then they started driving the **hippo** away.

We went down the High Street over the bridge and we went through Rawsonville - you could see a [indistinct] just nearer.

MS GOBODO-MADIKIZELA:

What were they doing to do as you are here? (sic)

MS KHUTWANE

I was just alone at the back of the **hippo** and they were just driving - it was pitch dark outside. They alighted the **hippo** and then they came to take me out of the **hippo**. One of them said to me can I see what I have put myself in, and then they asked me *when did I last sleep with a man. I was so embarrassed by this question. And I felt so humiliated - I informed them that I have nobody - I didn't have a partner and then they asked me with whom am I staying. I informed them that I was with my family. The other question that they asked me is how do I feel when they - when I am having intercourse with a man. This was too much for me because they were repeating it time and again, asking me the same question, asking me what do I like with the intercourse do I like the size of the penis or what do I enjoy most. So the other one was just putting his hand inside me through the vagina, I was crying because I was afraid that we have heard that the soldiers are very notorious of raping people. This one continued putting his say finger right through me, he kept on penetrating and I was asking for forgiveness and I was asking them what have I done, I am old enough to be your mother.* (emphases added)

This extract is meaningful at two different levels. First, it clearly exemplifies how the humiliating and sexual harassments experienced by women at the hands of police officers did not only include physical violence, but also acts of verbal injury, psychological torture and threat of rape. The woman's body is transformed into an object and a source of constant humiliation, a site of the visible enactment of political and patriarchal power, an instrument to undermine women's identities. Secondly, it exposes the TRC's strategy – embodied by the figure of Ms Gobodo-Madikizela, in this case – to solicit Ms Khutwane's story of sexual abuse. Ms Gobodo-Madikizela, in fact, had to prompt the witness to address the incident of violation twice: 'Excuse me mamma - can you please tell me what did they do to you?,' 'What were they doing to do as you are here?.' Fiona Ross places particular emphasis on the importance of Ms Gobodo-Madikizela's interventions in view of the fact that Ms Khutwane had not included the story of her sexual harassment as she told it before the Commission in her

prior written statement. Indeed, she had described her arrest and torture, and that she was *threatened* with rape, omitting though the sexual abuse.⁶³

As the following extract from Ms Khutwane's testimony shows, the woman suffered from many other violations while being interrogated and detained by the police:

MS KHUTWANE

[...] *One of the people informed me that whilst I was detained my place was burnt down whilst I was in prison and I was informed that it - the petrol bomb was thrown at it - so one of my children died because he had an epileptic attack.*

MS GOBODO-MADIKIZELA:

Is it - were there people who said you have betrayed others?

MS KHUTWANE

Yes, I do not know what happened to Niewoudt because during the time when they arrested me, *they never came to me and informed me why was I accused. They didn't even tell me why my house was burnt down, so I could see that even the community was ostracising me - I was being ridiculed by everybody because my house was destroyed through arson. But I have never turned my back against them - I am still an ANC member.* (emphasis added)

During her detention, Ms Khutwane was threatened, verbally injured, humiliated, hit on the face, beaten with the butt of a gun, suffocated with a towel, sexually harassed, and, as it emerges from this second extract, her house was also burnt down and one of her sons died of an epileptic attack. Furthermore, she describes her feelings of alienation from her own community following the suspicion of being a sell-out and police informer.

It is remarkable that none of the four quotations in the TRC's final report concerning Ms Khutwane's testimony makes reference to the arson, her child's death, and her being ostracised by her own peers, but they focus instead on the sexual abuse which she had not even mentioned in the written statement prior to the public hearing. Similarly to the Commission's attitude, the press reports that followed Ms Khutwane's public hearing paid very close attention to the sexual violation as if it was 'the primary event of harm'⁶⁴ and overlooked all the other harms that the woman endured. Ross pointedly observes that:

In all the media representations, Yvonne Khutwane's story was presented as complete: none of the reports showed how the testimony had been constructed, drawn from her through persistent questions and repetitions. Rather, the event

⁶³ See Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 88.

⁶⁴ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 91.

of sexual molestation was presented as though she had intended to speak of it all along and had done so without prompting.⁶⁵

Through the example of Ms Yvonne Khutwane's testimony, Ross thus exposes the Commission's strategies and efforts to create a narrative space where women were induced to share their stories of suffering, especially with reference to sexual violations; otherwise, adopting Commissioner Mapule Ramashala's words, 'if women do not talk then the story we produce will not be complete.'⁶⁶

Temporarily leaving in the background the question of whether the TRC succeeded in giving voice to and representing women's traumas in its testimonial healing project, Ms Khutwane's testimony raises another important question as to the definition of human rights violations proposed by the Commission. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act states that:

'gross violations of human rights' means the violation of human rights through (a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill treatment of any person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit an act referred to in paragraph (a).⁶⁷

The following violations were also considered to fall into the category of severe ill-treatment: rape, sexual assault or harassment; solitary confinement; physical beating resulting in serious injuries; burnings; injury by poisoning, drugs or other chemicals; mutilation; detention without charge or trial; banning or banishment; deliberate withholding of food and water to someone in custody with deliberate disregard to the victim's health or well-being; deliberate failure to provide medical attention to ill or injured persons in custody; the destruction of a person's house through arson or other attacks which made it impossible for the person to live there again. However, the report adds a restrictive clause according to which 'while the above acts and omissions would normally qualify as severe ill treatment, individual cases may not, in fact, have met all the criteria of the definition above and thus may not have qualified as severe ill treatment.'⁶⁸ In other words, in order to qualify as severe ill-treatment, other factors were to be taken into account, such as the duration of the suffering; the physical or mental consequences; and the age, the strength and the state of health of the victim.

⁶⁵ Ibid. An example of media article reporting Ms Khutwane's testimony is 'Woman tells truth body of sexual abuse', *South African Press Association (SAPA)*, Monday, June 24, 1996, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1996/9606/s960624c.htm>.

⁶⁶ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 23.

⁶⁷ 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report,' Vol. 4, Ch. 10, Para. 17.

⁶⁸ 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report,' Vol. 1, Ch. 4, Para. 120.

This definition of human rights abuses excludes the apartheid subjugation and everyday violence which permeated the lives of many millions of South Africans. Concerning this, the CALS submission proposed that:

the words 'severe ill-treatment' should be interpreted to include a wide range of abuses which took place under apartheid. Detention without trial itself is severe ill-treatment. Imprisonment for treason against an unjust system is severe ill-treatment. Forced removals, pass arrests, confiscation of land, breaking up of families and even forcing people to undergo racially formulated education are all forms of severe ill-treatment.⁶⁹

In their testimonies, women – who constituted over half of all deponents – described the absence of men, the disintegration of the family unit because of the pass law, the silences and secrets that antiapartheid activism brought, the Group Areas Act which forced non-white people to move to their designated group areas in the townships, and all the effects of the apartheid policy of separated development. Mark Sanders also observes that another common pattern in women's testimonies was for them to petition for funeral rites for the dead and disappeared of their loved ones – the requests made before the commission for bodies and body parts, for information about the site of burial of a relative, or for exhumation and proper reburial.⁷⁰ Although its initial mandate did not classify the abuse of corpses as a gross violation of human rights, the Commission was then led to perform exhumations, which, I suggest, further confirms the TRC's primary interest in the 'body.' On the other hand, despite the CALS's proposal to extend the definition of gross human rights violations, the ordinariness of apartheid oppression and separate development that I mention above remained located outside the Commission's radar, and it could only emerge as corollary stories in witnesses' bodily-violations-concerned accounts. In its final report volume, the TRC, indeed, acknowledges the 'Commission's relative neglect of the effects of "ordinary" workings of apartheid' and that 'this type of abuse affected a far larger number of people, and usually with much longer term consequences, than the types of violations on which the Commission was mandated to focus its attention.'⁷¹ By focusing too closely on the body and its violations, the TRC failed to address the 'normal', 'ordinary', everyday humiliations and abuses which were more pervasive and affected both activist and non-activist African people. The way in which Ms Khutwane's testimony was conducted by

⁶⁹ 'Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' point D.

⁷⁰ See chapter 2 'Remembering Apartheid,' and chapter 3 'Hearing Women' in Mark Sanders's *Ambiguities of Witnessing*.

⁷¹ 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report,' Vol. 4, Ch. 10, Para. 19.

the questioner Ms Gobodo-Madikizela and its retellings in the final report and in media articles, in fact, perfectly exemplify the Commission's interest in placing more emphasis on bodily violations and sexual harm, instead of paying as much attention to other abuses, such as the loss of a child and her being ostracised by her own community.

According to the statistics, women made more than half of the statements – the proportion of women to men were 54:52 – but:

men were the most common victims of violations. Six times as many men died as women and twice as many survivors of violations were men. Hence, although most people who told the Commission about violations were women, most of the testimony was about men.⁷²

The Commission also acknowledges that 'this is not to say that women did not suffer violations themselves – they certainly did suffer – but the focus of women's testimony was more often about someone other than themselves and those victims tended to be men.'⁷³ Despite all the workshops and meetings with gender activists, the TRC was unable to address gender systematically, and this failure is also reflected in the way the final report dealt with it, namely, by devoting a single chapter to women. Meintjes argues that 'without a gender lens, women's power, authority and role in history is erased.'⁷⁴ It is worth considering reasons to explain the relative absence of women's voices in the TRC hearings. On the one hand, women were more likely to suffer from violations such as the effects of forced removals, the separation from men and the disintegration of the family unity, because they were the ones required to stay in the villages to take care of the children and the house, while the husbands had to go to the city and find work there to financially support their families. These kinds of abuses were the combined result of apartheid oppression and patriarchal subordination, and they did not fall into the Commission's definition of gross human rights violations.

On the other hand, many women who had suffered from abuses that qualified as gross human rights violations, especially those related to sexual harm, chose not to testify before the Commission because they were not ready to, nor willing to share their pain in public. It may also be that they did not want to suffer from another incursion of

⁷² 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report,' Vol. 1, Ch. 6, Para. 23.

⁷³ Ibid., Para. 24.

⁷⁴ Meintjes, "'Gendered truth'? Legacies of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' 110.

the state even if its intentions were benevolent.⁷⁵ Notably, Ms Mthintso, chairperson in the Gender Commission, confesses her uneasiness about sharing her painful experience in her opening speech at the special women's hearings in Gauteng:

while writing this speech I realized how unready I am to talk about my experience in South African jails and ANC camps abroad. Even now, despite the general terms in which I have chosen to speak, I feel exposed and distraught. (*CMS* 273)

The TRC final report describes how many women began their testimonies by stating their reluctance in coming before the Commission:

Some said that they felt their sufferings were less severe than those of many other people. Ms Jubie Mayet, who had been banned and detained, said she was reluctant 'because my experiences under the old regime were nothing compared to what so many countless other people suffered.' Ms Nozizwe Madlala, detained for a year in solitary confinement, said that when people ask her if she was tortured, 'I usually answer in the negative, for my own experience of torture was much milder than that of many others.'⁷⁶

Mark Libin points out that the mandate of the TRC answers affirmatively to Spivak's postcolonial question, 'can the subaltern speak?'.⁷⁷ By providing a forum in which victims – mostly African people who had been silenced for so long – can relate the stories of their oppression, the Commission did try to afford the marginalised an opportunity where he/she could speak. Though conceived with this idea of allowing the 'subaltern' of South Africa to speak, many voices went unheard, especially those of women, because either the abuses from which they suffered did not fit the TRC's criteria, or they were simply reluctant to participate in the testimonial process. But since the testimonial process involves two parties, a willing witness who is ready to speak and an addressable audience who is prone to listen to and empathise with the speaker, we

⁷⁵ The CALS submission had in fact suggested that 'the Commission should publicise section 38 of the Act which binds all members and employees of the TRC to the preservation of confidentiality. Women need to know that they can come forward without other people knowing about it, and can give their statement to a person in safe and private conditions. They should be informed that they do not have to repeat their statement in front of the whole Commission in public and under the glare of television cameras.[...] Women should be able to request that their statements be taken by women and they be allowed to further elaborate on their statements in closed hearings, possibly only to women Commissioners' ('Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' point G). However, the chapter on women in the 4th volume of the TRC final report does not make any reference to the section 38 of the Act, nor to some examples of women's hearings that were held effectively in camera. This allows us to infer that the Commission did encourage women to describe their stories of sexual harm in a public context, rather than in a private one, for the sake of the healing national journey resulting from the public truth-telling process that the Commission promoted.

⁷⁶ 'The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report,' Vol. 4, Ch. 10, Para. 38.

⁷⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern speak?'.

are also tempted to reformulate Spivak's question and ask 'Can the subaltern be heard?'⁷⁸ Did the Commission provide a safe space where victims could speak, particularly when it came to sexual abuse suffered by women? Bearing in mind Spivak's question about the subaltern – the female subaltern in this case – and Libin's reformulation, the second chapter will be dedicated to the discussion of Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*, which problematise the definition of trauma, especially with reference to women, alongside challenging the appropriateness of articulating sexual violence against women in a 'public' context. The analyses of these novels will support my arguments that literature, on the one hand, may supplement the work initiated by the TRC, and, on the other, it can also contribute to trauma studies by expanding the Western conceptualisation of trauma as adopted by the truth commission itself.

1. 3 Translating, interpreting, and re-telling victims' testimonies: different perceptions of truths

The TRC public hearings were held under the banner 'Truth: the road to reconciliation,' a banner that foregrounded the two main assumptions on which the whole project was based: first, the truth about the past was recoverable; second, the establishing of the truth would heal the wounds of South Africa by also facilitating reconciliation between 'victims' and 'perpetrators.' Given the primary importance attributed to the role of 'truth' and its healing power, I will now discuss more deeply a major dilemma facing the TRC: how to do justice to the testimonials of those witnesses for whom translation was necessary. Can stories of trauma be articulated by someone other than the person who experienced them? Do translation, interpretation, and transcription affect the veracity of those stories? Who is entitled to tell traumatic stories? Since one of the Commission's main goals was to restore voice, to give people who had often suffered in silence and isolation an opportunity to publicly share their sorrowful experiences,⁷⁹ the victims – and also those applying for amnesty – were

⁷⁸ See Mark Libin, "'Can the subaltern be heard?'" Response and Responsibility in South Africa's Human Spirit,' *Textual Practice* 17, no. 1 (2003): 119-140.

⁷⁹ However, as highlighted in the first section of this chapter, just a limited selection of the victims who had given statements could participate in the hearings and give public testimony.

allowed to tell their stories in the languages of their choice, even though these languages fell outside of the eleven official languages of South Africa. Therefore, this polylingual and heteroglossic provision demanded the establishment of an extensive translating and interpreting service.

While those who appeared before the Commission were able to testify in their chosen language, their words could be heard in four different tongues through simultaneous multiple language translations. The channels available to listeners were English, Afrikaans, the dominant language of the region where the hearing was held, and another additional language of that region. In her analysis, Annelies Verdoolaage points out that English service was provided at every hearing as an indication of the Commission's language policy to use English as the main language of communication. Besides, of the African languages services, the Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho services were used most widely.⁸⁰

In *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition*, Catherine Cole emphasises that 'the very first line of transmission of testimony was mediated and interpolated – not identical to itself. Interpretation was central to the TRC process.'⁸¹ The language interpreters thereby become important intermediary figures who link the people giving testimony before the Commission with those receiving that testimony, the audience. Cole also suggests that:

The language interpreters were at once protagonists and mediators, actors and audience. They listened intently to the speaker's words, they were the first to reproduce the deponent's speech, and they did so in the first person, thereby assuming the speaker's subject position, the authorial voice.⁸²

This quotation highlights the sense of communal bond the interpreters and transcribers created with the witnesses due to the use of the first person while rendering a victim's testimony. In *Country of My Skull*, Krog reports some extracts of a young Tswana interpreter's interview, where the interpreter confesses that 'it is difficult to interpret victim hearings [...] because you use the first person all the time. I have no distance when I say "I"... it runs through me with I' (CMS 195). Indeed, the interpreters, along with the journalists covering the hearings, were provided with counselling because of

⁸⁰ In this regard see Annelies Verdoolaage, *Reconciliation Discourse: the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008).

⁸¹ Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission. Stages of Transition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 68.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 66.

the profound identification with the witnesses, and the entire impact of victims' painful stories of suffering and violence they had to translate.

Another challenge was to reproduce the speaker's account as reliably as possible in order to transfer the essential meaning – not a word-for-word translation: 'we were told to keep it as brief as possible and only focus on the major points [...] we had to get the facts, but people wanted to tell their story in broad terms,'⁸³ as asserted by a TRC statement-taker. However, besides their aim to concentrate on *facts*, it was also hardly possible for the interpreters and transcribers to find the words and articulate the victims' sorrow, pauses, silences, and moans while giving testimony. Sam Raditlhalo, in his article entitled 'Truth in Translation,'⁸⁴ deals with the difficulty concerning translation and interpretation when language becomes inadequate to describe what victims had undergone during their past of oppression. It is worth referring to the poem 'Parts of Speech' by Ingrid de Kok that Raditlhalo quotes, because it perfectly captures the complexity and painfulness related to the act of articulating trauma:

Some stories don't want to be told.
They walk away, carrying their suitcases
held together with grey string.
Look at their disappearing curved spines.
Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls,

[...]

And at this stained place words
are scraped from resinous tongues,
wrung like washing, hung on the lines
of courtroom and confessional,
transposed into the dialect of record.

Why still believe stories can rise
with wings, on currents, as silver flares,
levitate unweighted by stones,
begin in pain and move towards grace,
aerating history and recovered breath?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:
the flame splutter of consonants,
deep sea anemone vowels,
birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,
and verbs, verbs that move mountains?⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁴ Sam Raditlhalo, 'Truth in Translation: The TRC and the Translation of the Translators,' *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 89-101.

⁸⁵ Ingrid De Kok, *Terrestrial Things* (South Africa: Kwela Books, 2002), 21.

This poem from De Kok's poetry-collection *Terrestrial Things* directly addresses the powerlessness of language in translating communications of trauma conveyed through the non-language of the fragmented body. 'Parts of Speech' registers the tension between the desire for the language of testimony to perform a rehabilitative, healing function – especially in the context of the TRC – to 'begin in pain and move towards grace,/ aerating history and recovered breath,' and the resistance of certain stories of past atrocities that 'don't want to be told' or 'refuse to be danced or mimed.' In the final stanza, the almost desolate poetic voice wonders how it is still possible to 'imagine whole word, whole words' in the face of what has been unfolded about the past in the TRC's 'courtroom' and 'confessional.' Here the poem disassembles the linguistic sentence and makes explicit reference to parts of speech – 'consonants,' 'vowels,' 'syntax,' 'rhymes,' and 'verbs' – thus suggesting the painstaking labour of language in its attempt to give expression to trauma. 'The dialect of record' of South Africa's recent past is incomplete because it cannot convey people's pent-up emotions while they are testifying at the hearings, especially the grief and sorrow of the victim hearings.

De Kok's poem, 'The Transcriber Speaks,' is significant in this sense because it explores a new difficulty of the writing of trauma and another filter through which images of trauma were processed at the TRC hearings, that is, the stenographers of testimonies. Told in the first person, the poem opens with a statement that describes the function of the transcribers: 'I was the commission's own captive,/ Its anonymous after-hours scribe/ [...] Word by word by word/ From winding tape to hieroglyphic key,/ From sign to sign, I listened and wrote' (lines 1-2, 4-6). The repetition of 'word' suggests that the function of the transcriber is to translate and transcribe emotion, tone, expression and sounds, 'word upon word upon word' (line 10). Line 6 creates a connection between the process of producing the sound, hearing the sound, and transcribing the sound, on the assumption that the interpretation of these sounds is as accurately represented as the words chosen. The possibility of this action is, however, challenged later in the poem as the transcriber says:

But how to transcribe silence from tape?
Is weeping a pause or a word?
What written sign for a strangled throat?
And a witness pointing? That I described,
When officials identified direction and name.

But what if she stared?
 And if the silence seemed to stretch
 Past the police guard, into the street
 Away to a door or a grave or a child,
 Was it my job to conclude:
 ‘The witness was silent. There was nothing left to say’?⁸⁶

Here, the transcriber admits the impossibility for the written record to capture in words the narration of people’s trauma. His/her job is further complicated by the difficult task of transcribing silence onto a printed document. If the witness is left without a language to accurately give voice to his/her experience of trauma, how is the transcriber supposed to interpret and transcribe this type of silence?

Hence, we could ask if this ‘reduced’ version of truth, lacking of nuances and emotional content because of the translating and transcribing processes, can be identified with the word *Truth* that appears in the banner ‘Truth: the road to reconciliation.’ In this regard, Cole underlines that ‘a fundamental question that must be answered is what exactly the TRC meant by “truth.”’⁸⁷ The complexity of this concept also emerged in the debates that took place before and during the life of the Commission, which, in fact, acknowledged four notions of ‘truth:’ factual or forensic truth; personal or narrative truth; social or ‘dialogue’ truth and healing and restorative truth. Factual or forensic truth refers to the legal or scientific notion of truth as facts corroborated by evidence; ‘in other words, what happened to whom, where, when and how, and who was involved?.’⁸⁸ Personal or narrative truth refers to a more subjective version of truth, which attempts to ‘capture the widest possible record of people’s perceptions, stories, myths and experiences’⁸⁹ and give everyone who had been voiceless for so long ‘a chance to tell his or her truth as he or she sees it.’⁹⁰ Social or ‘dialogue’ truth aims to promote ‘transparency, democracy and participation in society [...] as a basis for affirming human dignity and integrity,’⁹¹ trying to transcend all the divisions of the past and listen carefully to the perspectives of all those involved. Finally, healing and restorative truth was central to the work of the Commission and resulted from the story-telling process and the acknowledgment of past abuses, which

⁸⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁷ See Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission*, 163.

⁸⁸ ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report,’ Vol. 1, Chap. 5, Para. 32.

⁸⁹ Ibid., Para. 37.

⁹⁰ Ibid., Para. 35.

⁹¹ Ibid., Para. 42.

contributed to the reparation of the damage inflicted during the regime and to the prevention of the recurrence of those abuses in the future.

One of the TRC's main goals was to 'compile as complete a picture as possible'⁹² of the events and gross human rights violations committed within or outside South Africa in the period 1960-1994, and this is the reason why the need to gather cold facts, verifiable information – that is, factual or forensic truth – often overcame the need to value the narrative or personal truths of the witnesses. On the one hand, it is a given that the interpreters and transcribers had to privilege and focus on facts, but, on the other hand, the so-called personal/narrative truth – which primarily relied on people's emotional status and on the body language associated with it – seemed to be beyond interpretation. Personal/narrative truth is something spoken, heard, and seen, not read; using Cole's words, it is 'performed.'⁹³

Z. Bock, N. Mazwi, S. Metula, and N. Mpolweni-Zantsi argue that 'a number of "truths," both of the narrative and factual nature, have inevitably been lost through the interpretation and transcription process.'⁹⁴ They have chosen a small selection of victims' testimonies from the second day of the HRVC hearings, 16 April 1996 – when three of the four widows of the men known as the Cradock Four testified before the Commission – and compared the official English versions of these testimonies, which are published on the TRC website, with their own translation in English from the source language, Xhosa. As mentioned above, there was, in fact, simultaneous interpretation into four languages – including English – when people delivered their testimonies at the hearings. The scholars have managed to obtain copies of the audiovisual tapes that provide a record of the selected testimonies in Xhosa, as well as the simultaneous English translation as a voice-over. After transcribing the Xhosa testimonies, and translating these into English, they have compared and analysed both English versions of the testimonies trying to highlight what had been lost in the official interpretation and transcription process of the TRC.

Here, I quote two examples from Bock et al's study to reflect on the power of language to change, at least in part, the meaning of what has been uttered, and at the same time, its inadequacy to express the performative aspect of the testimony. In the

⁹² Ibid., Chap. 2, Para. 2.

⁹³ Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission*, 165.

⁹⁴ Z. Bock, et al., 'An Analysis of What Has Been "Lost" in the Interpretation and Transcription Process of Selected TRC Testimonies,' *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistic Plus* 33 (2006): 2.

subsequent extract, Mrs Calata described what happened when a family friend went to identify the body of her deceased husband:

Xhosa transcription

Qha ke wasweleka u Mr Gxuluwa esasimcelile thina as ifamily aye ku identify Wabuya ke wandixelela ukuba (.) hayi ubonile – uye waqiniseka ukuba ngu Fort lowa / kodwa ufumanise into yokuba uxhwithiwe iinwele – zixhwithiwe literal ukuxhwitha iinwele entloko, ulwimi lwakhe lutsaliwe [hand signal] allude ngaphandle, bamsika iminwe / enamanxeba amaninzi emzimeni / xa emjonga apha ebhulukhweni wafumanisa ingathi esiqulubeni utyiwe **nayiNJA (.3) akukho nto yandenza buhlungu njengento yokufumanisa ukuba utyiwe naziziNJA/ yandenza buhlungu gqitha loo nto leyo**

English translation

But Mr Gxuluwa whom, as family, we asked to go and identify the bodies / has passed away / He came back and told us that / he saw – he is quite sure that it was Fort / but he discovered that the hair had been pulled out / the hair had been pulled out deliberately / to pull the hair out of the head/ the tongue was pulled out of the mouth [hand signal] it was long out of the mouth / fingers were cut off / He had many wounds in his body / when he looked at his trousers he discovered that it looks like he was bitten by the **DOG / (.3) there is nothing that made me feel bad more than knowing that he was also bitten by the DOG / that made me feel very bad**

Website version (official version)

Mr Koluwe, the man we as families asked to go and identify the bodies, has passed away. He said that he had seen the bodies but he discovered that the hair was pulled out, his tongue was very long. His fingers were cut off. He had many wounds in his body. When he looked at his trousers he realised that the dogs had bitten him very severely. **He couldn't believe it that the dogs already had their share.**⁹⁵

This example clearly illustrates how the emotional content has been transformed during the ‘official’ interpretation and transcription process. Besides a spelling mistake of Mr Gxuluwa’s name in the website transcription, the English translation made by the scholars focuses more on Mrs Calata’s emotions and perspective as we can observe in the following passage: ‘that the hair had been pulled out / the hair had been pulled out deliberately / to pull the hair out of the head/ the tongue was pulled out of the mouth [hand signal] it was long out of the mouth.’ While the website transcription does not insist on what the police had done directly to Mr Calata’s body – cutting off his hair, tongue, and fingers – the scholars do not sacrifice this part in order to privilege just facts, but they are careful to translate Mrs Calata’s repetition and commentary. Not only

⁹⁵ Ibid., 14-15.

did the police pull out Mr Calata's hair, but they did it deliberately as Mrs Calata makes it clear by repeating it three times. Moreover, the website transcription does not tell us how Mrs Calata felt upon hearing her husband's body had been bitten by dogs. Indeed, it seems that Mrs Calata is reporting what Mr Gxuluwa, her family friend, felt when he realised what had happened: 'he couldn't believe it that the dogs already had their share.' The other interpretation, instead, does not erase Mrs Calata's perspective at all; on the contrary, it conveys the woman's dismay about having her husband's body thrown to the dogs by the police, a gesture which exposed their inhumanity: 'there is nothing that made me feel bad more than knowing that he was also bitten by the DOG / that made me feel very bad.'

Another significant example is provided by the following extract resulting from the testimony of Mrs Mhlawuli:

Xhosa transcription

MRS MHLAWULI: ... I suppose inokuba zazikhona ne remarks ebabezenza / but baya bafika phaya bajonga / utata wafumanisa ukuba Tyhini! Nguye nyani uSicelo lo / uthi 'mntwana wam imeko akuyo' / wandixelela ukufika kwakhe wathi / **'mntwana wam imeko akuyo/ iyoyikisa / umntwana wam bamtshisile umntwana wam, umntwana wam bambulele kabuhlungu umntwana wam'** [cries] (.4)

MR SMITH: Are you - are prepared to continue Mrs Mhlawuli?

English translation

MRS MHLAWULI: ... I suppose they also made certain remarks / but they went there and looked / my father found that Really! It is him, Sicelo / he says **'my child** the condition that he is in' / he told me on his arrival and said / **'my child the condition that he is in / is frightening / my child they burned my child / my child, they killed my child horribly'** [cries] (.4)

MR SMITH: Are you - are you prepared to continue Mrs Mhlawuli?

Website version (official version)

MRS MHLAWULI: ... I understand there were also remarks. My father in law had a look and confirmed that one was Sicelo. He said the condition in which he was in was really **shocking**. They had burned him **terribly**.

MR SMITH: Are you prepared to continue?⁹⁶

This extract refers to the part of Mrs Mhlawuli's testimony when she reports what her father-in-law said to her on his return from his visit to the mortuary to identify Mr Sicelo Mhlawuli's body. Comparing the website version with the English translation

⁹⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

made by the scholars, we observe a great difference in the way Mrs Mhlawuli addresses her father-in-law: while in the former version, she refers to him as ‘my father-in-law,’ in the latter one, she calls him ‘my father,’ thus revealing the closeness of the relationship between them. The website official version also diminishes the emotional intensity of the testimony when Mrs Mhlawuli recounts her father-in-law’s description of the body as reported speech. In fact, in the Xhosa transcription – and in the English translation made by the scholars as well – Mrs Mhlawuli repeats the words he said to her as direct speech, and the repetition of the phrase ‘my child’ may be read as an indication of the love her father-in-law had for his son, Sicelo. By contrast, the website transcription chooses to express Mrs Mhlawuli’s father-in-law’s grief using the adjective ‘shocking,’ and the adverb ‘terribly,’ which fail to convey his profound suffering. Furthermore, this transcription decides not to mention that Mrs Mhlawuli burst into tears, another significant choice made by the ‘official’ translators which highlights the loss of some emotional content.

I have already discussed the public nature of the South African TRC; indeed, the hearings were held in front of a live audience, and a group of journalists were assigned to cover them and broadcast extracts of testimonies to let the whole country participate in this restoring and reinventing process in which South Africa was involved. Like the interpreters, the journalists were intermediaries between those people delivering their testimony and the wider public. However, their role expanded to serving as an amplifier, explaining the TRC’s protocols, contextualising and commenting on what was happening at the hearings, and isolating key moments. In this connection, it might also be argued that broadcasting a testimony on television had more impact than reading any transcription in the official website of the TRC or in the final report. Unlike the interpreters and transcribers, the journalists had the aim to tell the experiences of the witnesses by both showing images and broadcasting some extracts of victim testimonies. Through the simple act of transmitting an image, a scene, or a sound bite, it was possible to recover some performative aspects and emotional content of the testimonies which, otherwise, tended to be lost in the interpretation and transcription processes.

To this end, in *Country of My Skull* Krog describes all the phases to prepare and produce news bulletins, which aimed to attract as many people as possible and give them a full understanding of the essence of the TRC. Generally, a bulletin consisted of three audio elements: ordinary reporting read by a newsreader; 20-second sound bites of

other people's voices, and 40-second voice reports provided by a journalist. In addition to the short time available – which by no means could do justice to all the testimonies –, Krog points out that 'the past has to be put into hard news gripping enough to make bulletin headlines, into reports that the bulletin-writers in Johannesburg cannot ignore' (CMS 46). She also goes further explaining that 'bulletin-writers and newsreaders squirm away from whatever is not fashionable or harmlessly clinical. For words like "menstruation" or "penis" there is no place on the news.'⁹⁷ It is evident that, even though the 'truth' broadcast on television was not subjected to the limits deriving from the interpretation process – lack of emotional and performative content, for example – that truth cannot be considered complete either, because it was manipulated, adjusted, and, sometimes, twisted to accommodate some television requirements.

Despite the Commission's acknowledgment of four categories of truths – factual/forensic, personal/narrative, social or dialogue, healing and restorative truth – I argue that there exist more truths and different perceptions of them, mainly resulting from the interpretation, transcription, and re-telling processes. In *Looking Back Reaching Forward*, Yazir Henry tells the consequences after testifying before the HRVC of the TRC, and denounces:

The lack of sensitivity with which my story was treated once it left the confines of that space and became part of the public domain [...] my face and the story of my life were flashed across the country, on television, in newspapers, magazines and books, and often out of context. It was out of my control and done without my permission.⁹⁸

Yazir's story – as many other witnesses' stories – has been told and re-told, transcribed, analysed and commented, and he has been called many names and attributed different identities. In fact, although acknowledging that the TRC provided a space where people like him could tell their experiences and face the atrocities and the abuses of the past, he confesses that he is still trying to make sense of his own story and to discover what his truth is.

It seems that victims' testimonies gradually lost a certain degree of truthfulness once people left the witness box. This issue of veracity becomes more convoluted when it comes to the amnesty hearings: amnesty applicants had to be *willing* to tell the truth about their crimes, if they wanted to benefit from the possibility of amnesty. In addition to the filters of translation, interpretation, and transcription, there was then the concrete

⁹⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁹⁸ Yazir Henry, 'Where healing begins,' in *Looking Back Reaching Forward*, 168-169.

risk that amnesty applicants might not tell the whole truth if they thought it was not convenient for their application, thus undermining one of the main assumptions of the TRC – that truth could be fully recovered. I return to the issue of ‘truth,’ its recoverability and its real contribution to reconciliation in the third and fourth chapters, where I discuss Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun*, *Mother to Mother*, *Disgrace* and *Bitter Fruit* (ch. 3) and Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light* (ch. 4), respectively. Where chapter 3 focuses on the uncertain and hybrid demarcation of the Commission’s categories of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator,’ chapter 4 addresses the complexities of Coloureds’ cultural formation in order to extend the Commission’s strict definition of trauma. Though deploying different narrative strategies and focusing on different issues, these novels investigate and challenge the possibility of recovering the truth about the past, and the healing benefit that should derive from that truth, either in the context of the amnesty process, courtrooms, or in everyday life.

1. 4 Personal memoirs on the TRC: Desmond Tutu’s *No Future Without Forgiveness* and Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*

In this last section, I would like to analyse two texts – *No Future Without Forgiveness* by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog – which may offer insightful contributions in terms of describing some procedures and the philosophy adopted by the Commission. The personal dimension inherent in these two texts, which revolve around the authors’ first-hand experience at the TRC proceedings, also provides a significant bridge between this first chapter, mainly devoted to an historical and analytical introduction to the TRC, and my following chapters, where I will be investigating how a shortlist of exemplary works of fiction responds to the TRC project.

Of course, these two texts present different perspectives in accordance with the different roles played by the two authors: Archbishop Tutu was appointed Chairperson of the Commission and his viewpoint is naturally informed by his Christian faith, while the Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog covered the TRC hearings as a radio journalist for the South African Broadcasting Corporation and her narrative style results in a combination of genres (poetry, documentary, diary, and philosophical reflection).

No Future Without Forgiveness may be considered a personal memoir about Tutu's experience serving on the Commission, and this characteristic is quite evident in the very first pages, where the Archbishop describes his feelings during the day of the first democratic election in South Africa:

The air was electric with excitement, anticipation and anxiety, and with fear that those on the right wing who had promised to disrupt this day of days might succeed in their nefarious schemes [...] It was also an amazing spectacle. People of all races were standing in the same queues, perhaps for the very first time in their lives. Professionals, domestic workers, cleaners and their madams – all were standing in those lines that were snaking their way slowly to the polling booth. (*NFWF* 1, 4)

Election day, 27 April 1994, was South Africa's turning point where, after more than forty years of apartheid racism, black and white South Africans were *not* segregated anymore and could share a common humanity irrespective of ethnicity or skin colour. It was the momentous day which signalled the beginning of the political transition to democracy.

Delineating all the phases that resulted in the establishment of the Commission, Tutu argues that the most urgent question that needed to be addressed was how South Africans could deal with the past:

the past, far from disappearing or lying down and being quiet, is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye we will find that it returns to hold us hostage. (*NFWF* 31)

According to him, the Commission provided a better way of dealing with South Africa's painful past and getting at the truth, rather than a criminal trial or the provision of a general amnesty. He underscores the necessity to both restore victims' dignity and humanity and forgive the perpetrators as fundamental requirements to build a better future for all South Africans, in spite of race, class, or gender.

This 'third' way of a truth and reconciliation commission allowed victims to tell their stories and share their suffering in public, in addition to permitting perpetrators to acknowledge their crimes and ask for forgiveness. In chapter twenty-one, entitled 'Without forgiveness there is really no future,' Tutu explains that 'in forgiving, people are not being asked to forget' (*NFWF* 219), but, on the contrary, it is really paramount that people remember, the wrongdoer confesses, and the victim forgives so that the process of reconciliation can begin in South Africa.

Moreover, the choice of a truth commission was consistent with a central feature of the African *Weltanschauung* (philosophy, world-view) – what it is called *ubuntu* in the Nguni group of languages, or *botho* in Sotho languages. This word is particularly difficult to render in a Western language, because it refers to a typical African philosophy of life as well as a guide for social behaviour. In *A Country Unmasked*, Alex Boraine quotes its core belief “‘umntu nugmntu ngabantu, motho ke motho ba batho ba bangwe,” literally translated as “a human being is a human being because of other human beings.”’⁹⁹ A person with *ubuntu* is aware of belonging to a greater whole and that people are all interconnected; this means that we are diminished when others are humiliated or oppressed, we are dehumanised when we dehumanise the Other:

None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. There are no aliens, all belonging in the one family, God’s family, the human family. There is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free – instead of separation and division, all distinctions make for a rich diversity to be celebrated for the sake of the unity that underlies them. We are different so that we can know our need of one another, for no one is ultimately self-sufficient. (NFWF 214-215)

Postulated as the ethical foundation of the TRC, *ubuntu* represents and demands responsibility and reciprocity. This African philosophy shares striking similarities with Emmanuel Levinas’ formulation of ethics as an obligation and responsibility towards the Other. He suggests that subjectivity is realised only when the individual confronts the Other as Other, as an alterity that refuses to be assimilated into the individual’s ego. According to Levinas, an ethical community is enacted through the ‘face-to-face’ encounter which forces the individual to perceive him or herself in relation to the alterity of the Other: ‘the face-to-face is a final and irreducible relation which [...] makes possible the pluralism of society.’¹⁰⁰ The South African testimonial process, as Tutu emphasises, was indeed conceived as a forum for face-to-face encounters among the ‘wounded people’ of the country, where the whole community was compelled to acknowledge the presence of the Other and pay attention to his/her story of suffering. In this sense, Sanders points out that the human rights violation hearings – namely the victim hearings – were staged as an ‘enactment’, an ‘exemplification’ of *ubuntu* as reciprocity.¹⁰¹ I suggest that the amnesty hearings, albeit to a different extent, also staged a certain level of reciprocity. Although there was the actual risk that amnesty

⁹⁹ Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*, 362.

¹⁰⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 291.

¹⁰¹ See Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 24-29.

applicants would not tell the whole truth about their crimes if they believed it could jeopardise their application, the mere concept of ‘acknowledging’ their responsibility for their crimes – or *part* of their crimes – in front of their victims and the whole country certainly contribute to fulfilling the ethics of reciprocity that *ubuntu* represents.

Tutu’s deep belief in *ubuntu* as well as in the religious faith are quite evident in this memoir, where he often appeals to God and Christian theology to explain how and why people should behave as God’s creatures, as God’s representatives. In this regard, Boraine makes a point relating to the overtly religious character of the Commission, primarily exemplified by Tutu and the offering of prayers during the proceedings: in fact, he observes how this feature earned both praise and criticism since there were many people belonging to other faith communities.¹⁰² Recounting an episode when ‘[Boraine] suggested to [Archbishop Tutu] that he should not wear his purple clerical robes to the hearings, [Tutu] replied, “The President knew that I was an Archbishop when he appointed me!”’¹⁰³ This makes clear the Archbishop’s strong character as well as his profound commitment to religion: indeed, as a man of faith, he was convinced that religion could help and guide people to the road towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is significant to notice that, in his memoir, Tutu provides some examples of victim testimonies to support the concept that ‘without forgiveness there is really no future:’ he quotes those examples which show, on the one hand, the relief and the cathartic effect experienced by many people through the story-telling process, and, on the other hand, the extraordinary capacity of forgiveness proved by many others. In chapter eight, for instance, he transcribes the words said by a young man, Lucas Sikwepere, after describing how a notorious Cape Town policeman had shot him in the face:

I feel what...has brought my sight back, my eyesight back, is to come here and tell the story. I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now...it feels like I’ve got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story. (*NFWF* 128-129)

¹⁰² In connection with this see Boraine, *A Country Unmasked*, 264-266.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 101.

Another important example of reconciliation or willingness may be found in chapter seven, where the Archbishop recounts the testimony of a woman, Ms Beth Savage, badly injured during an attack by the liberation movement APLA.¹⁰⁴

What she said of the experience which had left her in this condition was quite staggering and unbelievable:

All in all, what I must say, is through the trauma of it all, I honestly feel richer. I think it's been a really enriching experience for me and a growing curve, and I think it's given me the ability to relate to the other people who may be going through trauma [...] I would look to meet that man that threw that grenade in an attitude of forgiveness and hope that he could forgive me too for whatever reason. But I would very much like to meet them.

Her sublime attitude left many of us quite speechless and, in general, we were filled to overflowing with a sense of deep thankfulness that nearly all the victims, black and white, possessed this marvellous magnanimity. It did seem to augur well for our country. (*NFWF* 112-113)

However, many others who appeared before the Commission admitted that it was impossible for them to forgive, that they needed more time, and that they were not sure whether they would be ever able to forgive. Both Boraine and Tutu stress the fact that the Commission's aim was to create an opportunity where forgiveness and reconciliation could come into being for those who were ready and able to do so.

Despite his emphasis on the power of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, Tutu does not avoid mentioning some problems and criticism the TRC had to face up to during its mandate. As he underlines in chapter ten, 'We did not know,' one of the greatest weaknesses of the Commission was the fact that they failed to attract the majority of the white community to participate enthusiastically in the TRC process. There were also other weaknesses in the reparation and rehabilitation procedure along with the deficiency of the psychological support and other forms of counselling for those who gave their testimony. Furthermore, the Commission was not immune from suspicions and chasms within itself, mainly due to both the commissioners' diverse backgrounds,¹⁰⁵ the constant pressure under which they had to work, and the traumatic experience of listening to such heart-breaking stories of suffering.

¹⁰⁴ In November 1992 the Pan Africanist Congress's armed wing, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) attacked the King William's Town golf club, killing four civilians and injuring many others. In 1993, they proclaimed 1993 as 'The Year of the Great Storm' and sanctioned other attacks on civilians.

¹⁰⁵ The commissioners, in fact, came from different backgrounds in terms of history, ethnicity, and gender – 'a useful paradigm of our nation' (*NFWF* 71) –, and that helped to create a distrustful atmosphere among them, especially during the meetings of the first year of the Commission's work. In this regard,

The Archbishop also describes the failed attempts of negotiations with Mr P. W. Botha who refused to cooperate with the Commission, in spite of Tutu's efforts in convincing the former State President to appear before the TRC – which even aroused some criticism from the black community. On the other hand, he refers to some troubles concerning the Commission's handing the report over to the then President Mandela caused by the African National Congress, which tried, in vain, to stop the Commission from publishing any part of the report that implicated the ANC in human rights violations.¹⁰⁶

Despite all the adversities the TRC coped with, Desmond Tutu asserts his belief that, through the works of the Commission, South Africa succeeded in breaking the silence after more than 40 years of tyranny and in making a step forward in the more challenging process of reconciliation. The last words of his text are dedicated to the hope and the faith in a possible future without conflict thanks to God's guidance and the power of forgiveness:

Our experiment is going to succeed because God wants us to succeed, not for our glory and aggrandisement but for the sake of God's world. God wants to show that there is life after conflict and repression – that because of forgiveness, there is a future. (NFWF 230)

Country of My Skull is the result of Antjie Krog's personal experience combined with both victims' and perpetrators' extracts of testimonies, interviews, letters and sound bites. Published in 1998, *Country of My Skull* can be considered one of the most emotional and important works about the TRC and South Africa's violent past, as well as one of the most controversial. Some critics such as Meira Cook and Sarah Riden decry Krog's choice of privileging a more personal and fictional approach to the victim testimonies instead of factual analyses.¹⁰⁷ Cook also points out that Krog's book 'treads an uneasy line between cultural witnessing and imaginative fictionalizing, thus begging the related question as to how this account should be read: as historical document or literary text.'¹⁰⁸ Concerning this, the author herself gives us the guideline for the 'right'

Tutu depicts those first meetings as a 'hell:' 'you wondered as a black whether your white colleague would have reacted in that way to a fellow white, and vice versa' (NFWF 70).

¹⁰⁶ For a detailed account of both episodes see section 1.1 of this chapter.

¹⁰⁷ In this regard, see the study of Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi, 'Abusive Narratives: Antjie Krog, Rian Malan, and the Transmission of Violence,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 109-123.

¹⁰⁸ Meira Cook, 'Metaphors of Suffering: Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*,' *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 34, no. 3 (2001): 75.

interpretation of the text: during a (fictionalised?) conversation with a colleague, Patrick, Krog claims that she is not:

reporting or keeping minutes. I'm telling [...] I'm busy with the truth...my truth. Of course, it's quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I'm telling the story to. (*CMS* 259)

Krog manages to meld history and story, describing the procedures of the Commission, quoting extracts of testimonies from too long marginalised people and telling her inner journey to reconciliation as a white Afrikaner. This personal characteristic of her writing is immediately evident from the beginning of the text, where she alternates the description of the works of the Justice Portfolio Committee – which had been appointed to frame the bill setting up the TRC – and the account of some episodes from her personal life. For example, she describes an episode of violence, which took place at her parents' farm after the 1994 democratic elections: her two brothers shot some black people who had tried to steal from the farm. Krog reports one of her brothers asserting that: 'Like feeling daily how my family and I become brutalized...like knowing that I am able to kill someone with my bare hands...I am learning to fight, to kill, to hate. And we have nowhere to turn' (*CMS* 18). This private anecdote is very meaningful because it shows the violent climate still existing after the elections, and the Afrikaners' fear of living in a country mainly ruled by black people. It is quite remarkable that Krog decides to include these episodes at the beginning of the text, and, consequently, at the beginning of her account about both the Commission and her personal journey to reconciliation, as she wanted to convey her awareness of the difficulty and of all the obstacles that South Africa needs to overcome in order to be healed and reconciled.

Later on, in connection with her work as journalist while reporting on the TRC, she also depicts the bitterness, the infinite sorrow, and the desire to resign from her job due to the emotional involvement in listening to victims' stories of suffering, loss and death:

Week after week; voice after voice; account after account. It is like travelling on a rainy night behind a huge truck – images of devastation breaking in sheets on the windscreen. You can't overtake, because you can't see; and you can't slow down or stop because then you will never get anywhere. It is not so much the deaths, and the names of the dead, but the web of infinite sorrow woven around

them. It keeps on coming and coming. A wide, barren, disconsolate landscape where the horizon keeps on dropping away. (CMS 48)

[...] how many people can one see crying, how much sorrow wrenched loose can one accommodate...and how does one get rid of the specific intonation of the words? It stays and stays. (CMS 73)

She does not even hide her feelings of uneasiness and complicity with the regime due to her skin and culture:

What I have in common with them [perpetrators] is a culture – and part of that culture over decades hatched the abominations for which they are responsible. In a sense it is not these men but a culture that is asking for amnesty. (CMS 144)

According to Krog, the use of the autobiographical ‘I’ becomes necessary, since the ‘whole point of writing is to interact with the “you,”’ and the author ‘is left with “I.”’¹⁰⁹ As highlighted in ‘Fact Bordering Fiction and the Honesty of “I,”’ her usage of the first person relies on several reasons, but the most important one seems to be that ‘it allows [her] access to fact’¹¹⁰ from her viewpoint, since she is aware that she cannot speak on behalf of all Afrikaners. It also allows ‘the reader to piggyback on the “I” into the testimony – safe in the knowledge that “I” would not simply leave like the reporters of a newspaper or radio. The “I” would stop halfway and say: what do I do with what I have just read?.’¹¹¹ She does not want to leave the reader to reflect alone upon the monstrosity of what has been committed under the apartheid regime. Finally, clinging to that “I,” the author can give expressions to her most inner feelings about the socio-political and human transition her country is undertaking through the work of the Commission.

Krog even invents the figure of a beloved ‘to verbalize certain personal reactions to the hearings [...] who could not only bring new information, but also express the psychological underpinnings of the Commission’ (CMS 259). In chapter fifteen, for instance, she describes a private moment with her fictionalised lover in order to convey her sense of anger:

Anger spews up in me [...] and I push him hard. He stumbles. ‘Don’t hit me,’ he yanks my arm. He is angry. I fall in the sand. He pulls me up. I claw at him. My voice like raw meat. My teeth chattering with an unnamed lust to rip open,

¹⁰⁹ Antjie Krog, ‘Fact Bordering Fiction and the Honesty of “I,”’ *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative* 8, no. 2 (2007): 38.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 40.

to tear apart, to destroy, to plunder. He devours my face. It is only when he cries out that I realize I've sunk my teeth deep into his left shoulder. (CMS 250)

It is no coincidence that this outburst occurs after commenting on the responses of the white South Africans to the revelations of the TRC's findings: the bulk of the white community, in fact, still refused to acknowledge and take any responsibility for the violent past perpetrated under apartheid.

As some critics have suggested, *Country of My Skull* can be classified as creative non-fiction because of Krog's use of fictional elements to tell 'the real story.' The author herself points out that her imagination affects the narrative discourse and not reality: 'So where we initially used facts to enable our fiction to arrive at the truth, we now use fiction – or more accurately, fictional elements – to enable our facts to arrive at the truth.'¹¹² She cuts and pastes people's testimonies, changes some names when she thinks people might be annoyed, makes comments and intertwines episodes from her personal life. All of this together constitutes her truth about the TRC. Nonetheless, Krog is completely aware of the existence of multifaceted versions of truth, and chapter eight represents a clear example: here, the author offers five versions of the murder of policeman Richard Mutase and his wife, all derived from five people's accounts. She describes the applicants' stories as belonging to 'a whole circuit of narratives: township stories, literature, Truth Commission testimonies, newspaper reports [...] and every listener decodes the story in terms of truth. Telling is therefore never neutral, and the selection and ordering try to determine the interpretation' (CMS 126-127).

At this point, it is interesting to draw attention to another consideration relating to the concept of 'truth.' On two occasions, the author suggests that the 'truth' has a gender, thus echoing the gender activists' question 'Does Truth have a Gender?' that I have discussed earlier. In chapter five, entitled 'The Sound of the Second Narrative,' where Krog introduces the perpetrators' narrative, she also states that 'truth has become Woman. Her voice, distorted behind her rough hand, has undermined Man as the source of truth. And yet. Nobody knows her' (CMS 84). Furthermore, later in the text, she explicitly asks 'does truth have a gender?' (CMS 271). It is noteworthy that Krog raises this question in a chapter entitled 'Truth is a Woman,' which is completely dedicated to the testimonies of some women who have been objects of torture, rape, sexual abuse, mutilation, and humiliation during apartheid, from both white policemen and black comrades in townships and liberation camps. I think the author decides to assume a

¹¹² Ibid., 36.

feminist viewpoint in order to underline the double colonisation of the black South African woman, who was discriminated against at least twice – both for her skin colour and for her gender/sexuality. The women's testimonies reported in this chapter, indeed, show how their torturers had used the female body and sexuality to dehumanise them: 'your sexuality was used to strip away your dignity, to undermine your sense of self' (CMS 272), as highlighted by Thenjiwe Mthintso, chairperson of the Gender Commission.

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu approaches the topic of the gender hearings in a completely different way. Despite acknowledging the strength and the courage of women and their remarkable part in the struggle against apartheid, as well as the profound suffering they had undergone, he decides not to report any testimonies. This choice implies that in focusing on forgiveness and reconciliation, without dwelling on the gruesome details, Tutu appears unable to recognise the specificity of women's abuses. On the other hand, Krog, as observed above, reports several women's testimonies without censoring even the most intense parts. In accordance with her unique style, she alternates testimonies of women tortured and assaulted by both the regime and the comrades, presenting them in different ways: either transcribing only women's voices, reporting a dialogue between an advocate and a victim, describing the testimony itself, or making personal comments. Besides, she even quotes some words in italics pronounced by a rapist belonging to the liberation movement to make the point that women were considered mere objects, no matter from which side of the struggle:

A group of six guys and myself in Sebokeng decided to form an organization to keep their senior comrades busy all the time. We rape women who need to be disciplined. Those who behave like snobs. They think they know better than most of us. And when we struggle, they simply don't want to join us. (CMS 276)

Focusing on rape and sexual abuse, Krog also underscores that men, when testifying about the abuses they suffered, did not use the word 'rape,' opting instead for other expressions. Consequently, by denying their sexual subjugation to other men's brutality, they turned 'rape' into a woman's issue only and kept 'nourishing' sexual discrimination. I will further explore the representation of violence against women in the following chapter.

Returning to the multiple perspectives of truth and reality, the hybrid nature of the text is also reflected in language and in the different registers adopted in *Country of*

My Skull, which alternates a documentary style with the lyric mode, as we can see in chapter three:

To seize the surge of language by its soft, bare skull

Beloved, do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending – you who once whispered beside me in the dark.
(CMS 39)

This lyric section comes directly before a series of unattributed victim testimonies, as a transition – announced by the use of the italics in the first line of the section – to prepare the reader for the powerful impact resulting from the heartrending accounts that follow. Okla Elliot suggests that Krog's intent is to lyricise a victim's aim to tell his/her story so that others do not forget the brutalities and the violence perpetrated during apartheid.¹¹³ However, I argue that it might also be Krog's voice: despite her claims that no poetry should derive from victims' testimonies, the author cannot avoid writing it.¹¹⁴ Apartheid has been defined a crime against humanity, which was perpetrated by the so labeled 'perpetrators' against 'victims,' but all South Africans are survivors of this terrible monster. As both survivor and poet, Krog – the 'I' – appears to assign herself the challenging task to give voice to that 'you,' who stands for all the victims that had to endure in silence the pain experienced during the years of the past regime.

Later in the same chapter, Krog returns to poetry after transcribing the testimony of Thomzama Maliti, a black woman testifying the crimes committed by the comrades:

dare I sit in this grape dark
during this return journey where my body is overcome
by grief my heart coagulate resigned

write I – a blue slit against this all... (CMS 53)

This poetic fragment introduces one of Krog's considerations about truth and the difficulties to achieve it:

I hesitate at the word [truth], I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer

¹¹³ In this regard, see Okla Elliott, 'Lyric Monsters: The Humanizing Process of Language in Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*,' in *Postcolonial Studies, Volume 7: Trauma, Resistance, Reconstruction in Post-1994 South African Writing*, ed. by Jaspal K. Singh and Rajendra Chetty (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 43-56.

¹¹⁴ 'No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this. So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die' (CMS 74).

the word 'lie'. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there...where the truth is closest. (*CMS* 54)

The use of the lyric mode thus allows Krog to convey emotions, feelings and truths that arise from testimonies but that cannot be translated and reproduced in cold verbatim transcriptions. The aim of the interpreters was, in fact, to focus on the major points and cold facts, and they were not always able to translate people's sufferings and cries. As an example, in chapter eighteen the author decides to place the 'Shepherd's tale' – 'using the exact words in which he spoke it' (*CMS* 328) – into a poetic form to dramatise the difficulties of the interaction between the questioner and the teller/witness. Through this erratic and broken structure, she also manages to replicate and emphasise the trauma experienced by the shepherd while police were searching his house.

Here it is useful to compare some extracts of the real testimony given by Mr Likotsi (the shepherd)¹¹⁵ with Krog's re-elaboration of the same ones:

From the transcription

MR LAX: Now, can you tell us about the incident that happened? It happened in May '93, is that right?

MR LIKOTSI: Maybe you are right. You know, my problem is I was a shepherd, I cannot write, and I forget all these days, but I still - can I repeat what I just said earlier on about the harassment? Now, listen very carefully because I am telling you the story now. On that day it was at night of the date you have referred to. A person arrived and he knocked. When I answered the door burst open, and I said, 'Who is knocking so terribly?' He answered, he said, 'Police,' [...] I asked them, I said, 'What do you want?,' but they never provided an answer. They pushed us outside. It was terribly cold on that day. The children were woken up. I said to them, 'Will you provide me with the money to take these children to the doctor?' They did not answer. I said to them, 'Please, the policemen are not supposed to behave in this way.' I said, 'When a policeman goes to a farm he starts first at the farmer's house. If the farmer doesn't allow them entry they leave. Now, where do you get the permission from to get into my premise, break the doors? Is this the way you conduct your affairs?' When I looked thoroughly the door was not just kicked, it was even broken down with the gun butts. Even to this day the doors are still broken, that my children took pity on me and in this year March they bought a new door and the new frame...frame, and we had to get another person to come and fix the door.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ This hearing was held on 27 June 1997 in Ladybrand, Free State.

¹¹⁶ Mr Likotsi's testimony is fully transcribed in the official website dedicated to the work of the TRC, from which the extract I discuss have been taken. See <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cladyb/ladyb2.htm>, accessed October 8, 2015.

From *Country of My Skull*:

LAX: Can you tell us about the incident that happened. Was it in May 1993?

LEKOTSE: Maybe you're right – you know my problem is,
I was a shepherd.
I cannot write
and I forget all these days, but I still . . .

Can I repeat what I said earlier on about the harassment?

Now listen very carefully,
because I'm telling you the story now.

On that day,
it was at night,
a person arrived and he knocked.
When I answered, the door just opened
and I said, 'Who's knocking so terribly?'
He answered, he said: 'Police'

[...]

I asked them, 'What do you want?'
but they never provided an answer.

They pushed us outside.
It was terribly cold on that day.
The children were woken up.
I said to them, 'Will you provide me with the money
to take these children to the doctor?'
They did not answer.

I said to them,
'Please, the policemen are not supposed to behave this
way.'

I said, 'When a policeman goes to a farm
he stops first at the farmer's house.
If the farmer doesn't allow them entry,
they leave.

Now where do you get the permission from
to come into my house
and break the doors –
is this the way you conduct your affairs?'

When I locked thoroughly
the door was not just kicked,
it was even broken down with their gun butts.

Even to this day the doors are still broken.

My children took pity on me this year,
they bought a new door and a new frame
and we had to get another person to come and fix the door. (CMS 321-322)

Comparing these two extracts, it is quite evident that Krog uses almost the same words uttered by the shepherd during the testimony, but the effect they might produce on the reader is significantly different. In *Country of My Skull*, Mr Likotsi's testimony assumes the form of a poem or a tale, and, as such, Krog even gives it a title, 'The Shepherd's Tale.' The poem is primarily characterised by a series of enjambments – such as 'Now where do you get the permission from/ to come into my house/ and break the doors' – which seem to recreate the shepherd's apprehension and, at the same time, the sense of incredulity felt during the assault. Moreover, the author plays with the shepherd's sentences, creating some stanzas made of one or two lines to emphasise what he is saying: for instance, if we consider the stanza consisting of 'I asked them, "What do you want?"/ but they never provided an answer,' it summarises the absurdity of the brutalities and tyrannies committed during the apartheid regime against powerless people, who do not even understand the reason why they occurred. Another powerful example is the line 'Even to this day the doors are still broken:' while in the transcription it is inserted in Mr Likotsi's discourse, in Krog's re-elaboration it stands alone to signify that the consequences of that assault are still affecting the victim.

Finally, it is important to place a particular emphasis on how Krog decides to end her book: while the opening scene consists of a detailed description of her arrival at the old parliamentary venue – where the Justice Portfolio Committee was discussing what to include in the draft legislation establishing the TRC –, her final message is entrusted to poetry. Addressing 'us all; all voices, all victims' (CMS 422), she claims that all the stories reported to the Commission made her change forever. In *Entanglement*, Sarah Nuttall points out that Krog engages with her Afrikaner identity, her whiteness, in ways that reveal a 'process of becoming someone you were not in the beginning.'¹¹⁷ At the beginning of her journey, which also coincides with the beginning of her book, Krog does not hide her intimacy and complicity with the perpetrators of apartheid, 'the men of my race', 'they are as familiar as my brothers, cousins and school friends. Between us all distance is erased' (CMS 144). Following the contact with the victims and witnessing their pain, Krog revises the meaning of being white in this new context and claims: 'because of you/ this country no longer lies/ between us but within [...] I was scorched/ a new skin/ I am changed forever' (CMS 423). In this process of negotiating a new identity, the poet finds the courage to ask for forgiveness to all

¹¹⁷ Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), 58.

victims of apartheid, to whom this book is also dedicated, and beseeches ‘you whom I have wronged, please/ take me/ with you’ (ibid.).

Against all its failures and mistakes, both Desmond Tutu and Antjie Krog believe that the TRC succeeded in keeping alive the idea of a common humanity, and made an end of the tyranny of silence by guiding people towards the road to reconciliation. Of course, as Krog underscores:

it is asking too much that everyone should believe the Truth Commission’s version of the Truth. Or that people should be set free by this truth, should be healed and reconciled. But perhaps [...] because of these narratives, people can no longer indulge in their separate dynasties of denial. (*CMS* 134)

The Commission may represent the first step of that long journey called reconciliation, but it must be followed by other steps taken by all South Africans, as displayed in Tutu’s following words:

Confession, forgiveness and reparation, wherever feasible, form part of a continuum [...] It [reconciliation] has to be a national project to which all earnestly strive to make their particular contribution – by learning the language and culture of others; by being ready and willing to make amends; by refusing to deal with stereotypes in making racial or other jokes that ridicule a particular group; by contributing a culture of respect for human rights, and seeking to enhance tolerance – with zero tolerance for intolerance; by working for a more inclusive society where most, if not all, can feel they belong – that they are insiders and not aliens and strangers on the outside, relegated to the edges of society. (*NFWF* 222)

The analyses of the novels I have chosen to focus on in the subsequent chapters highlight the necessity to carry on the ‘incomplete’ work of the truth commission; thus also proving the fundamental role played by literature in helping people to question, challenge, and keep the dialogue on the past open to better understand the present.

Chapter 2

The Articulation of Female Trauma: Conflictual Dynamics between Voice and Silence

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

The blueprint to life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence

from Adrienne Rich's *Cartographies of Silence*¹¹⁸

2. 1 Introduction

This second chapter is devoted to the analysis of female trauma, both 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary,' and its literary representation. As identified in the previous chapter, the TRC held special hearings on women in order to encourage them to appear before the Commission and tell their stories of suffering. Despite the efforts of the Commission though, many women were not persuaded to participate in the reconciling journey proposed by the TRC, appearing to prefer silence over story-telling. On the other hand, many other women *could not* take part in that healing process, because their traumas did not fall into the Commission's strict definition of human rights violations. Through the explorations of four exemplary novels – Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* –, I focus on the literary responses to key issues of female trauma, which were either neglected or improperly addressed by the Commission.

Section 2 is dedicated to the analyses of *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace*: both novels confront the ethical complexities of representing sexual violence endured by women – interracial rape to be specific –, which is further complicated by the author's gender. The characteristic of having been written by male authors, indeed, invites questions about the possibility, and reliability, for men to portray and instantiate violence against

¹¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'Cartographies of Silence,' in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*, by Adrienne Rich (New York: Norton, 1978), 17-18.

women and their suffering. I do not want to suggest that only women writers can represent violence suffered by other women, because it would mean that women can only write about women, and men only about other men, which it is not the case in my view. I agree with Nadine Gordimer's observation according to which 'to their essential faculty as writers, all writers are androgynous beings,'¹¹⁹ implying that writers should move freely between male and female perspectives, regardless of their sex or gender. My discussion of the novels shows the authors' attentiveness in exploring and representing the trauma of the *Other* – in this case, the female Other – without attempting to appropriate their story. In this connection, I argue that silence is not an absence, as Rich's poem claims: silence 'is a presence/ it has a history a form.'¹²⁰ Borrowing Ross's words, 'silence is a legitimate discourse on pain and there is an ethical responsibility to recognise it as such.'¹²¹ Acknowledging the importance of silence, the two authors, in fact, adopt silence as a narrative strategy to represent something that cannot be represented because it is beyond their ken – such as sexual violence on women, on the Other.

The categories of private and public spaces play a fundamental role in the context of the work of the TRC. The Commission demanded of people – both the so-identified victims and perpetrators – to come forward and tell in public their private stories in order to contribute to collective memory and facilitating the reconciling process. The resulting blurring of the line between the public and the private is reminiscent of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political.'¹²² Anna Enke underscores that 'the women's movement, perhaps more than any other post 1960 social movement, not only condemned the lingering nineteenth-century liberal ideal of separate private and public realms, but also showed that personal and political realms were inseparable or even indistinguishable.'¹²³ Second-wave feminism aimed to overturn the concept according to which men would make history and politics in the public sphere, the most visible and important one, whilst women would be reduced to the relative invisibility of

¹¹⁹ Nadine Gordimer, 'Selecting My Stories'(1975), in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. by Stephen Clingman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), 113.

¹²⁰ Adrienne Rich, 'Cartographies of Silence,' in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (New York: Norton, 1978), 17-18.

¹²¹ Ross, *Bearing Witness*, 49.

¹²² The phrase has been repeatedly associated with the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (second-wave feminism), and it is quoted from the feminist Carol Hanisch's essay 'The Personal is Political' (1970). See <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>, accessed October 15, 2015.

¹²³ Anna Enke, 'Taking Over Domestic Space. The Battered Women's Movement and Public Protest,' in *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, ed. by Van Gosse and Richard Moser (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 164.

the private domestic space. Elizabeth Randol also points out that ‘feminists argued that “the personal is political”, meaning that issues such as rape and domestic violence were not merely private problems but were, in fact, public crisis.’¹²⁴ Hence, the slogan ‘the personal is political’ was employed to emphasise how the private and the public are profoundly intertwined and affect one another.

In different ways, both novels make reference to the public space of the Commission: Dangor directly quotes the TRC and its amnesty hearings, while Coetzee creates an allegorical setting which clearly recalls the atmosphere of the Commission hearings, where people are required to make public statements. In a country permeated by racial prejudices and bias, interracial rape encompasses both gender and racial domains. In *Bitter Fruit*, Lydia is not just a woman being raped by a man, but she is a *coloured* woman being raped by a *white* man. *Disgrace* too features interracial rape prominently, as Lucy is a young *white* woman being sexually assaulted by three *black* men. In these fictional contexts, the two authors, by implications, criticise the TRC’s attempt to publicise women’s private stories of suffering, and place emphasis on how deeply intertwined gender and race, private and public still are in post-apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, by demanding of women to publicly share their stories of sexual violence, the commission failed to foresee the risk of having this type of violence read primarily through racial and political lens. The novels, then, expose the hybrid demarcation between private and private spheres in relation to interracial violence against women, and, in opposition to the TRC’s public approach, they try to renegotiate women’s privacy and intimacy by exploring silence as a more accommodating space for women’s painful memories.

Section 3 focuses on *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and *Mother to Mother*. Both texts try to expose the ‘spectacle’ of the TRC process by looking instead at the ordinary suffering, which results from years of apartheid oppression and centuries of history of colonialism. In *Postcolonial Witnessing*, Stef Craps discloses the limits of ‘canonic’ trauma theory, which mainly relies on the Euro-American model, thus overlooking the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma in favour of ‘extraordinary’ event-based approach. He argues that some criticism levelled at the TRC ‘resonates with our observation that the current trauma discourse has difficulty recognizing that it is not just

¹²⁴ Elizabeth F. Randol, ‘Homeland Security and the Co-optation of Feminist Discourse,’ in *Women and Children First: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Public Policy*, ed. by Sharon M. Meagher and Patrice DeQuinzio (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 19.

singular and extraordinary events but also “normal” everyday humiliations and abuses that can act as traumatic stressors.’¹²⁵ Underlying some similarities between traditional trauma theory’s approach and the TRC’s focus on an event-based definition of gross human rights violations, Craps presents Magona’s novel as a literary response to ordinary female trauma; I would extend this insight to Ndebele’s novel which, I argue, critically revisits the limits and elisions of the Commission’s work.

Due to historical circumstances, the condition of the black South African woman is often described as ‘double-colonisation,’ as she is oppressed by both colonial and apartheid rules, *and* patriarchal structures within her own community.¹²⁶ Black South African women were frequently confined to ‘passive’ domestic spaces to take care of the household, while their men could take active part in the anti-apartheid struggle. These gendered roles meant that the majority of women who appeared before the Commission told the grieving stories of their beloved ones – their men, fathers, uncles, and sons – while their own stories remained in the background. Indeed, many stories of ‘ordinary’ female trauma – the absence of the husbands, the feelings of anxiety and waiting for the beloved ones to return home, the fear of loss and powerlessness, for instance – went unheard because they did not fall into the restrictive definition of victim of gross human rights violations.

Consistent with the previous observations, I discuss how both Ndebele and Magona are interested in exposing the limitations of the work of the TRC by rediscovering the ordinary effects of trauma inflicted on women by both apartheid oppression and local patriarchies. Both texts are, in fact, related to the work of the truth commission: Ndebele makes direct reference to Winnie Mandela’s nine-day public hearing; Magona’s narrative focuses on the murder of America Fulbright student Amy Biehl, whose murderers were granted amnesty by the TRC. Similarly to Spivak’s conception of the female subaltern, the protagonists of both novels are women who still cannot speak, be heard, nor benefit from the cathartic effect of telling their stories at the public hearings, because their stories do not meet the Commission’s criteria.¹²⁷ In this last section, I then show how both authors conceive fictional spaces – whether a private

¹²⁵ Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, 45.

¹²⁶ Concerning this see, Robin Visel, ‘A Half-Colonization: The Problem of the White Colonial Woman Writer,’ *Kunapipi* 10, no. 3 (1988): 39-45.

¹²⁷ It is worth noting that *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* – as much as *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace* – is a novel about women and their stories of trauma written by a male author. In a similar way to the other novels, Ndebele gives voice to the female Other without appropriating their stories.

gathering of women, or a mother's letter – constitute an alternative to the TRC public hearings, where the protagonists can finally speak up and share their pain.

2. 2 Ethical complexities and representability of sexual violence on women: silence and shame

2. 2. 1 Subversive silence in *Bitter Fruit*

First published in South Africa in 2001, *Bitter Fruit* is set in 1998, between the publishing of the TRC final report, and the end of Nelson Mandela's term as president, a year described by the narrator as 'a twilight period, an interregnum between the old century and the new, between the first period of political hope and the new period of "managing the miracle."' ¹²⁸ Focusing on the micro-narrative of one family, the Alis, Dangor both highlights the complexities, fragmentations, and ambiguities of coloured identity in the 'New' South Africa, and raises questions about the Commission's ability to deal with, and recover from personal trauma, especially in connection with the issue of rape and sexual violence on women. In *Mapping Loss*, Shane Graham observes that, through the depiction of the aftermath of rape, the author challenges 'a central conceit in the rhetoric of the TRC: the idea that truth, obtained through archiving of memories of victims and confessions of perpetrators, will lead to reconciliation.' ¹²⁹ The connection between *Bitter Fruit* and the work of the Commission is also suggested by the tripartite division of the text: 'Part One Memory', 'Part Two Confession', and 'Part Three Retribution' which counterpose against, as Frenkel observes, 'the three steps laid out by the TRC – speak, grieve, and heal.' ¹³⁰

The novel concentrates on the entanglements of a coloured family: Silas Ali, a former revolutionary, now a lawyer working for the Ministry of Justice and deeply involved in the work of the TRC; Lydia, a nurse, who was subjected to rape by the security police; and Mikey, the unacknowledged product of Lydia's rape, but raised by

¹²⁸ Achmat Dangor, *Bitter Fruit*, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001; London: Atlantic Books, 2004), 255. Citations refer to the Atlantic Books edition. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *BF*.

¹²⁹ Shane Graham, *Mapping Loss*, 94.

¹³⁰ Ronit Frenkel, 'Performing Race, Reconsidering History: Achmat Dangor's Recent Fiction,' *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 1 (2008): 159.

Silas and Lydia as their son. The narrative begins with Silas encountering François Du Boise, a retired police Lieutenant, who, nineteen years earlier – when Silas was involved in underground activities – had raped Lydia while Silas was chained up helplessly in a police van nearby. This confrontation is significant at two different levels. On the one hand, it dramatises the factual possibility of the encounter between ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ in the ‘New’ democratic South Africa, which was especially fostered by the works of the TRC.¹³¹ On the other hand, it sets off a chain of events which will culminate in the disintegration of this family unit. The narrator depicts Du Boise as:

A ghost from the past, a mythical phantom embedded in the ‘historical memory’ of those who were active in the struggle. Historical memory. It is a term that seems illogical and contradictory to Mikey; after all, history *is* memory. [...] Now his mother and father have received a visitation from that dark past, some terrible memory brought to life. (*BF* 32)

As for this ‘ghostly’ and painful appearance from the past, the narrative develops around the effects and consequences produced in the three main characters’ lives. Through the use of free indirect discourse and a wide range of character-focalisers, Dangor creates a juxtaposition of perspectives which give the reader access to a subjective and private dimension of trauma and memory that a factual account might struggle to fully capture. By representing trauma and each character’s manner of coping with it, *Bitter Fruit* powerfully suggests the existence of countless invisible and unspoken traumas, which elude the collective and national account of the South African past provided by the TRC.

Following the rape, Lydia’s and Silas’s marriage has been overshadowed both by the memory of the rape, and, even more, by its unspoken trauma, leading the couple to increasingly isolate themselves from each other as time has gone by: ‘So their time spent together passed quietly, each one reading on their own, or listening to their own music through earphones or in their separate sanctuaries’ (*BF* 61). In the immediate aftermath of the rape, it was Silas who initiated a silence which can be read as an act of

¹³¹ Sorcha Gunne, in fact, depicts this confrontation as ‘itself indicative of the new possibilities of post-apartheid space.’ See Sorcha Gunne, ‘Questioning Truth and Reconciliation: Writing Rape in Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* and Kagiso Lesego Molepe’s *Dancing in the Dust*,’ in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narrative: Violence and Violation*, ed. by Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 169.

denial and repression of memory, arising from his inability to empathise with Lydia and comfort her:

He knew then, several years before he encountered Du Boise in a shopping mall, that Lydia really wanted to explore some hidden pain, perhaps not of her rape, but to journey through the darkness of the silent years that had ensued between them. He was not capable of such an ordeal, he acknowledged. It would require an immersion in words he was not familiar with, words that did not seek to blur memory, to lessen the pain, but to sharpen all of these things. He was trained to find consensus, even if it meant not acknowledging the ‘truth’ in all its unflattering nakedness. Hell, he had an important job, liaising between the Ministry of Justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was his task to ensure that everyone concerned remained objective, the TRC’s supporters and its opponents, that they considered the law above all, and did not allow their emotions to sway them. What would happen if he broke his own golden rule and delved into the turmoil of memories that the events of those days would undoubtedly unleash? (*BF* 63)

As highlighted by Miller,¹³² Silas embodies the conflict between two types of memory: on the one hand, a personal memory – the night of Lydia’s rape – that he wants to suppress, and, on the other hand, a collective, national memory that he is fostering and building through his job for the Ministry of Justice, ‘trying to reconcile the irreconcilable’ (*BF* 29) and ‘jiggling those TRC commissioners, the old security people’ (*BF* 257) and the African National Congress. Miller even argues that Silas’s ‘suppression of uncomfortable memories, truths, and emotions and his desire to remain “objective” are not completely separable from the TRC’s own mediation of memory.’¹³³ Notably, Lydia acknowledges that:

[Silas’s] ‘forgetfulness’ was not natural, was not an unconscious, pain-induced suppression of things too agonizing to remember, but a deliberate strategy, something thought out behind a desk, whisky in hand, ice tinkling, golden liquid contemplatively swirled. That’s why he was so good at his job, helping the country to forget and therefore to forgive, a convenient kind of amnesia. (*BF* 122)

Consequently, Silas’s silence and denial of the memory of that terrible night effectively both silenced Lydia and became part of her trauma as well: ‘his fear, that icy, unspoken revulsion, hung in the air like a mist’ (*BF* 129) made Lydia cross ‘over into a zone of silence’ (*ibid.*).

When Silas, finally, tells Lydia about his encounter with Du Boise, she accuses him of bringing back the pain of that memory, after so many years of silence – ‘you

¹³² Ana Miller, ‘The Past in the Present: Personal and Collective Trauma in Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*,’ *Studies in The Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (2008): 149.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

chose to remember, you *chose* to come home and tell me' (BF 13). She even undertakes a self-destructive dance on broken glasses, trying to anaesthetise 'a much deeper, unfathomable agony' (BF 21) with her physical pain. Drawing on Veena Das, Ross acknowledges the limitations of language and the validity of silence, especially with reference to some horror that cannot be articulated.¹³⁴ Instead of communicating her grief through words, Lydia resorts to a silent painful dance on broken glass, which must be interpreted as a valid, if also self-destructive, expression of her pain. Silence thus becomes an act of agency through which Lydia is able to communicate meaning when words have failed. The woman's silence is *not* an absence of words, *nor* of emotions. Indeed, although she has been silenced for almost twenty years by her husband's behaviour, and, now, by choice keeps that silence, Lydia has not ever been voiceless nor unwilling to speak, and this is proved by her desire to start writing a diary three days after her rape, in December 1978. In her journal, Lydia entrusts her inner thoughts and suffering, complaining about the lack of an addressable speaker with whom she could share her story of pain:

I cannot speak to Silas, he makes my pain his tragedy. In any case, I know that he doesn't want to speak about my being raped, he wants to suffer silently, wants me to be his accomplice in this act of denial. I also cannot speak to my mother or father. They too will want to take my pain, make it theirs. If they suffer on my behalf, that will be penance enough, they believe. They will also demand of me a forgetful silence. Speaking about something heightens its reality, makes it unavoidable. This is not human nature, but the nature of 'confession' that the Church has taught them. Confess your sins, even those committed against you – and is rape not a sin committed by both victim and perpetrator, at least according to man's gospel? – but confess it once only. There true salvation is to be found. In saying the unsayable, and then holding your peace for ever after. (BF 127)

Neither Silas, nor her family, nor the Commission are able to provide a setting where Lydia feels she can speak. Although conceived with the idea of offering the South African female subaltern a safe space where she could speak, special women hearings did not 'attract' many female voices; instead, women frequently preferred silence over speech, privacy over public spectacle. The passage also shows Lydia's scepticism of Christian concepts of confession and forgiveness, which informed the work of the TRC. Indeed, she refuses to testify before the Commission and tell her story at women's hearings, because 'nothing in her life would have changed, nothing in any of their lives would have changed' (BF 156). A public confession of her suffered pain would not

¹³⁴ See Ross, *Bearing the Witness*, 49.

have cancelled the violent deed of the rape. Besides rejecting her opportunity to participate in the long journey of ‘speak, grieve, and heal’ initiated and supported by the Commission, the woman also asks Silas to stop Du Boise’s application for amnesty, which would have exposed her private pain. This time Lydia’s silence is ‘both reactionary and subversive,’¹³⁵ an act of rebellion and protest against the TRC and its public use of Christian rhetoric of forgiveness, which also indicates a refusal of the supposed catharsis that ‘speaking out’ about traumatic events is meant to deliver. Emblematically, after her rapist’s application, she decides to take up her journal again, implying the importance of a private and personal dimension of her sorrowful memories. Frenkel remarks that ‘the inability of the TRC to articulate a “whole truth” or to construct a dominant narrative is highlighted through Lydia’s inability to articulate her own trauma in such a setting.’¹³⁶

Bitter Fruit thus openly criticises the TRC’s public truth-telling process, implying that ‘truth and confession, over articulated and expressed without conviction [...], are rendered meaningless during this period.’¹³⁷ Furthermore, Dangor addresses a specific weakness of the TRC, that is, despite its efforts to elicit women’s stories, for instance by establishing the Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, many of them remained silent, refusing to take part in the national reconstructing process. In his critique of the Commission’s (dis)engagement with the issue of sexual violence on women, Gunne underlines that Dangor represents the TRC as a ‘space where women’s voices are subjugated by male desire.’¹³⁸ Silas clearly exemplifies this gendered orientation of the TRC: his idea that there was no need to discuss the rape, as collateral damage of the anti-apartheid struggle, epitomises in fact an attempt at appropriating Lydia’s pain. Conversely, Lydia does not want either the Commission or Silas to appropriate her story: ‘you don’t know about the pain. It’s a memory to you, a wound to your ego, a theory [...] you can’t even begin to imagine the pain’ (*BF* 14). Remarkably, Dangor does not try to absorb and represent the story of Lydia’s rape in his male perspective: the scene of rape is almost absent from the narration – it is in fact just evoked through vague memories and random comments –, thus highlighting the

¹³⁵Sorcha Gunne, ‘Questioning Truth and Reconciliation: Writing Rape in Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* and Kagiso Lesego Molepe’s *Dancing in the Dust*,’ 172.

¹³⁶ Frenkel, ‘Performing Race, Reconsidering History: Achmat Dangor’s Recent Fiction,’ 158.

¹³⁷ Jane Poyner, ‘Rerouting Commitment in the Postapartheid Canon: TRC Narratives and The Problem of Truth,’ 188.

¹³⁸Sorcha Gunne, ‘Questioning Truth and Reconciliation: Writing Rape in Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* and Kagiso Lesego Molepe’s *Dancing in the Dust*,’ 175.

author's choice not to linger on details that might sensationalise the sexual violation. He instead tries to give voice to Lydia's sense of uneasiness about the articulation of and the confrontation with her own trauma.

'The memory of being raped' (*BF* 119) overwhelms Lydia's sense of her sexuality and her relationship with Silas, whom she cannot dissociate from the image of her rapist, especially since Du Boise's reappearance in their lives:

I can't rest peacefully with both of you around, your bodies, your smells, even your sounds have become all mixed up. It's like he raped me on your behalf, so that one day I would live with him through you. When you are inside me, and around me, it feels like Du Boise. He made you his instrument. Is it not enough that I have to deal with the thought of his seed in Mikey, his genes, his blood, his cold and murderous eyes? (*BF* 123)

This quotation also hints at the damaged relationship between Lydia and her son, Mikey, the product of her rape. Brust underscores that while 'Silas fails to empathize with Lydia [...] Mikey's close, almost incestuous relationship with his mother, causes him to overempathize with her.'¹³⁹ The text often depicts Lydia and Mikey as a couple, 'an oddly chaste couple, awkwardly trying to be close' (*BF* 23), alluding to their special interconnectedness and intimacy: they can sense each other's presence, and Lydia seems to be obsessed with her son's sexual life. Compared to Silas's attitude, Mikey is the only one able to reach out to his mother and comfort her, sometimes crossing the mother-son boundary. For instance, after hearing of Du Boise's application for amnesty, it is 'Mikey who put his arms around her, whispering, "It's okay, Mama, it's okay". It was Mikey she turned to, because Silas had walked away into the humid night, escaping to a bar' (*BF* 162). And in this closeness, Lydia kisses Mikey, 'the way she had always wanted to draw a man to her, at her behest, for her own comfort and pleasure' (*ibid.*), almost stepping into the dimension of incest and irremediably tainting their mother-son relationship.

The memory of the trauma, and the inability to deal with it, eventually drive Silas, Lydia, and Mikey apart, disintegrating their family unit and leading them to different lives in three separate temporal dimensions: Silas lives in the past, 'increasingly summoning up happier times' (*BF* 164); Lydia lives in the present 'self-judging, brutally honest' (*BF* 165); Mikey 'as he has now defined himself, lives only in the future, in the world of young people and young pursuits' (*BF* 167). The allusion to the fragility of the (African) family structure foregrounds Ndebele's and Magona's

¹³⁹ Imke Brust, 'Transcending Apartheid: Empathy and the Search for Redemption,' in *Postcolonial Studies*, Volume 7, 88.

concerns with the same issue. In different ways, the three authors show how deeply apartheid affected the African family unit and how difficult it is to recompose it in the post-apartheid era in spite of the efforts of the TRC. They clearly imply complications that the Commission did not and could not encompass in its mandate, thus suggesting the importance of carrying on the reconciling process, perhaps, at a more personal and familial level.

However, within this zone of silence, separateness, and lack of agency – at least from Lydia's and Silas's sides – Lydia grows, undertaking a journey which will free her from the ghosts of her past. Symbols of Lydia's personal growth are both the car she buys, achieving physical and spatial independence from her husband, and the research team she joins which does control tests on HIV-positive mothers. Later in the novel, Mack argues that 'Silas's fiftieth birthday party provides the occasion for Lydia's final act of separation from her biological and national families and the burdens that they place upon her.'¹⁴⁰ During the party, two important events take place: on the one hand, Lydia gives Silas the diary of his father, Ali Ali, which his mother had given to her, and which presumably tells the story of Ali Ali's voyage from India to South Africa. With this gesture, Lydia plans to 'hand Silas his heritage [...] then walk away, free of him and his burdensome past' (*BF* 251), free from the memory of her own past too. On the other hand, she also dances and has sex with a young, dark-skinned, attractive Mozambican, João. Seeing their lovemaking in a deserted room of the house, Silas reflects: 'His wife had found release at last from both her captive demons: from Du Boise and from himself. Now not every man would be a rapist to her' (*BF* 267). Following Silas's party, Lydia leaves her house driving to an unknown destination, and disentangling herself both from family and the 'New' South Africa:

Time and distance, even this paltry distance will help to free her. Burden of the mother. Mother, wife, lover, lover-mother, lover-wife, unloved mother. Unloved, in sum, except for those wonderful, unguarded moments, Mikey, Silas, and, of course, black João, beautiful as jet. Even Du Boise does not matter any more. (*BF* 281)¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Katherine Mack, 'Hearing Women's Silence in Transitional South Africa: Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*,' in *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, ed. by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 209.

¹⁴¹ The text does not provide a detailed description of João, nor of his personal history or background. I think it is his air of mystery, uncertainty, newness, and freedom from a burdensome past that contributes to his charm, and makes him the person to set Lydia free from her sexual demons. Besides, it is not important who he is, but the role as trigger, propeller he plays in Lydia's life.

Dangor describes another story of women's suffering: Mikey's friend, Vinu, has been victim of her father's sexual abuse for years. Significantly, Vinu decides to confide in Mikey, asking him to listen to her story: 'But I want you to listen, really listen, please?' (*BF* 207). Vinu's plea to be listened to clearly echoes the epigraph of this second section, entitled 'Confession': 'Since in order to speak, one must listen first/ Learn to speak by listening', a quotation from *Mesnevi*, a long poem written by a 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi. It is important to underline that Vinu's story of sexual abuse could not qualify as gross human rights violations, thus preventing her from participating in the hearings or the reconciliation process. Here, Dangor establishes a significant parallel between the contradictory situations the two women are experiencing: on the one hand, there is Lydia's rape, which could be eligible as an example of gross human rights violations because it was 'political' motivated by Silas' involvement with anti-apartheid struggle, *and* her subversive decision not to speak at the TRC special hearings on women. On the other hand, there is Vinu's sexual abuse, which does not enter the political dimension of apartheid violations and, consequently, not even the Commission's radar, *and* her need to speak out and confide in an addressable listener. In the absence of the Commission's support, Vinu chooses her friend Mikey as the interlocutor and listener of her story of pain. The choice to include her story into the narrative might then be interpreted as the author's attempt to expose the existence of a wider range of female traumas affecting South Africa's reality that were not included in the TRC mandate, but that still needed to be addressed to achieve reconciliation.

Vinu's heartbreaking exchange with Mikey might also suggest that a more effective act of witnessing and story-telling can only be achieved between equals and friends, when interlocutors share some common grounds, and Mikey, being a child of rape, represents the right listener for the girl's story. On the contrary, the character of Silas seems to conjure up the public context of the Commission's hearings and its tendency to appropriate people's painful stories for the sake of collective healing, a risk that Lydia utterly refuses to take. Through the examples of Lydia's and Vinu's stories, Dangor draws attention on the fact that the TRC could not accommodate all South African women's stories of suffering. He dramatises the difficulties and contradictions of attempting to articulate and represent sexual violence on women, especially in public contexts such as the Commission's hearings. *Bitter Fruit*, in fact, invites readers to reflect on a more personal and intimate forms of dealing with female trauma, thus

anticipating Njabulo Ndebele's depiction of a private 'gathering' of women sharing their pain in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, which I discuss later in this chapter.

2. 2. 2 Shameful silence in *Disgrace*

J. M. Coetzee's first post-apartheid novel, *Disgrace*, combines the story of David Lurie – a fifty-two-year-old university professor who writes 'books about dead people'¹⁴² – with a larger narrative that addresses the problems of representing both the racial other and sexual violence on women in post-apartheid South Africa. Enacting two parallel stories of sexual violation – Lurie's harassment of his coloured student Melanie Isaacs in the first half of the novel, and the gang rape of his daughter Lucy in the second half – the novel 'sets up an internal debate on what it means adequately to respond to an experience of disgrace and bodily violation for perpetrator as well as for victim.'¹⁴³ Despite winning two international awards, the Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, since its publication in 1999, *Disgrace* has attracted a mixed reception ranging from hostility and accusations of racism because of its pessimistic portrayal of post-apartheid racial relations, to deeper explorations which unveil the paradox faced by the white South African writer. Jane Poyner, indeed, observes that Coetzee's central concern in both his fiction and his critical works reflects the postcolonial struggle between 'narrativising the lost or silenced (hi)stories of the oppressed (black) Other' and the risk of 'assuming the authoritative (and hence, by analogy, colonialist) stance [he seeks] to challenge.'¹⁴⁴ His preoccupation with the peril of imposing his white, Afrikaner, colonising perspective on the (hi)stories of the Other is, in fact, reflected in his slippery language and constant questioning of authorial authorship.

The African National Congress's oral submission to the South African Human Rights Commission's Inquiry into Racism in the Media on 5 April 2000, perhaps, represents one of the most significant examples of a racialised reading of the novel. According to Peter McDonald, the ANC employed Coetzee's text 'as an historical

¹⁴² J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 2nd ed. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1999; London: Vintage, 2000), 162. Citations refer to the Vintage edition. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *D*.

¹⁴³ Elleke Boehmer, 'Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,' *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 344.

¹⁴⁴ Jane Poyner, 'Truth and Reconciliation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' *Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 5, no. 2 (2000): 67.

witness to the persistence of racism among white South Africans' because it portrayed the Black as a "'faithless, immoral, uneducated, incapacitated primitive child,'" a version of white racism they traced back to J. B. M. Hertzog, the father of "so-called pure Afrikaner nationalism."¹⁴⁵ This observation apparently alludes to David Lurie's description of Pollux, the youngest of David's daughter Lucy's black rapists: 'a violent child in the body of a young man [...] Deficient. Mentally deficient. Morally deficient' (*D* 207-208). The ANC's criticism was echoed by other commentators and reviewers; Jakes Gerwel, professor and Director General of the President's office under Nelson Mandela, for instance, expressed his dismay at the novel's portrayal of the 'almost barbaric post-colonial claims of Black Africans,' at its representation of 'mixed-race [*bruin*] characters' as 'whores, seducers, complainers, conceited accusers', and at its 'exclusion of the possibility of civilized reconciliation.'¹⁴⁶

With regard to the ANC's submission to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), David Attwell emphasises that their reading of *Disgrace* 'is racialized beyond a level that is warranted in the text of the novel.'¹⁴⁷ He in turn proposes a reading which 'contains and sublimates race,' embedded 'into larger patterns of historical and ethical interpretation.'¹⁴⁸ My own reading of the novel shows how the author is primarily interested in the ethical complexities of representing rape and sexual violence on women, alongside engaging with racial implications. Carine M. Mardorossian, in fact, suggests that Coetzee's undertaking challenges 'normative approaches to rape, justice, and human relationship,' and, instead of confining post-apartheid violence to racial frameworks, the author highlights 'the inextricable relation between incommensurable categories of identity such as gender, class, or ethnicity in the application of legal and moral authority.'¹⁴⁹ Without explicitly referring to the work of the TRC, Coetzee's novel, however, also poses questions about both the effective representability of sexual harm on women and the existence of a suitable listener/reader for these stories of female abuses in the context of transitional South Africa, two issues which focused the Commission's attention as I have discussed in my first chapter.

¹⁴⁵ Peter McDonald, 'Disgrace Effects,' *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 323.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁴⁹ Carine M. Mardorossian, 'Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' *Research in African Literatures* 42, no. 4 (2011): 74-75.

From the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist, David Lurie, fifty-two years old and twice divorced, is presented as an outcast, a man alienated both from his society and work, a man 'out of touch, out of date' (*D* 13). Once professor of modern languages, particularly fascinated by English Romanticism, he has become adjunct professor of communications at the Cape Town Technical University following 'the great rationalisation' (*D* 3) of his department. Although he is allowed to teach a special-field course a year (Romantic poets), 'because that is good for morale' (*D* 3), for the rest he teaches without passion Communications 101 and Communication 201, making 'no impression on students. They look through him when he speaks, forget his name' (*D* 4). His masters have been Wordsworth and Byron, 'his imaginative domain is one of classical myth and learning, people with gods and angels and heroes and devils. His cosmography is Dantean or Miltonic, with heaven and hell, Eden and an underworld.'¹⁵⁰ However, when David gives a class on Byron's poem *Lara*, he is not able to arouse his students' interest: 'heads bent, they scribble down his words. Byron, Lucifer, Cain, it is all the same to them' (*D* 34). A couple of pages earlier, he even depicts his students as 'post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate, they might as well have been hatched from eggs yesterday' (*D* 32). Lurie, therefore, appears to have a cultural legacy to transmit, but it is one that his students have no interest in, and this contributes to his marginalised state.

His passion for Romantic poetry is indicative of Lurie's character and, in a sense, prophetic of his behaviour. In his career as a scholar, he has written three poorly received critical works, including *Wordsworth and the burden of the past*. In the South African context, the word 'burden' inevitably assumes a remarkable significance in relation to the burden of guilt experienced by white liberal South Africans, like Coetzee and David Lurie, for their 'unwilling' complicity in their country's history of violence during apartheid. However, later in his career, Lurie now chooses to turn 'his academic eye towards the life and work of the scabrous Byron,'¹⁵¹ which establishes an implicit connection between Byron's libertine life and the protagonist's promiscuity. His lechery is also anticipated in the opening sentence of the novel, where the third-person narrator hints at the protagonist's problem of sex: 'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (*D* 1). Besides referring to

¹⁵⁰ Deirdre Coleman, 'The "Dog-Man": Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' *Twenty-Century Literature* 55, no. 4 (2009): 607.

¹⁵¹ Poyner, 'Truth and Reconciliation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 68.

Thomas Hardy's preface to his novel *Jude the Obscure*,¹⁵² this statement introduces Lurie's solution to his 'problem of sex', namely his weekly visits to the 'exotic' prostitute Soraya, whose photograph in Discreet Escorts's book depicts her with 'a red passion-flower in her hair and the faintest of lines at the corners of her eyes' (D 7). Whatever the uncertainty with which Soraya's racial identity is indicated, her 'honey-brown body, unmarked by the sun' (D 1) clearly classifies the woman as non-white. Sohinee Roy highlights the importance of *Disgrace*'s opening paragraph which signals the new direction undertaken in post-apartheid South Africa: in this new context, interracial sexual relations are no longer prohibited.¹⁵³

The narrative structure deployed in the novel consists of a third-person narrator whose focaliser is Lurie's perspective; the use of the present tense throughout the text also 'adds to the immediacy and proximity with which the protagonist's viewpoint is represented.'¹⁵⁴ Everything is seen through Lurie's eyes, and, as readers, we are led to sympathise and agree with Lurie's actions and his 'readings' of those actions – such as, for instance, his sexual act with the coloured student Melanie that I discuss later –, which are affected by his hegemonic position as a male and Afrikaner. The description of Lurie as an outcast within his own community, though, positions him on the edge of that dominant power, thus creating an interesting contrast, which alerts readers to the 'potential' unreliability and bias of Lurie's viewpoint. To this end, there are also some linguistic clues in the narrative, which expose the disjunction between the authorial voice and Lurie's perception of reality. For example, the phrase 'to his mind' in the opening sentence, or the expression 'To some degree, he believes, his affection is reciprocated' (D 2),¹⁵⁵ conveys a certain degree of discrepancy between the narrator and Lurie as the narrative focaliser, encouraging readers to distance themselves from the protagonist's perspective. Concentrating on an analysis of verbal aspects and tenses of the novel, Mark Sanders also places particular emphasis on the phrase 'to his mind'

¹⁵² Coleman observes that in his preface to the novel, Hardy mentions 'the problem of sex', defining it 'as the "deadly war waged between flesh and spirit."' The scholar carries on arguing that 'Hardy's dark novel' enacts 'a fictional universe dominated by the tragedy of the sexual instinct'. As I discuss shortly, Lurie will become a victim of his own sexual instincts as well. Coleman, 'The "Dog-Man": Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 600-601.

¹⁵³ While during apartheid, both the Immorality Act (1950-1985) and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949-1985) forbade any kind of sexual relationship between white and non-white people. See Sohinee Roy, 'Speaking with a Forked Tongue: *Disgrace* and the Irony of Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 58, no. 4 (2012): 702.

¹⁵⁴ Mardorossian, 'Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 78.

¹⁵⁵ This quotation from *Disgrace* refers to Lurie's opinion about his relationship with the prostitute Soraya.

which, by separating the auxiliary verb ‘have’ from its participle ‘solved’, affects the perfective aspect of the verb phrase:

Indicating transcendent aspect, the perfective ‘has solved’ secures the narrative present. Before its syntax can be completed, however, the perfective is sundered by an aside alerting the reader that the action narrated is not over – that, as the narrator gently intimates by splitting ‘has solved’ in two with the words ‘to his mind’, the solution Lurie imagines himself to have found [for his problem of sex] is premature.¹⁵⁶

The prematurity and incompleteness of Lurie’s solution to his problem of sex – that is, his weekly encounter with a non-white prostitute – is also reinforced through the use of the present tense in the following two sentences of the novel’s opening paragraph: ‘On Thursday afternoons he drives to Green Point. Punctually at two p.m. he presses the buzzer at the entrance to Windsor Mansions, speaks his name, and enters’ (*D* 1). Sanders argues that the iterative aspect enshrined in the present tense of these verbs ‘retroactively permit[s] one to read the perfective “has solved” as iterative: indicating habitual action, not the completed action it typically indicates.’¹⁵⁷ In addition to providing some insights into Lurie’s character, these syntactic clues are also important in terms of narrative strategy, because they invite readers to be alert and question the effective reliability of both the narrator and the narrative focaliser. From the outset of the novel, Coetzee thus deploys a narrative strategy which hints at the possibility for the narration to be incomplete or flawed in a certain sense, rather than claiming authenticity or factual objectiveness, which in turn indicates a much more ambivalent and complex approach to the question of ‘truth-telling’ than that on which the TRC relied.

Lurie’s overwhelming willingness to indulge his sexual appetite, far from being under control, leads him to sexually abuse one of his students from his Romantic course: Melanie Isaacs. Similarly to Soraya, Coetzee does not resort to apartheid racial terminology to classify Melanie’s identity, but from the novel’s description of her features, we can clearly deduce that Melanie belongs to the coloured community: ‘she is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes’ (*D* 11), familiar signifiers to describe the ‘cape’ coloured population. Lurie also gives her a new name ‘Melàni: the dark one’ (*D* 18) which hints at her non-white identity. Roy places an emphasis on this ‘relative’ absence of specific racial markers, arguing that ‘the racial silence in *Disgrace* identifies the racial ideology and practice of

¹⁵⁶ Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 172-173.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

“new South Africa” with David Goldberg’s concept of the postracial.’¹⁵⁸ According to Roy, the ‘post-apartheid fear of racial reference’ must be ascribed to apartheid abuse of the racial category as a divisive classifier which aimed to secure white privilege. Supporting Goldberg’s assessment, she claims that ‘postracial racelessness signals the suppression of race instead of its disappearance.’¹⁵⁹ Roy’s study discloses the complex entanglements behind racial and sexual dynamics, which were created by the apartheid regime and a history of colonisation but still affect the post-apartheid South African present. Coetzee’s stylistic choice also shows his awareness of the shortcomings of language itself to represent the Other without the risk of inscribing both Melanie and, as we have seen above, Soraya into a fixed category still loaded with racist symbolism.

Lurie’s behaviour, however, perfectly exemplifies the complex complicity between sexual desire and racial power, which is mirrored in the description of all the ‘sexual acts’ between the man and Melanie. They are, indeed, portrayed through the professor’s viewpoint as being the main focaliser, and these descriptions result in a general suppression of the girl’s perspective and emotions:

On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion. When he comes back the rain has stopped. The girl is lying beneath him, her eyes closed, her hands slack above her head, a slight frown on her face.[...] Averting her face, she frees herself, gathers her things, leaves the room. (*D* 19)

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette’s. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. ‘No, not now!’ she says, struggling. ‘My cousin will be back!’ But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd sleepers [...] She does not resist. *All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes.* She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. [...] *Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.* As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. (*D* 24-25, emphasis added)

These two quotations make reference to two different sexual encounters between Lurie and Melanie, and, on both occasions, the repulsion and unwillingness the girl’s body

¹⁵⁸ Roy, ‘Speaking with a Forked Tongue: *Disgrace* and the Irony of Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa,’ 702.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 703.

expresses are quite manifest: ‘All she does is avert herself’ (*D* 25). Nevertheless, Lurie is reluctant to call his act ‘rape’ – despite being conscious of Melanie’s aversion – and his dominant perspective, Mardorossian underlines, brings the reader ‘into an uncomfortable proximity to and complicity with the white masculinist subject’s way of thinking.’¹⁶⁰ Lurie’s dominant viewpoint epitomises both the colonising and patriarchal discourses which entrap the female subaltern voice of Melanie, ‘the dark one.’

Lucy Graham also remarks that ‘Lurie’s misuse of Melanie exposes power operating at the level of gender and at an institutional level’¹⁶¹ acknowledging Coetzee’s willingness to look into a very common characteristic in contemporary South Africa, that is, more and more cases of gender harassment and rape in campus life.¹⁶² Lurie’s sexual abuse of Melanie even acquires a ‘darker’ connotation – if it is possible in a case of rape – when the text suggests a distressing association between the student and Lucy, Lurie’s daughter, as it is evident in the subsequent quotations:

He makes up a bed for her in his daughter’s room, kisses her good night, leaves her to herself. (*D* 26)

He sits down on the bed, draws her to him. In his arms she begins to sob miserably. Despite all, he feels a tingling of desire. ‘There, there,’ he whispers, trying to comfort her. ‘Tell me what is wrong.’ Almost he says, ‘Tell Daddy what is wrong.’ (*D* 26)

He strokes her hair, kisses her forehead. Mistress? Daughter? What, in her heart, is she trying to be? What is she offering him? (*D* 27)

The implicit allusion to incest might be interpreted as an aggravating circumstance of David’s behaviour, which makes his account ‘not rape, not quite that’ (*D* 25) no longer reliable to the reader’s eyes. His perverse desire for a woman who makes him think of his daughter serves as a warning for readers. Indeed, alerted by this disturbing association, and by those narrative clues that I have discussed earlier, the reader cannot escape the sensation that what David did to Melanie is illicit – the same way it would be illicit if Lucy were in the girl’s place – and, as such, it must be called in the proper way, rape, regardless of his contrary claims.

¹⁶⁰ Mardorossian, ‘Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,’ 78.

¹⁶¹ Lucy Valerie Graham, ‘Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,’ *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (2003): 437-438.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 438.

Notably, the two classes of Romantic poetry that Lurie teaches echo this feeling of wrongdoing. Analysing Wordsworth's passage about the Alps, from Book 6 of *The Prelude*, he lingers on the verb 'usurp upon', reminding the students that '*usurp upon* means to intrude or encroach upon. *Usurp*, to take over entirely, is the perfective of *usurp upon*; usurping completes the act of usurp upon' (D 21). This preference for the verb 'usurp upon' over the perfective 'usurp' unmistakably recalls Lurie's 'intrusion' into Melanie's body, signifying, on the one hand, the girl's reluctance for the sexual act, and, on the other hand, Lurie's intention to carry on this unwelcome relationship. Following Melanie's boyfriend's threatening visit, Lurie teaches a class on Lord Byron's poem *Lara, A Tale* (1814), which is meaningful at different levels. First, the reference to Byron and his scandalous life forecasts the shameful future that awaits Lurie:

'We continue with Byron,' he says, plunging into his notes. 'As we saw last week, notoriety and scandal affected not only Byron's life but the way in which his poems were received by the public. Byron the man found himself conflated with his own poetic creations – Harold, Manfred, even Don Juan.'
Scandal. A pity that must be his theme, but he is in no state to improvise. (D 31)

It is no coincidence that Lurie's operetta *Byron in Italy* – recounting the poet's flight to Italy to avoid scandal – will ironically parallel the professor's escape from the city, Cape Town, to his daughter's homestead in the Eastern Cape, after his sexual crime has been exposed in the public eye. Graham Pechey, in fact, underlines that 'like Lurie, its male representatives [Romantic poets] led "imperfect" lives and were forced out of England into more permissive climes. Lurie's identification with them develops into a sharing of their fate, an exile that in his case is internal.'¹⁶³ The specific reference to the poem *Lara, A Tale* also allows the comparison between Lurie and Lucifer, the 'erring spirit' (D 32) who 'doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulse is dark to him' (D 33).¹⁶⁴ Lurie seems to favourably follow his masters' disgraceful fate: the libertine Byron; the Count Lara, a mysterious outcast with the stamp of Cain on his forehead; and, finally, Lucifer, the fallen angel, whose name undoubtedly recalls the professor's surname, 'Lurie.'

¹⁶³ Graham Pechey, 'Coetzee's Purgatorial Africa: The Case of *Disgrace*,' *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2002): 380.

¹⁶⁴ Byron's poem reads: 'He could/ At times resign his own for others' good,/ But not in pity, not because he ought,/ But in some strange perversity of thought,/ That swayed him onward with a secret pride/ To do what few or none would do beside;/ And this same impulse would in tempting time/ Mismatch his spirit equally to crime.' Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 33.

The novel plays out another episode of violence on women: the gang rape of David's daughter Lucy. After David is forced to resign from his academic position, he 'escapes' to his daughter Lucy's isolated farm in the Eastern Cape, initiating his private journey to redemption. Whilst he is 'a man of the city' (D 6), his lesbian daughter Lucy is 'a frontier woman of the new breed' (D 62), 'no longer a child playing at farming, but a solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*' (D 60) who has a rifle and the dogs she takes care of as her only defence. As suggested by Poyner, the dichotomy between metropolis and country, between Lurie and Lucy, parallels the dialectic between Byron's ethics, as a second-generation Romantic poet, and Wordsworth's 'naturalistic representation of the Imagination.'¹⁶⁵ Coleman seems to support Poyner's argument highlighting some similarities between Lucy and Wordsworth's Lucy Gray:

[...] a ghostly child of nature who disappears on a stormy night leaving no trace except her footprints in the snow. Wordsworth's Lucy is a border figure, less a creature of flesh and blood than the personification of human solitude, ordered out into the cold night by her father with no guide to assist her. To the extent that Wordsworth's ballad is a tale of narrative estrangement, this fits well with Lurie's frequent misreading of his daughter's life and his inability to guide her.¹⁶⁶

Alienated from his previous life – 'two weeks ago he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*' (D 71) – David tries to accommodate to his daughter's country life-style, dealing with 'dogs and daffodils' (D 62), although their opinions, especially about animals, do not coincide:

Lucy: [...] This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. I don't want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us.

David: [...] We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution. (D 74)

Besides showing that Lucy and David do not share the same respect for animals – at least, at the beginning of Lurie's stay at the farm – these two quotations also reveal Coetzee's concern with animal rights, an issue which was not at all part of the TRC mandate. It is no coincidence then that the author publishes the novella *The Lives of*

¹⁶⁵ See Poyner, 'Truth and Reconciliation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 69, 74.

¹⁶⁶ Coleman, 'The "Dog-Man": Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 608.

Animals in 1999, the same publication year of *Disgrace*. The novella, which straddles the boundary between essay and fiction, exposes animal cruelty perpetrated by human beings and appeals to an ethic of empathy in our treatment of animals. Following this ethic of empathy, Lurie will also find a form of expiation for his past, which I discuss in the third chapter.

Through Lurie's escape to Lucy's isolated farm, Coetzee is also able to expose 'the farm space' as 'a violently contested boundary in post-apartheid South Africa.'¹⁶⁷ In the apartheid era, the farm was a space dominated by white farmers, the colonisers,¹⁶⁸ but, following the demise of the apartheid regime, the new government has been promoting a land reform programme, which aims to return to black South Africans their land, and foster a new redistribution of power. However, significant restitution claims are yet to be solved, and most of the land is still white-owned, thus proving that the current land reforms are inadequate to address this social and power injustice.¹⁶⁹ For this reason, Coetzee's transformation of Petrus, Lucy's African assistant, from 'the gardener and the dog-man' (*D* 64), to Lucy's 'co-proprietor' (*D* 62), after obtaining a Land Affairs grant and buying a hectare from Lucy's property, might be interpreted as the author's recognition of the difficulties and ironies generated by the attempts at more equal redistribution of land in South Africa. In this sense, it is no surprise then that the farm space is still affected by violence and racial hatred; indeed, this space becomes the setting for Lucy's rape by three unnamed intruders – 'two men and a boy' (*D* 91). Attwell observes that the rapists' racial identity is not conveyed by racial or ethnic markers, but it is rather suggested by their language, 'Is no one there' (*D* 93), meaning 'there is no one there', and 'Hai' (*D* 95), spoken with derision directed at Lurie.¹⁷⁰ Conversely, the first excursion into racial discourse is made by Lurie himself after the intruder's mocking remark:

¹⁶⁷ L. Graham, 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 438.

¹⁶⁸ The farm is loaded with symbolic meaning for the Afrikaner myth of belonging to South Africa. The term farm, or *plaas* in Afrikaans, is in fact intertwined with the discourse on land and ownership, thus becoming a representative of the hierarchy and power of the colonial past.

¹⁶⁹ In this regard, see Ben Cousins, 'Why South Africa needs fresh ideas to make land reform a reality,' *The Conversation*, 31 May 2016, accessed 8 October 2016, <http://theconversation.com/why-south-africa-needs-fresh-ideas-to-make-land-reform-a-reality-60076>. See also 'South Africa passes land expropriation,' *Aljazeera*, 27 May 2016, accessed 8 October 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/south-africa-passes-controversial-land-ownership-law-160527033515636.html>.

¹⁷⁰ See Attwell, 'Race in *Disgrace*,' 336.

He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. (*D* 95)

From this passage, the reader can guess the rapists' non-white racial identity, against which David's high cultural world can do nothing. The protagonist's consciousness and imagination are clearly still saturated by the racist language of empire and apartheid – the black other is the 'savage' –, and this example seems to foreground the difficulty for the 'New' South Africa of finding a new language in which to imagine the Other that is not affected by racist ideology.

Mardorossian, however, suggests that this episode of violence should not be read just within racial (and racist) frameworks, 'but as the context through which other sites of gendered violence get normalized (and deracialized).'¹⁷¹ The fact that Lucy's rape remains off stage¹⁷² is enlightening in this sense: the contrast between Melanie's violation, which is 'luridly represented via Lurie,'¹⁷³ and the absence of Lucy's profaned body invites us to read these two scenes against one another, revealing Coetzee's attempt at exposing 'the masculinist and racist bias through which the first one is represented and naturalized.'¹⁷⁴ Lurie is reluctant to admit the gravity of Melanie's abuse, but in the case of his daughter's assault he does not hesitate to claim 'violation [...] yes, it was a violation' (*D* 119). The contrast between these two ways of addressing female violence adopted by Lurie underscores the novel's purpose to challenge the normalisation with which the post-apartheid era still addresses violence against non-white women perpetrated in white contexts. It also suggests that Lurie is unable to make connections between his own behaviour and that of Lucy's rapists, who are significantly African men. This causes the reader to reflect on the possibilities for any effective representation of the Other, given Lurie's inability, despite his post-apartheid location, to make a connection between his own and his daughter's rapists' behaviour.

¹⁷¹ Mardorossian, 'Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 74-75.

¹⁷² The third-person narrator does not describe the scene of Lucy's rape, but, instead, he focuses on David's perspective, recounting how the attackers trap him in the lavatory, and, then, set him on fire. Luckily, David's wounds will not be so severe as much as they appear at first sight.

¹⁷³ L. Graham, 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 442-443

¹⁷⁴ Mardorossian, 'Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 80.

Lucy's decision not to report the rape to the police is paralleled by the author's narrative choice of not representing the scene of the rape. Talking with her father, Lucy explains the reason of her silence:

This has nothing to do with you, David [...] as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone. (*D* 112)

Violence has made the boundary between public and private very unstable under apartheid, and it appears to continue even now in the post-apartheid era. The work of the Commission too continues to step across this boundary by inviting victims to tell their heart-breaking stories in the public context of the hearings. Lucy's assertion that her story is private must be read as her attempt to reclaim her private space and the terms on which her feelings might be articulated, her attempt to re-establish the boundary between public and private spheres. Her refusal to speak also 'signals her recognition that individual stories like those by the TRC tended to obscure the larger truth of oppression of the marginalized majority, the mundane everyday reality of apartheid.'¹⁷⁵ Through Lucy's silence, Coetzee implies a more sceptical attitude to the work of the truth commission at least at two different levels: first, not all the victims had the opportunity or the willingness to participate in the healing journey initiated by the TRC; secondly, although providing for some sort of accounting, the public truth-telling process could not cancel nor change the horrible memory of past brutalities and crimes.

Moreover, Lucy's insistence on the impossibility of reporting her rape in 'this place being South Africa', 'at this time' (*D* 112) shows her awareness that 'representing the self is inseparable from representing others.'¹⁷⁶ according to the young woman, the story of her rape would be interpreted *only* in racial terms because of her rapists' identity, and this would have contributed to the 'black peril' narrative, making her play a role in a history of oppression.¹⁷⁷ In this sense we must interpret David's comment about the rapists' racial identity, as implying that if they had been 'white thugs from Despatch' (*D* 159), perhaps, Lucy would be less inclined to withdraw into silence. He

¹⁷⁵ Jane Poyner, 'Rerouting Commitment in the Postapartheid Canon: TRC Narratives and The Problem of Truth,' 187.

¹⁷⁶ Mardorossian, 'Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 76.

¹⁷⁷ Lucy Graham identifies the 'black peril' hysteria 'with the sensationalised media accounts of white women raped by black men [...] during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [which] reflected white anxieties in times of social and economic crisis'. Graham carries on specifying that this white paranoia, of course, reappeared in the transition period of the 1990s. See L. Graham, 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 434-435.

goes even further suggesting that his daughter's rape was 'history speaking through them [...] a history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors' (*D* 156). Aligning with her father's position, Lucy too expresses the guilt of white liberals by acknowledging that her rape might be regarded as the price she has to pay for the abuses perpetrated against the (black) Other during apartheid:

'[...] what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.' (*D* 158)

Shortly after, however, Lucy attempts to readdress her rape from a gender perspective:

'Hatred... When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?' *You are a man, you ought to know*: does one speak to one's father like that? Are she and he on the same side? (*D* 158)

Given South Africa's history of racism, the gender dimension of sexual violence on women has often been disregarded; but Lucy here attempts to reclaim her own feminist perspective for what happened to her, a perspective that associates her father with other male rapists. This highlights their distinct views on gender roles and sexuality, with Lucy being presented as more conscious of gender ideology and David as rather complacently heteronormative. Yet, in a country like South Africa, the social categories of race, gender and class cannot but be inevitably intertwined, and Lucy, as well as David, prove to be perfectly aware of the racial and 'historical structures in which sexuality operates.'¹⁷⁸ Rape itself becomes a 'familiar metaphor of colonization,'¹⁷⁹ since women as much as the land are considered property to invade and conquer. There are, indeed, many associations between women and 'objects' in the novel signifying that a woman does not own herself: for example, 'cars; shoes; women too' (*D* 98), 'because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she

¹⁷⁸ Attwell, 'Race in *Disgrace*,' 339.

¹⁷⁹ Pechey, 'Coetzee's Purgatorial Africa: The Case of *Disgrace*,' 381.

brings into the world. She has a duty to share it' (*D* 16). The connection between women and land is also enacted by Petrus's new building whose 'long shadow' (*D* 197) overlooks Lucy's property, 'a shadow symbolic of the country's violent past and of the retribution that has begun and [Lurie] is sure to continue.'¹⁸⁰

The absence of any description of Lucy's rape demonstrates Coetzee's awareness of the ethical complexities of representing sexual violence without further betraying the violated body. Lucy is adamant that what happened is just hers, and David – and, by default, the reader – cannot understand because they were not there.¹⁸¹ L. Graham argues that the South African author challenges Western artistic traditions and approaches to the act of rape, which she describes as 'obscured and legitimized by representations that depicted sexual violation in an aesthetic manner.'¹⁸² Indeed, after the farm attack, a memory from childhood comes to Lurie:

In an art-book in the library there was a painting called The Rape of the Sabine Women: men on horseback in skimpy Roman armor, women in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing. What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her? (*D* 160)

In spite of being unable to comprehend Lucy's suffering – '[...] when rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is?' (*D* 141) he wonders – Lurie seems to be conscious of the inadequacy of the Western attitude towards sexual violence on women, a scepticism which he also manifests in his comment about Byron shortly after: in the light of what happened to Lucy, 'Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed' (*ibid.*).

The impossibility of truth-telling in language, especially when it comes to unequal power-relations, is further exemplified by David's unsuccessful attempts to describe Petrus, the (black) Other: 'it is hard to say what Petrus is, strictly, speaking' (*D* 116); '[David] would not mind hearing Petrus's story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa' (*D* 117). By presenting the postcolonial dichotomy between *we* and *the Other*, 'we Westerners' (*D* 202) and 'his [Petrus's] people' (*D* 201), the novel dramatises what Timothy Bewes identifies with the event of *shame*. Rejecting the concept of shame as a subjective emotion or feeling, in his monograph *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, Bewes proposes shame as 'an event of incommensurability: a

¹⁸⁰ Coleman, 'The "Dog-Man": Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 602.

¹⁸¹ 'You weren't there. You don't know what happened' (*D* 140).

¹⁸² L. Graham, 'Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 440.

profound disorientation of the subject by the confrontation with an object it cannot comprehend, an object that renders incoherent every form available to the subject.’¹⁸³ This discrepancy between subject and object, between content and form, is particularly evident in postcolonial writing, where these writers experience ‘a situation in which the ethical (or aesthetic) obligation to write and the aesthetic (or ethical) impossibility of writing are equally irrefutable’¹⁸⁴ because of their ‘historical situatedness in the aftermath of the colonial project.’¹⁸⁵ We see this in Coetzee’s insistence that, despite his relative marginality as an Afrikaner, Lurie is incapable of understanding and representing Petrus, the black Other, just as his complacency about his gender makes it impossible for him to comprehend his own daughter.

Coleman, however, underscores that in remaining silent, Lucy ‘runs the risk of conferring ownership of the story on her rapists;’¹⁸⁶ Lurie, in fact, points out that following Lucy’s silence, ‘the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for’ (*D* 115). Lurie himself tries to own his daughter’s story and tell her what happened that terrible day: ‘You were raped. Multiply. By three men [...] You were in fear of your life [...] And I did nothing. I did not save you’ (*D* 157). As Lucy later says to her father:

You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (*D* 198)

Lucy claims the ownership of her story as well as her own decisions: she is the main character of her story and she is the only one who can decide about her own life. *Disgrace* can then be usefully read in relation to Spivak’s question ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’: not only does Coetzee wonder if the subaltern can speak, but also if he/she can be heard. Although Petrus and Lucy cannot be properly classified as ‘subaltern’ according to Spivak’s definition,¹⁸⁷ I want to suggest a more overreaching

¹⁸³ Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸⁶ Coleman, ‘The “Dog-Man”: Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,’ 607.

¹⁸⁷ However, Petrus might be regarded as closer to Spivak’s subaltern condition than Lucy because of South Africa’s racialised past.

understanding of the term that includes these two characters: both Lucy and Petrus, because of their conditions in terms of gender and race and economic situation respectively, tend to occupy an inferior position in the social scale, if compared with the dominant male perspective embodied by the protagonist, the Afrikaner David Lurie. Coetzee appears to take up the challenge from Spivak's incitement to respond to the subaltern; according to Spivak, 'the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation,'¹⁸⁸ but find a way for the subaltern voice to speak and be heard on its own terms, in its own context, without being entrapped by hegemonic discourses. To avoid the risk of appropriating the story of Lucy's rape, Coetzee chooses to make the focus on the difficulty of narrating the event rather than 'delivering' it and trying to convey it in realistic details. I think it is important to interpret this avoidance as the author's unwillingness to absorb the violence against Lucy into a narrative which is still constrained by apartheid racial taxonomies and patriarchal codes.

Besides Coetzee's narrative silence, there is also Lucy's refusal to report her rape to the police because she fears that her story will inevitably be heard through racial and racist frameworks. Concerning this, Lurie's insistence that his daughter should tell her story resonates ironically, given his own inability to see the paradox between Lucy's chosen silence and Melanie's impossibility to speak when Lurie is dominating her from a sexual viewpoint. Lucy's silence must also be read in contrast with the truth commission's efforts to encourage women to speak out about their own traumas at the women's public hearings. If Lurie's account of the violence suffered by Melanie represents an example of an attempted act of 'misappropriating' the girl's story – a risk that the TRC often ran into through the testimonial, translating, and transcribing processes as I have argued in my previous chapter –, Lucy's silence becomes her medium to claim ownership over her own story, which is reminiscent of Lydia's subversive silence in *Bitter Fruit*. Coetzee seems thereby to suggest that the Other cannot be easily made to speak, not even in post-apartheid South Africa. This conclusion can also be extended to the public setting of the TRC hearings, which was supposed to provide witnesses with a safe place where they could tell their stories, but it failed to completely avoid the risk of appropriation on behalf of the Commissioners, the journalists, the interpreters and transcribers, and the audience itself. This is particularly relevant to the case of sexual harm on women: despite the Commission's efforts, many

¹⁸⁸ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?,' 80.

women who could qualify as victims of gross human rights violations chose not to testify before the TRC because they were not ready to, nor willing to share their pain in public, thus suggesting that *that* public platform could not accommodate all situations and needs.

Disgrace thus engages with the ethical complexities concerning the representability of the Other, with particular reference to the articulation of sexual violence on women, an issue that was quite underestimated by the Commission for the sake of the ‘truth’ as the only road to reconciliation. On the other hand, Coetzee proves to be aware of his ‘potentially’ limited and biased male standpoint, and deliberately chose not to turn Lucy’s silence into voice by adopting narrative strategies that mark this impasse. However, I think that silence does not mean absence as Adrienne Rich’s poem reminds us; on the contrary, silence is full of meanings in *Disgrace*. Borrowing Bewes’ conceptualisation of the event of shame, Lucy’s silence becomes shameful because it dramatises the ethical complexities of trying to give form to such an elusive and complex matter as the issue of sexual violence on women in a context still affected by racial and gender bias. As readers, we are left with the task of carrying on the work of the TRC and identify a more suitable context where the Other, especially the female other, can finally speak in his/her own terms.

2. 3 Literary responses to ‘ordinary’ female trauma

2. 3. 1 Claiming an ‘ordinary’ female alternative space in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*

Focusing on the stories of four ordinary women and on the public figure of Winifred ‘Winnie’ Nomzamo Zanyiwe Madikizela-Mandela, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* explores the plight of these women who lived in the gap of uncertainty, the terrors of loneliness and waiting for their husbands to return after years of enduring absence. As announced by the (frame) narrator in the opening scene of the novel, ‘this book tells the stories of four unknown women, and that of South Africa’s most famous

woman, who waited'.¹⁸⁹ Employing as a framework the myth of Penelope, 'the ultimate symbol of a wife "so loyal and so true"' (CWM 2) who had been waiting for Odysseus to return home for nineteen years, Ndebele shows, as J. U. Jacobs observes, how 'the lives of African women in this country have been overdetermined by the impact of their husbands' migrant lives.'¹⁹⁰

In South Africa, the story of Penelope's exemplary fidelity should strike a special cord. For over a century, millions of her South African descendants have unremittingly been put to the test by powerful social forces that caused their men to wander away from home for prolonged periods of time. Their fate is the product of one of the most momentous social transformations in world history. Modernism, in its ever-expanding global manifestations, took its own form in South Africa. It took the form of massive male labour migrations to the mines and factories of South Africa. In the process, an entire subcontinent witnessed massive human movement that still continues to this day. (CWM 5-6)

Through the examples of Penelope's five descendants' stories (including Winnie Mandela's), Ndebele identifies the main reasons for the absence of South African men, which reflect the economic and political realities of the country as resulting from colonial and apartheid policies. Indeed, chased off the land by colonial laws, men were forced to the mines and factories in the first place, and, then, following economic expansion, they left to pursue other types of career such as that of teacher, doctor, salesman, priest and so on. The banishment of major political organisations after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960¹⁹¹ caused another wave of dispersion, when many husbands did not go in search of work, but either vanished into exile, or were detained in jail without trial, or tried and sentenced for long periods for political resistance.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela perfectly exemplifies what Ndebele defines as the 'rediscovery of the ordinary' in his essay 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa.'¹⁹² Here, the author criticises the artistic value of the so-called 'protest literature' because of its choice to represent the oppressed and present evils, reinforcing the binary division between the powerful and the powerless while neglecting

¹⁸⁹ Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2003; Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2004), 1. Citations refer to the Ayebia Clarke edition. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and anticipated by the abbreviation CWM.

¹⁹⁰ J. U. Jacobs, 'Diasporic Identity in Contemporary South African Fiction,' *English in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2006): 130.

¹⁹¹ The tragedy went down in history as Sharpeville Massacre (21 March 1960) witnessed the killing of sixty-nine people, who were demonstrating against the Pass Laws, at the hand of the South African police.

¹⁹² Njabulo Ndebele, 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,' in *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, by Njabulo Ndebele (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1994), 41-59.

the responsibility of envisaging a different society. Relying on the phenomenon of the spectacle, this form of literature:

documents; it indicts implicitly; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought [...] It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it.¹⁹³

On the other hand, rather than lingering on this rhetoric that emphasises the ‘spectacle’ of oppressive conditions under apartheid, Ndebele investigates the nuances and complexities of four ordinary South African women who lived *despite* apartheid. The same logic is applied when he revisits the historical memory of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in an alternative way to that employed by the TRC, lending a new dimension of privacy and intimacy to what Alex Boraine called ‘a South African tragedy.’¹⁹⁴ Notably, Driver points out that:

Ndebele draws our attention not simply to a particular experience withheld from black South Africans in real life, but also to what he sees as the problems of black South African narrative under white domination. For one thing, he has said, black South African narrative came to a halt under apartheid; for another, it has suffered from a focus on what he calls the ‘spectacular’ rather than the ‘ordinary.’¹⁹⁵

The text is thus divided into two parts, and an introductory section to each part is presented by a frame narrator who stresses the fictional status of the characters and of writing itself, in addition to involving the reader in the narration.¹⁹⁶ ‘Part One’ consists of the personal accounts of the four ordinary descendants of the mythical Penelope: three of them are presented by a third-person perspective (the frame narrator), whereas one is narrated in the first person voice by the descendant herself (Mamello Molete, aka Patience Mamello Letlala). In ‘Part Two’, the women speak mostly in the first person, either in dialogue or in monologue, as they evoke the figure of Winnie Mandela, ‘the ultimate public symbol of women-in-waiting’ (CWM 72-73), while sitting and having

¹⁹³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁹⁴ Boraine, ‘A South African Tragedy: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela,’ in *A Country Unmasked*, 221-257.

¹⁹⁵ Dorothy Driver, “‘On these premises I am government:’ Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and the Reconstructions of Gender and Nation,” in *Africa Writing Europe: Opposition, Juxtaposition, Entanglement*, ed. by Maria Olausson and Christina Angelfors (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2009), 5.

¹⁹⁶ In connection with this last feature of the narrative, it might be useful to make reference to some examples in the way in which the narrator tries to involve the reader through the use of first plural person pronouns or adjectives: ‘Let’s begin with’ (CWM 1), ‘Let’s consider’ (CWM 7), or ‘Our second descendant’ (CWM 17), emphases added.

tea altogether. It might be argued that, by holding imaginary conversations with Winnie, the four women act as a chorus, each questioning her and commenting on aspects of her public life before and after her husband's release. Antjie Krog notices that *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* is not structured in a linear way: 'there was no proper beginning to the novel, nor to the individual stories of these women; there was also no end, because the end of the book, like the conversation with Winnie, was imaginary.'¹⁹⁷ Moreover, although the title of the novel might suggest otherwise, Winnie Mandela is not the main narrator of the story, nor its protagonist; in addition, nearly a third of the book is dedicated to the four 'ordinary' women's stories. In this regard, it is notable that the author does not use Winnie's maiden name – Madikizela – as part of the title of the novel, implying that, on the one hand, women's identities are inevitably bound to those of their husbands in patriarchal societies, and, on the other hand, Winnie's identity and life have been particularly affected by her husband's famous, yet confining, name.

In October 2013, ten years after the book's first publication, Ndebele decides to publish a revised edition of novel, and in his 'new' introduction he emphasises his decision not to interview Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, since his is fundamentally an artistic project, not a biographical one; he claims, in fact, that 'I had not written a biography. It was a fictional interpretation of a life, not the life itself.'¹⁹⁸ This statement poses an important question as to the classification of the book, a matter which proved to be quite relevant to its non-publication in the United States.¹⁹⁹ I agree with Liatsos's definition of the novel as an example of 'historiographic metafiction',²⁰⁰ which crosses the borders between fact and fiction. Indeed, despite the fact that the four women are presented in a realistic way in 'Part One,' and that Winnie Mandela is a real historical character, the book enters the 'unreal' dimension of fiction when the four women move into the imaginative company of Winnie and the mythological figure of Penelope in the last chapter. This transition from the real to the unreal, from the physical to the

¹⁹⁷ Antjie Krog, 'What the Hell is Penelope Doing in Winnie's Story?,' *English in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2009): 56.

¹⁹⁸ Njabulo Ndebele, Introduction to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed. (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2013), Kindle edition.

¹⁹⁹ In his introduction to the new edition of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, Ndebele mentions the 'experimental' nature of the novel, along with the book's small size and that the topic was rather distant from an American readership, as some of the main factors against its publication in the USA.

²⁰⁰ Liatsos argues that 'In assuming the form of a historiographic metafiction, the novel challenges the stable boundaries separating fact from fiction to explore the potential of their cross-fertilization,' in Yanna Liatsos, 'Truth, Confession and the Post-apartheid Black Consciousness in Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*,' in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Jo Gill (New York: Routledge, 2006), 123.

metaphysical, is also prefigured by the frame narrator in his introductory section to ‘Part Two:’

Is it possible that our four descendants, as instances of thought turning to desire, can find themselves together in a room? Why not? The intangibility and randomness of imagination permit them absolute mobility. [...] In these random journeys they take, they are subject to one requirement: to resist the urge to break out of the confines of thought into full desire. They strain at the writer’s leash, wanting to assume individuality of character. But the writer must hold on to the leash, and hope it won’t choke them. That they will have to learn to enjoy movement between the end of the leash and the hand that holds it. (CWM 39-40)

This extract is significant at two different levels: on the one hand, it prepares the reader to enter the world of imagination; on the other hand, it explicitly hints at the creator/creature type of relationship between the writer and his/her characters.

The same kind of transgression also takes place at a formal level of the text: not only does Ndebele fuse aspects of fiction, biography, and essay, but he also creates a melange between ‘a novel and a storytelling performance and, consequently, between the reading and the listening experience.’²⁰¹ This oral quality of the narrative is particularly evident in ‘Part Two’ of the book, when the four women gather to share their stories and hold imaginary conversations with Winnie. As a consequence, they acquire both the status of storyteller and listener as well as the frame narrator who gives voice to them. In this regard, Ndebele also highlights that:

[...] transgressions of borders between literary genres may be analogous to transgressions of borders between races, ethnicities, social classes, and geographical spaces. These categories are not necessarily eliminated, nor is it necessarily desirable that they should be; rather, the possibilities of their interactions as imaginatively explored may prompt new ways of experiencing community.²⁰²

The above passage suggests the necessity for South Africa to question the boundaries of race and ethnicity – as the only basis to depart from apartheid divisions between white and non-white –, which is further conveyed by the experimental and hybrid nature of Ndebele’s text.

One last observation before discussing in detail the two parts of the novel must be dedicated to the author’s choice to focus on female characters. In an interview with Charles Cilliers, Ndebele asserts that he has often been asked the question as to the challenges for him, as a male writer, of exploring the perspectives of different women:

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ndebele, Introduction to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed.

It is one of the questions that necessitated an introduction. Nadine Gordimer wrote to me of some of her impressions of reading the novel. On this particular issue she wrote: 'Here's a feminist fiction of strong emotional conviction written by a man. Perhaps could only be written by a man.' I treasure this comment from a Nobel prize-winning woman of enormous literary accomplishment. I confess, however, to having been somewhat uneasy about the work being described as 'a feminist fiction.' I feared that such a well-meant statement might become a label, and I fear labels. While having their uses, they do often simplify and take away depth from anything they are meant to describe. In reality if there is any feminism in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* it was one outcome among others, rather than a driving intention.²⁰³

Ndebele is uncomfortable with Gordimer's label of 'feminist fiction', but he seems to agree with her definition of the writer as an androgynous being:²⁰⁴ the issue of gender should not limit, or affect, the writer's capacity and imagination to tell a story. On the contrary:

anyone who wants to tell a story that has seized hold of them can enter the lives of people who are not their own, who live in countries not their own, who are men when she is a woman, and who are women when he is a man.²⁰⁵

The Cry of Winnie Mandela thus has an explicit aim to address a dimension of the experience of apartheid that was neglected by the TRC. The disruption of the concepts of family and home, the suffering of 'ordinary' women who have been 'living in the zone of absence without duration' (CWM 8) after their husbands' departures did not meet the category of 'victim' of the Commission's criteria. As my following discussion about the novel argues, the author tries to create an alternative female setting to that of the TRC where even Penelope's descendants find a place to share their stories and recover from their suffering.

The opening scene of the text describes Ndebele's thesis about the condition of the black South African woman: 'departure, waiting, and return: they define her experience of the past, present, and future. They frame her life at the centre of a great South African story not yet told' (CWM 1). As we have seen, the novel tells the stories of four ordinary women who, like their mythological ancestor Penelope, have been waiting for their husbands to return for many years. These four protagonists, as Van Zyl

²⁰³ Charles Cilliers, 'Winnie's Cry Resonates a Decade On,' *City Press*, October 20, 2015, accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Winnies-cry-resonates-a-decade-on-20150430>.

²⁰⁴ See Nadine Gordimer, 'Selecting My Stories.'

²⁰⁵ Ndebele, Introduction to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed.

Smit observes, 'represent different social strata, different regions, rural and urban.'²⁰⁶ 'Mannete Mofolo enters the genealogy of Penelope when her husband decides to leave their impoverished homestead and go to work in the mines in Johannesburg. He eventually starts a second family and relinquishes the responsibility of providing for the children from his first marriage to 'Mannete, who never abandons the hope for her husband's return. The husband of Delisiwe Dulcie S'khosana, Penelope's second descendant, goes to Scotland to study medicine and become the first black doctor from his township. His studies continue for years while being financially supported by Delisiwe, who copes with his absence by having short-lived affairs, one of which leaves her pregnant. When he finally returns after fourteen years and finds Delisiwe with a four-year-old child, he divorces her, marries a nurse and moves into the rich white suburbs. The husband of Mamello Molete, the third descendant and only character who speaks in the first person in Part One, goes first into exile and then he is arrested for being part of the anti-apartheid struggle. During the transitional period of 1990-1994 when political prisoners are released from prison, he files for divorce and marries a white comrade from the resistance movement. The fourth descendant, Marara Joyce Baloyi, is married to a womaniser whose moral excesses make him lose his job. Committed to a tradition according to which the wife must remain faithful, Marara stays with her husband until his death, burying him in a costly casket to live up to her role of beloved and loyal wife – although, as she admits in her account, 'in truth, he had become a rag towards which she no longer felt any emotion' (CWM 37).

As highlighted by Jane Poyner, these are the stories of 'Everywoman.'²⁰⁷ The state of waiting is, in fact, a shared condition for black South African women who have been condemned to passivity and lack of agency by both white domination (first colonialism, then apartheid) and African patriarchal culture. David Medalie identifies two main inflections of the scenario of waiting:

The first is economic and political, for the waiting of the women is a symptom and a consequence of a society which has separated men and women, either by forcing the men to seek work elsewhere, or by driving them into exile; and the second is related to gender inequality, which turns women into those who wait while others travel and do, which reduces them to enforced passivity.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Betine Van Zyl Smit, 'From Penelope to Winnie Mandela – Women Who Waited,' *International Journal of The Classical Tradition* 15, no. 3 (2008): 402.

²⁰⁷ Jane Poyner, 'Rerouting Commitment in the Postapartheid Canon: TRC Narratives and The Problem of Truth,' 189.

²⁰⁸ David Medalie, 'The Cry of Winnie Mandela: Njabulo Ndebele's Post-Apartheid Novel,' *English Studies in Africa: A Journal of the Humanities* 49, no. 2 (2006): 57.

The hardship of black South African women's conditions is intensified by men's expectation that they should be eternally faithful. This added burden is perfectly dramatised by Ndebele's reference to the myth of Penelope who waited nineteen years for her husband Odysseus to return from his wanderings, becoming 'the embodiment of female virtue that gives comfort to them [men], allaying their fears and pampering their vanities' (CWM 5). However, although their communities expect chastity and patience from the four descendants, and although they have internalised these expectations, they do not wait passively in many ways: 'Mannete Mofolo leaves to search for her husband, unsuccessfully; Delisiwe, overwhelmed by her longings, has extramarital love affairs; Mamello tries to have her husband back by writing him a letter.

Furthermore, they will recover their agency more convincingly in 'Part Two' of the novel by setting up an *Ibandla labafazi*, a Zulu phrase that refers to a gathering of waiting women, where they can share their stories of suffering. It could be argued that this gathering where women can speak questions the boundary between the private and the public as much as it occurred in the TRC public hearings where victims were supposed to tell their private experiences. However, I think there is a fundamental difference between the public approach of the TRC and Ndebele's alternative space: these women, in fact, have the opportunity to choose the listeners with whom to share their own pain. Differently from the TRC hearings, Penelope's descendants have the certainty that they will be heard and understood by the other members of this female gathering.

This private/public space allows them to share their stories of enduring waiting, and, more important, to engage in imaginary conversations with the most famous South African woman-in-waiting, Winnie Mandela:

Because Winnie waited too. The only difference between us and her is that she waited in public while we waited in the privacy of our homes, suffering in the silence of our bedrooms. [...] Only Winnie was history in the making. There was no stability for her, only the inexorable unfolding of events; the constant tempting of experience. The flight of Winnie's life promised no foreknown destinations. It was an ongoing public conversation, perhaps too public to be understood. (CWM 44-45)

By questioning aspects of Winnie's public life, especially with reference to her state of waiting for Nelson Mandela's return, the four women investigate the relationship between the categories of private and public – wondering 'is it possible to have an intimate conversation about such a public figure? Was there any intimacy about her

[Winnie]?’ (CWM 46). Simultaneously, their conversations with Winnie represent their possibility to regain their ‘female’ agency, ‘a way we can look at ourselves. A way to prevent us from becoming women who meet and cry. Or if we do meet and cry, that we do so out of choice’ (ibid.). Raditlhalo emphasises that the women’s comments on Winnie’s life range from her much publicised and embarrassing letter to her lover, Dali Mpofu (Delisiwe’s section) to her inability to live up to the dream of Nelson’s return²⁰⁹ (Marara’s part), and to the uncertainty of what she would do whether her husband decided to return to her.²¹⁰

The *ibandla* stages what Poyner defines as ‘an informal and Africanized “truth and reconciliation commission,”’²¹¹ through which Ndebele draws attention to the stories of everyday suffering engendered by both apartheid and colonialism that the *real* truth commission failed to address during its work. Indeed, the TRC’s definition of victim of gross human rights violations encompassed the kind of bodily abuse – torture, rape, mutilation, the murder of a loved one – automatically excluding the ‘more ordinary and systematic subjugation of the apartheid system,’²¹² such as, for example, the Pass Laws which aimed to limit the movements of black population and confine them in specific areas. Furthermore, Liatsos stresses Ndebele’s choice to give voice to ordinary women, who suffered the ordinary consequences of the apartheid laws, in a private and intimate dimension as that of the *ibandla* over the public spectacle of the HRVC hearings, ‘whose quality resembled that of the testimonial/protest literature Ndebele criticized in the 1980s, constructing innocent victims pleading to be rescued from the abuses of villainous masters.’²¹³ Though I would not argue that the main goal of the Commission was to construct ‘victims pleading to be rescued from the abuses of villainous masters’ but rather to promote reconciliation through the truth-telling process, it is undeniable that both the TRC hearings and protest literature relied on the most spectacular and ‘extraordinary’ aspect of apartheid violence and trauma.

²⁰⁹ In connection with this, Driver highlights that ‘for many black South Africans, the novel implies, the reunion of these iconic figures, Winnie and Nelson Mandela, would have symbolized the restoration of the African nation,’ in Driver, “‘On these premises I am government:” Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and the Reconstructions of Gender and Nation,’ 6.

²¹⁰ See Sam Raditlhalo, “‘Private, Intimate Conversations:” *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* – Njabulo Ndebele,’ in Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed.

²¹¹ Poyner, ‘Rerouting Commitment in the Postapartheid Canon: TRC Narratives and The Problem of Truth,’ 190.

²¹² Liatsos, ‘Truth, Confession and the Post-apartheid Black Consciousness in Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*,’ 121.

²¹³ Ibid.

I would argue further that Ndebele hints at other important problems, such as the issue of dislocation and the forced removals,²¹⁴ which had not been included among the TRC's category of gross violations of human rights suffered by black people. In her imaginary conversation with Winnie, Marara talks about the experience of many non-white people:

[...] who built homes and communities and then watched them demolished by apartheid's bulldozers. In a country where so many homes have been demolished and people moved to strange new places, home temporarily becomes the shared experience of homelessness, the fellow-feeling of loss and the desperate need to regain something. (*CWM* 81-82)

In connection with the concept of home for South Africans, Driver also points out that:

However, home was simultaneously degraded under apartheid. [...] the nuclear family home was, on the one hand, proclaimed as a sign of modernity, a private space, and as women's role (sole) domain, and, on the other hand, rendered inaccessible as such.²¹⁵

The stories of Penelope's descendants (including Winnie's own) exemplify how the concept of the nuclear family home was undermined by the impacts of the apartheid laws and men's migrant labours, which forced the family members to live apart. As a consequence, the concept of home also becomes the site where black South African women experience their state of double-colonisation: following the apartheid laws, and because of an African society built on a patriarchal system of codes and values, these women are confined to await chastely their husbands' return while taking the responsibility to do housework and raise their children.

Following the four descendants' imaginary conversations with Winnie Mandela, her character finally steps into the narrative: '[...] locked into an eternal embrace with you [the four descendants] across time and distance' (*CWM* 103), Winnie perceives that 'she can take the risk of unburdening myself to you without feeling violated' (*ibid.*). Krog underlines the difficulty and the danger of writing about Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, known as the 'Mother of the Nation,' since her ambiguous involvement in the

²¹⁴ The Group Areas Act of 1950 was the title of three acts enacted under apartheid. These acts assigned racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas, causing many non-white people both to have a long-distance commute to go to work, and to be forcibly removed from their homes and allocate in specific zones.

²¹⁵ Driver, "On these premises I am government:" Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and the Reconstructions of Gender and Nation,' 6.

horrendous actions of the Mandela Football club, her group of ‘bodyguards,’²¹⁶ which emerged before and during the work of the TRC: ‘it was never easy to be against Winnie, but it was even more difficult to be on her side.’²¹⁷ Krog’s assertion poses the quandary as to Winnie’s contradictory experiences and involvements in the struggle against apartheid and beyond. Recalling her past history of suffering – the separation from Nelson Mandela; the police searching and ‘violating’ the intimacy of her house; the abuses and brutalities endured at the hand of Major Theunis Swanepoel, a security policeman; the banishment in Brandfort – Winnie, ‘the child of Major Theunis Swanepoel born in his torture chambers’ (*CWM* 125), depicts her personal journey which turned her into ‘the law of struggle’ (*ibid.*), ‘the embodiment of disruption’ (*CWM* 108). Confiding in the four descendants, Winnie describes herself as the product of an extreme situation: ‘I am not a politician. I am what politics made me. What politics made me, is not me. But what politics made me has become a part of me, a part of what I am’ (*CWM* 136). Here, Ndebele is not trying to justify Winnie Mandela’s alleged crimes; nor does he want to judge her choices and actions. On the contrary, his portrayal of the ambiguous figure of Winnie acts as a metaphor of the paradoxical nature of the liberation movement, which was not immune from allegations of perpetrating gross human rights violations as occurred, for instance, in its training camps in Tanzania. The subsequent extract from the novel perfectly captures the contradictions and the ambivalences of Winnie’s character, ‘representing the ambiguity of post-apartheid society itself.’²¹⁸

I am your pleasure and your pain, your beauty and your ugliness. Your solution and your mistake. Your hell and your heaven. I am your squatter camp shack and your million rand mansion. I am all of you who maim and rape. I am all of you who give love and succour. I am your pride and your shame. Your honour and your humiliation. (*CWM* 137)

The complexity of Winnie’s personality is further reflected in the dialogical narrative structure of her section. Aiming to unburden herself and share her personal story with the other Penelope’s descendants, Winnie engages in an intimate

²¹⁶ With regard to the Mandela Football Club, and Winnie Mandela’s nine-day public hearing see the first section of chapter 1.

²¹⁷ Krog, ‘What the Hell is Penelope Doing in Winnie’s Story?’, 55.

²¹⁸ Medalie, ‘*The Cry of Winnie Mandela: Njabulo Ndebele’s Post-Apartheid Novel*,’ 59.

conversation with a *part* of herself, her private self, and, in doing so, she tries to leave aside the “false” self of public posturing,’ as Poyner points out:²¹⁹

Your testimonies have restored to me some measure of self-criticism. I’m easy and calm. Although I’m not in your physical presence, I’ve stretched my legs in front of me, and feel deeply the comfort of your presence. [...] I, too, Winnie Mandela, will speak to Winnie. I’ll write to her. Address her. I’ll plead with her, cajole her, charm her, scold and rebuke her, interpret her, ask her to answer all your questions, and respond to your insights, if she can remember them all. I, Winnie Mandela, holding on to my precious space of anonymity, will speak to my namesake. (CWM 110-111)

Adopting a confessional mode, ‘Winnie’ starts her self-reflective and self-examined non-linear account of some episodes of her life by addressing the four women, her public personality, ‘Winnie Mandela,’ and, sometimes, her former husband, Nelson. The woman’s dialogic confession is thus revealed through her continuous self-referential questions, as the following passages illustrate:

1) You could be anywhere. Are you at home? Are you in a court? Are you at the clinic? Are you shopping? Are you at a rally? Here’s hoping you arrived early. Are you at a funeral? Are you dropping in on the poor and the needy at the squatter camp? (CWM 111)

2) What damage has been done to me by the men’s punches all over my body? Huge, hairy, fists with sausage fingers. [...] Did I become your daughter, Major Swanepoel? Was your way around the Immorality Act to play out your desire through violating a woman’s body by torture? (CWM 120)

3) And he continued to love me, desiring me with the same purity of memory. And me? What about me? Did I remember his body? I’m terrified by the possibility of answers. (CWM 131)²²⁰

These are just a few examples showing Winnie’s necessity to undertake a self-reflective mnemonic journey which will lead the woman to finally find a private and truthful version of herself. This dialogic self-reflective strategy adopted by Ndebele also implies a more varied, polyphonic kind of telling than that demanded by the TRC’s structure. As I have explained in my previous chapter, people who wanted to tell their stories before the Commission were first asked to give statements by answering questions of a pre-made form. Once selected as potential witnesses, the whole testimonial act too

²¹⁹ Poyner, ‘Rerouting Commitment in the Postapartheid Canon: TRC Narratives and The Problem of Truth,’ 191.

²²⁰ The first extract refers to the very moment in which Winnie begins to address and question her public self; while the other two passages make reference to her memory of being tortured by Major Swanepoel, and to her longing for Nelson’s body during his imprisonment, respectively.

resulted in a guided process, where the accounts of those classified as ‘perpetrators’ were punctuated by the cross-examination on behalf of the Amnesty Committee and/or the family of the victim; while victim testimonies were usually ‘directed’ by the commissioners’ interventions. Consequently, the type of testimony performed at the TRC public hearings lacks the *agency* and the polyphonic dimension, which, in turn, characterise Winnie’s account in Ndebele’s text.

It is then no surprise that, in this section of the novel entirely dedicated to Winnie’s account, Ndebele refers to Winnie’s TRC hearing, the spectacle and publicity of which deeply contrast with the intimacy and privacy prevailing instead in the *Ibandla* of waiting women. Describing the hearing as her ‘hell’ and her ‘heaven’, Ndebele’s character remembers saying at the hearing that she would not take responsibility for things which went wrong:

‘So,’ I said to the world, ‘you want me to acknowledge my involvement in “terrible things”? How can I make a definitive acknowledgement of responsibility for events that arose out of multiple causalities? How can I take responsibility for actions engendered by conditions that fostered human folly? Tell me. The least I can do is to acknowledge some events. They happened. But I would never go on to do what many want me to do. I will never accept responsibility. This allows you all, all of millions out there, wondering about me, to make your choice. You can either love me or condemn me. Take your choice [...].’ (CWM 134-135)

The real Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, in fact, did not confess her wrongdoings before the TRC. Following Archbishop Tutu’s plea, she rather acknowledged that some ‘things went horribly wrong’²²¹ and that she was deeply sorry for that, but, at the same time, she was very careful not to admit any personal responsibility for those actions. Conversely, the context of the novel allows Winnie to relinquish ‘the art of technical denial’ (CWM 134) that she used at the hearing, and to confide sincerely in Penelope’s descendants about her true feelings and emotions. Concerning this, Driver observes that ‘responding to the intimacy the four women offer, Winnie gives an account of herself that abandons political posturing and turns instead to self-reflection and self-doubt.’²²² Ndebele also transforms Winnie into a spokesperson for a private dimension of reconciliation when she claims her distrust of the type of ‘collective’ and ‘public’ reconciliation fostered by the TRC:

²²¹ In relation to this see Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 134-135.

²²² Driver, ““On these premises I am government:” Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and the Reconstructions of Gender and Nation,’ 15.

There is one thing I will not do. It is my only defence of the future. I will not be an instrument for validating the politics of reconciliation. For me, reconciliation demands my annihilation. No. *You*, all of you, have to reconcile not with me, but with the meaning of me. For my meaning is the endless human search for the right thing to do. I am your pleasure and your pain, your beauty and your ugliness. Your solution and your mistake. Your hell and your heaven. [...] The journey to your future goes through the dot of loving me, despite myself, on the world map that lays out journeys towards all kinds of human fulfilment. (CWM 137-138)

Winnie's opposition to become an instrument of reconciliation in the new South Africa, along with her request for being accepted despite her paradoxical nature, contradict the thrust of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose goal was to establish as complete a picture as possible of apartheid history – the nature, the causes, and the violations committed – as the only basis to move on and build up a better future. Liatsos, in fact, argues that:

Where the South African truth commission desired to abolish the contradictory perspectives that undermined the creation of a single, moral conclusion of apartheid's historical memory, Mandela advocates a dual orientation toward the past, whose contradictory insights stimulate the imaginary deftness – that which, according to Ndebele, is contained in 'the ordinary' life of the South African black consciousness, and constitutes the formal effects of his latest novel.²²³

The author's interest in showing Winnie's inner thoughts and emotions is even more evident in the corresponding section of the woman's account in the 2013 edition of the novel. This is, in fact, the section in which Ndebele makes more revisions, especially in relation to Winnie's memory of the TRC special hearing. He adds some extracts of the emotional testimonies of Nicodemus and Caroline Sono, whose son had been kidnapped by the Mandela Football Club, in addition to imagining Winnie's reaction to their words. I have chosen an extract of Winnie's interior monologue where there emerges her opposition to *publicly* acknowledge her actions:

It was hard listening to Mr and Mrs Sono. Her testimony, in particular, was excruciating. When she opened her arms to pull towards her bosom an imaginary son returning, crying out, and her husband wiped his right eye with a white handkerchief, it was searing. What they felt was real. I knew of the facts that caused their feelings. But could I acknowledge publicly those facts? My posture at the hearing was my answer. So I listened: my face showing no emotions, except a simulated sneer, a contemptuous chuckle: inner

²²³ Liatsos, 'Truth, Confession and the Post-apartheid Black Consciousness in Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*,' 132.

confirmations of my external repudiations. The turmoil inside of me, I would not, would never, show.²²⁴

This passage epitomises the double consciousness of Winnie's character in Ndebele's construction, the conflict between a public posturing self who cannot show any feelings and a private self who is in a turmoil of emotions. Winnie's words might also be interpreted as the author's criticism of the public spectacle begotten by the TRC hearings. Ndebele seems to read Winnie's decision not to acknowledge her wrongdoings at the hearing as a form of protest against the TRC's public process, rather than her cynical indifference. Some lines later, in fact, Winnie proves to be perfectly aware of the brutalities and crimes committed by the liberation movement, when she asks: 'How possible is it to lead a lawful life in future after a lawless Struggle?'.²²⁵ Although the author does not intervene in the general plot of the novel in his 2013 edition, the revisions seem concerned with scrutinising the complexity of Winnie Mandela's character – albeit without condemning her behaviour – which could not be encompassed by Justice Michael Stegmann's definition: 'calm, composed, deliberate, unprincipled and unblushing liar' (*CWM* 136).²²⁶

The last chapter of the novel, entitled 'A Stranger,' provides an example of what Van Zyl Smit defines 'a touch of magic realism,'²²⁷ that is the appearance of Penelope in the story. While travelling on a 'holiday that validates a special kind of reconciliation: reconciliation with themselves' (*CWM* 142), the five women (the four ordinary descendants and Winnie Mandela) meet a white woman with a strange accent who asks them for a lift to Durban. Unexpectedly, the stranger turns out to be Odysseus's wife, Penelope, known as the paradigm of the faithful and submissive wife. Penelope claims to have been on a pilgrimage of reconciliation for more than two thousand years, and confesses her desire to meet them, as soon as the five women of the *ibandla* decided on that trip. As she explains to the descendants, she reveals a part of her own story that 'has never been told' (*CWM* 145), that is, when at the end of the Homeric epic Odysseus departs from their home once more to go and perform cleansing rituals, she decides to leave him and go 'on my own cleansing pilgrimage' (*CWM* 145):

²²⁴ Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Michael Stegmann was the presiding judge at the 1991 trial investigating Winnie Mandela's involvement in the abductions and beatings of four boys, one of whom, 14-year-old Stompie Moeketsi Seipei, was later found dead.

²²⁷ Van Zyl Smit, 'From Penelope to Winnie Mandela – Women Who Waited,' 404.

[Odysseus] should have returned not only to Greece, but to me as well. It was not enough for him after our rather anxious first lovemaking in nineteen years, to give me an account of his adventures as if he could silence my years of waiting with one night of lovemaking and storytelling. We needed to go on holiday. For him to claim civic responsibility towards Greece was not enough. He also needed to assert personal responsibility towards me. My Odysseus had no idea he had to reconcile himself with me as well. But such was the state of the world's consciousness at the time. Nevertheless, I did not want to lament that realisation; I made the decision to undertake my own journey. (CWM 145)

Similarly to Winnie's claim for freedom and for a personal level of reconciliation, Penelope appears to regain her own agency by demanding the right to make her own decisions. Krog argues that 'instead of Africa being dictated to by a Western framework, Ndebele smartly uses Winnie to create an alternative route and African framework for Penelope.'²²⁸ this 'new' Penelope has given up her former and traditional role of patient, comprehensive and faithful wife, choosing instead to actively create her own destiny. Interestingly, Driver suggests that Ndebele 'initially uses [the myth] in the novel in order to evoke the European attempt to redefine an African femininity and thus to represent Europe in its moment of overbearing colonial contact with Africa,'²²⁹ but, by subverting Penelope's myth through the example of her five descendants and of the Greek woman herself, the author tries to rewrite the encounter between Africa and Europe, and restore to the women their own agency and femininity. In relation to this, Van Zyl Smit highlights that:

Thus Ndebele has freed not only Penelope from the confines of unconditional waiting for and subjection to her husband but has made the new Penelope the symbol of hope for women in the twenty-first century, not only South African women, but women everywhere. He has set Penelope free, and through her, all women. Women should have the courage of their convictions to undertake their own journeys.²³⁰

Echoing Winnie's earlier words – 'you're even more. You are millions of other women who are on this journey with you' (CWM 142) – the five women represent an example of those women who have decided to undertake an identity journey towards freedom and self-reconciliation, after enduring the suffering imposed on them both by colonialism and apartheid *and* by patriarchal society. It is no coincidence that the novel

²²⁸ Krog, 'What the Hell is Penelope Doing in Winnie's Story?', 59.

²²⁹ Driver, "'On these premises I am government:": Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and the Reconstructions of Gender and Nation,' 20.

²³⁰ Van Zyl Smit, 'From Penelope to Winnie Mandela – Women Who Waited,' 404.

is dedicated to Sara Baartman,²³¹ a woman ‘who endured the horrors of European eyes, was desecrated after her death, and finally returned home, to rest.’²³² Sara Baartman, Penelope, Winnie and the four descendants are thus all interconnected both in their stories of suffering and in their just regained freedom. The end of the 2013 edition of the novel underlines the profoundness and the importance of women’s interconnectedness and sisterhood:

They cannot explain why they miss Penelope so deeply after they have just been with her and so briefly. Maybe they desire to know the worlds she has been to and new ones she has yet to visit. Soon they sense their inexplicable longing as disorientation. They have to restore the sense of their presence to one another. They are on a pilgrimage of their own making to recover intimacy, affection, resolve, and their presence in the world.²³³

Within the framework of a revisited version of the myth of Penelope, Ndebele’s novel envisages a private space where ordinary women can share their personal stories of enduring suffering and reconcile with themselves. By rejecting the label of ‘victim,’ those women ‘reclaim [their] right to be wounded without [their] pain having to turn [them] into an example of woman as victim’ (*CWM* 35). Ndebele offers the five descendants (and Penelope) the opportunity to regain their own agency and freedom of choice in the private dimension of female companionship. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* thereby dramatises an alternative to the spectacle and publicity of the TRC hearings, as well as a critique of the ‘strict’ criteria according to which the South African Truth Commission decided who were the victims. Ndebele is interested in posing questions about the TRC’s ability in dealing with ‘ordinary’ trauma, especially in connection with women and the issues of marriage and family. The author does not pursue the aim of demolishing or denying the goals accomplished by the TRC, but he rather wants to explore facets of everyday experiences of apartheid that would expand the work initiated by the Commission in crucial ways. Interviewed on the occasion of the

²³¹ Sara Baartman has become one of the most famous Khoikhoi women because she was exhibited as a freak show attraction in 19th-century Europe under the name Hottentot Venus. She was exhibited first in London in order to entertain people because of her ‘exotic’ origin and show what were thought of as highly unusual bodily features, such as steatopygia (large buttocks) and elongated labia. She was finally laid to rest 187 years after she left Cape Town for London. Her remains were buried on Women’s Day, 9 August 2002, in the area of her birth, the Gamtoos River Valley in the Eastern Cape. See Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: a Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009). In this fascinating volume, Crais and Scully explore the life of Sara Baartman and her ‘transformation’ into the almost mythological figure of the Hottentot Venus.

²³² Ndebele, Dedication to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed.

²³³ Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, rev. ed.

publication of the revised edition of the novel, the author argues that very few families have benefited in South Africa in these 20 years of democracy:

Circumstances, I'm afraid, do not appear to have changed significantly in the last 20 years. Let's face it, it has taken some 200 years of colonisation and imperialism to systematically destroy the African family in South Africa. When we achieved our democracy in 1994, our new government did not focus on 'the family' in its various manifestations, as a priority in the search for a new social order. Equally so, did we not have a national project of the century to rebuild the human spatial environment? Our living conditions continue to assail the family. Many fathers, uncles, brothers, husbands and sons went down in Marikana,²³⁴ dislocating more families in a continuous replay of what the British began in breaking up the African family to exploit African labour. Colonial legislators must be celebrating in their graves for their continuing achievement. Black, African mining magnates have accorded new legitimacy to this history.²³⁵

The novel therefore becomes a site where we can extend and complicate those enquires that have not been addressed yet by South African politics, aiming to 'confront the human tragedy together with the immense responsibility to create a new society.'²³⁶

2. 3. 2 Mother as witness in *Mother to Mother*

I now turn to Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*, a novel which, like Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, demonstrates the huge impact of apartheid on the African family. In an interview with David Attwell, Magona asserts that 'the African government was waging a war against African families,'²³⁷ forcing fathers to leave the household and search for better job opportunities, while mothers and children had to stay behind in the village. Samuelson correctly observes that the African family

²³⁴ The Marikana massacre or Lonmin strike started as a wildcat strike at a mine owned by Lonmin in the Marikana area, close to Rustenburg in 2012. The event garnered international attention following a series of violent incidents between the South African Police Service, Lonmin security, the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and strikers themselves, which resulted in the deaths of 34 people, the vast majority of whom were striking mineworkers killed on 16 August 2012. The Marikana massacre was the single most lethal use of force by South African security forces against civilians since 1960. The shootings have been described as a massacre in the South African media and have been compared to the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. See <http://www.seri-sa.org/index.php/10-advocacy/media/142-marikana-media-articles-and-press-releases>, for a collection of media articles and press releases from 2012 to 2015, which retrace the tragic event along with commenting on the findings of the commission of inquiry appointed by President Jacob Zuma to investigate the killings.

²³⁵ Charles Cilliers, 'Winnie's Cry Resonates a Decade On.'

²³⁶ Ndebele, 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,' 58.

²³⁷ David Attwell, Barbara Harlow, and Joan Attwell, 'Interview with Sindiwe Magona,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no 1 (2000): 285.

is ‘a site of fragility, a haven under siege, effectively undermined and destroyed by apartheid machinery in the form of the migrant labor system and internal “influx control,”’ thus becoming ‘a maternally dominated world,’ where ‘the mother is the constant feature, that which holds the family together while shiftless fathers drift through it.’²³⁸ In some instances, because wages were so low, men even deserted the family, as we have seen with the examples of Ndebele’s Penelope’s descendants, compelling women to go to work and leave the children alone. The absence of one or both parental figures to raise the children was a common feature of African families during apartheid. This painful situation of leaving the children without care – which forms the emotional core of *Mother to Mother* – is also experienced by Magona herself as she tells her story in the first volume of her autobiography, *To My Children’s Children* (1990):

Each morning as I prepared and served breakfast [for my employer’s family], made school lunches, dressed kids for school, walked kids to same, in my body beat the heart of a mother whose own were left untended. Many a time, I recall, did I see myself as the mother wolf who had had to leave her cubs with a jackal to go and search for food during a particularly long and hard-hitting drought. The tale ends with the mother wolf having succeeded only in having her children eaten by the jackal. My very endeavors to maintain my family contained the seeds for its destruction. Later, I was to learn of the white South African woman’s anguish upon becoming a working mother. Mine was not the choice of being a working mother or a not-working mother. No. I could choose between being a working mother or having no children left.²³⁹

Black South African mothers had been mostly prevented from the choice of caring for their children because to do so would be to risk their own survival. Magona herself, as a single mother with three children, worked as a domestic worker for four years, and she has used her own experience and the experiences of women that she knew in the township to write her novel *Mother to Mother*.

Set during the transitional period in South African politics from the apartheid regime to the 1994 first democratic elections, Magona’s novel is a fictionalised account of American Fulbright student Amy Biehl’s murder by youths in the township of Guguletu in August 1993.²⁴⁰ Adopting the maternal voice of the fictional Mandisa, the

²³⁸ Meg Samuelson, ‘Reading the Maternal Voice in Sindiwe Magona’s *To My Children’s Children* and *Mother to Mother*,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000): 229.

²³⁹ See Anne Whitehead, ‘Reading with empathy: Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother*,’ *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012): 189.

²⁴⁰ Amy Biehl was a white American graduate of Stanford University and an Anti-Apartheid activist in South Africa who was visiting the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town as a scholar in the Fulbright Program. As she drove a friend home to the township of Guguletu, outside Cape Town, on 25

mother of Amy's killer Mxolisi, the novel retells the events of the day of the murder (25 August 1993) and attempts to articulate the experiences in the young man's life which might have contributed to Amy's murder. Magona's stated motivation for writing the novel arose from her close identification with the real mother of one of Amy's killers, Evelyn Manquina – here fictionalised as Mandisa – with whom she grew up in Guguletu. Talking to David Attwell and Barbara Harlow, in fact, Magona explains that:

Well, we grew up together! As we say in the township, 'I know her saliva!' because I have eaten candy from her mouth. I was horrified that someone I knew... I thought of the little Mandisa – how was she handling this? Suddenly something had happened to *her*. I had a vague kind of sympathy for the Biehls, whom I do not know; I did not know them. But now I thought of Mandisa and I thought, my God, how is she? I wonder what has happened? How is she feeling? How has she dealt with it?²⁴¹

This feeling of closeness with Manquina/Mandisa's experiences led Magona to realise that 'if it could happen to her, it could so easily have happened to me. I do not come from a better family background. That could have been me.'²⁴² Manquina/Mandisa's story is the story of many black South African mothers who suffered from everyday oppressions and humiliations and losses because of apartheid overwhelming policies.

However, despite being based on a real event such as Amy Biehl's murder, and on the experiences of many black mothers, the author is emphatic that *Mother to Mother* is a novel, a work of fiction, since she did not interview either of the two families involved in the crime.²⁴³ Indeed, although four youths were convicted for the murder of Amy Biehl, Magona makes only one youth responsible for the killing, Mandisa's eldest son Mxolisi.

In the 'Author's preface,' Magona points out that her aim in writing the novel was to describe not the world of the victim, which had been much talked about, but 'the other world,' that of the perpetrators, usually left more in the background:

August 1993, she was murdered by a black mob who pulled her from the car and stabbed and stoned her to death while shouting anti-white slurs. The four men convicted of her murder were released as part of the Truth and Reconciliation process.

²⁴¹ D. Attwell, Harlow, and J. Attwell, 'Interview with Sindiwe Magona,' 284.

²⁴² Ibid., 287.

²⁴³ See Karin Orantes, 'The Magic of Writing: an interview with Sindiwe Magona,' in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative in South Africa*, ed. by Ewald Mengel Borzaga and Karin Orantes (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2010). Magona states that 'I wrote it as a novel because I hadn't asked the people for consent, I hadn't interviewed them. I didn't want it to be a non-fiction book. I can't do non-fiction books: the endless interviewing of people, and then what is it? It's better for me to write it as fiction then I can do what I want to do,' 45.

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 woman's 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?²⁴⁴

Starting in the epistolary mode with the first chapter, 'Mandisa's Lament,' written in italics, Mandisa directly addresses Amy's mother in the attempt to help Mrs Biehl 'to understand [her] son' (*MTM* 8). Whitehead observes that 'motherhood is clearly posited as the common ground that brings the two women together,'²⁴⁵ across both racial and national boundaries, and, I add, it also connects the two worlds, victims and perpetrators. Nearly at the end of the novel, Mandisa, in fact, addresses Amy's mother as 'my sister-mother:'

Your daughter. The imperfect atonement of her race.
My son. The perfect host of the demons of his.

My Sister-Mother, we are bound in this sorrow. You, as I, have not chosen this coat that you wear. It is heavy on our shoulders, I should know. It is heavy, only God knows how. We were not asked whether we wanted it or not. We did not choose, we are the chosen. (MTM 215)

Mandisa's first-person letter to Amy's mother functions as a narrative device which brings together the world of the perpetrator with that of the victim; more so than any of the texts discussed thus far, this narrative strategy directly relates to one of the TRC's main goals: the promotion of national unity and reconciliation by creating a space where 'victims' and 'perpetrators' could confront and tell their stories.

But *Mother to Mother* goes beyond the ambit of the TRC by also exposing the everyday impacts of apartheid subjugation. Interviewed by Orantes, Magona acknowledges that:

Well, the TRC did a lot of good. What it did not do is be universal. It was for a small pocket of people, the 'stars of apartheid' as I call them. For the ordinary men in the street it did absolutely nothing. It may have shown what was possible, but it has not reached the people yet.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Sindiwe Magona, *Mother to Mother*, 2nd ed. (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1998; Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2013), 5. Citations refer to the 2013 edition. Subsequent quotations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *MTM*.

²⁴⁵ Whitehead, 'Reading with empathy: Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*,' 185.

²⁴⁶ Orantes, 'The Magic of Writing,' 42.

The author believes that the TRC has not addressed ‘the root cause’²⁴⁷ behind apartheid oppressions and violations, failing the ordinary people who suffered from ordinary traumas such as the consequences of the Pass Laws, the forced removals, and the disintegration of the African family unit, as shown by the examples of Mandisa’s and her son’s lives. The epistolary mode is, in fact, confined to occasional excerpts of Mandisa’s letter to Mrs Biehl interspersed throughout the novel; while the core of *Mother to Mother* consists of Mandisa’s mapping of memories in a diary format which alternates between the week of 25 August 1993 – the day of Amy’s murder – and flashbacks to earlier times and episodes in Mandisa’s and Mxolisi’s ordinary lives. In this regard, Shane Graham emphasises that, aiming to a proper understanding of Mxolisi’s murderous act, *Mother to Mother* is also ‘Magona’s attempt to diagnose the social and psychological disorders that engender such unspeakable, unexplainable acts of violence rendered through a complex temporal, special, and social mapping of the multiple traumas visited on Mandisa, her children, and her community.’²⁴⁸ In contrast to the ‘stars of apartheid,’ Mxolisi’s crime is inserted into the larger narrative of colonialism²⁴⁹ and apartheid oppression by the narrative device of the remembering mother, whose memories focus on examples of everyday trauma and subjugation – which do not fit the TRC’s definitions of gross human rights violations but they do render ‘visible the “ordinary” structural violence underpinning the “spectacular” events of Biehl’s death.’²⁵⁰

Mandisa is particularly concerned to describe the devastating effects of the forced removals her family and community had been subjected to in 1968 under the notorious Group Areas Act. The woman recalls how her family – alongside the whole community – had to leave their beloved home in Blouvillei, ‘escorted’ by ‘government vehicles hounding them, bayonets prodding their backs’ (*MTM* 75). In exodus to the windswept and sandy Guguletu – where the wind becomes ‘a reminder of how we had been swept into this howling place against our will’ (*MTM* 38) – ‘a long line of wearied humanity: children, women and men, following their noses, going to a place they had

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁴⁸ Shane Graham, *Mapping the Loss*, 77.

²⁴⁹ The novel, in fact, makes a few references to the European colonisation of South Africa, placing emphasis on how ‘white people [the boers] stole [African people’s] land. They stole our herds. We have no cattle today, and the people who came here without any have worlds of farms, overflowing with fattest cattle’ (*MTM* 185).

²⁵⁰ Meg Samuelson, ‘The Mother as Witness: Reading *Mother to Mother* alongside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ in *Sindiwe Magona. The First Decade*, ed. by Siphokazi Koyana (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004), 131.

never seen before, where they knew not what awaited them. They trekked. Leaving their lives flattened to nothing behind them' (*MTM* 75). Besides the traumatic journey towards a new place, Mandisa also describes the subsequent break-up of her 'well-knit' community, the loneliness and the displacement experienced 'in that sea of strange faces' (*MTM* 39), 'the loss of our friends, the distances our parents had to travel to and from work, the high fares we had to pay going to and from places with decent food shopping' (*MTM* 41).

Through Mandisa's voice, Magona exposes the hardship of the African family whose conditions are further aggravated following the forced removals. As a consequence of this apartheid resettlement, fathers had to travel longer distances to and from work without having their wages augmented for the transport, and mothers were then 'compelled' to work in order to financially support the family:

Soon, all our mothers, who had been there every afternoon to welcome us [the children] when we returned from school, were no longer there. They were working in white women's homes. Tired, every day when they returned. Tired and angry. In time we did not remember coming back from school to mothers waiting with smiles. (*MTM* 76)

Similarly, in order to contribute to the economic maintenance of her family, Mandisa works from Monday to Saturday as a domestic worker in the household of her white employer, Mrs Nelson, thus leaving her own house 'before the children go to school and coming back long after the sun has gone to sleep. I am not home when they come back from school' (*MTM* 15). She is constantly plagued with guilt at not being able to '[stay] home doing all the things a mother's supposed to do' (*MTM* 14). Here Mandisa shows how apartheid policy deeply affected African families and motherhood at their core, severely compromising their capacity to raise and take care of their children. Indeed, without rules and parents' guide, Mandisa sadly observes that:

Our children fast descended into barbarism. With impunity, they broke with old tradition and crossed the boundary between that which separates human beings from beasts. Humaneness, Ubuntu, took flight. It had been sorely violated. It went and buried itself where none of us would easily find it again. (*MTM* 85)

Far from condoning or justifying her son's crime, but consistent with the previous comment, Mandisa expresses her lack of surprise at Mxolisi's act, which she repeatedly emphasises:

From the very beginning, this child has been nothing but trouble. But you have to understand my son. Understand the people among whom he has lived all his life. Nothing my son does surprises me anymore. Not after that first unbelievable shock, his implanting himself inside me; unreasonably and totally destroying the me I was. The me I would have become. (*MTM* 97)²⁵¹

This extract is also relevant from another perspective: although the protagonist has three children, she has developed a special bond with her first son, Mxolisi, following the circumstances of his conception. Mandisa recounts that as a teenager she does not engage with sexual intercourse with her boyfriend China, because her mama warned her ‘never to sleep with a boy as a wife does with her husband’ (*MTM* 105). Fortunately, China ‘had no intention of getting [Mandisa] or himself into that kind of trouble’ (*ibid.*), all they did was ‘play sex’, without penetration. However, Mandisa falls pregnant at fifteen, even though the midwife confirms that her hymen has not been broken. This unplanned pregnancy subverts the girl’s life: ‘what turmoil the coming of this child had brought to my life. Were it not for him, of course, I would still be in school. Instead, I was forced into being a wife, forever abandoning my dreams, hopes, aspirations’ (*MTM* 143). Despite the fact of gaining her Tata’s permission to avoid marriage and pursue her schooling as a single mother, she is appalled to find it retracted and herself bound to marry the father of her child because of the laws of her family clan. Her father offers as an explanation the fact that:

we are ruled by laws. We live our lives through advice, consultation and allowing or bowing down to the voice of the majority. Never can I trust my eye above the eyes of the many, who are my family, my clan. (*MTM* 138-139)

This decision will dictate Mandisa’s existence, and will see her catapulted into an unwanted and unloving marriage, subjugated to her in-laws’ rules, and finally working as a domestic worker without the schooling necessary to escape this pervasive trap.

This lack of autonomy that Mandisa experiences in the domestic realm is further conveyed by the act of renaming her child. In fact, even though Mandisa named her son

²⁵¹ This passage echoes Magona’s concern with the increase of violence among young people in Guguletu: ‘Guguletu was not safe long before Amy was killed in Guguletu. And it wasn’t going to be safe in a hurry long after. We know what we have sown. Hatred towards each other. And now we are surprised to hear that this happened? For having allowed such a climate to thrive in South Africa, we are all culpable [...] And so if we don’t tend the young people, each generation, we will then have the criminals we deserve later on. And we have failed the children in South Africa.’ See D. Attwell, Harlow, and J. Attwell ‘Interview with Sindiwe Magona,’ 285-286.

Hlumelo – meaning spring²⁵² – her in-laws reclaim their patriarchal right as grandparents to rename him Mxolisi – ‘who would bring peace’ (*MTM* 146): ‘the renaming of Hlumelo upset me. Shocked me. It was as though I had lost a child. What joy can there be in a mother’s heart, even when the dead child is replaced? Hlumelo. Mxolisi?’ (*MTM* 147).

The effects of apartheid laws and the less visible violence and restrictions that the structures of patriarchy – here mediated by the community – inflicted upon Mandisa are presented by Magona as closely contributing to the creation of Mxolisi as traumatised victim, and later, killer. According to Samuelson:

As a domestic worker – a black woman exploited within the racist and sexist economy of apartheid – [Mandisa] is prevented from fulfilling what she perceives to be her maternal roles towards Mxolisi. As a *makoti*²⁵³ in China’s household she was robbed of all autonomy as his family mapped out both her destiny and that of her son.²⁵⁴

In the novel, Mxolisi is unquestionably to blame for his murderous act. Mandisa, in fact, does not seek forgiveness for her son without punishment, but she is rather concerned with trying to explain and contextualise her son’s and her own lives into larger narratives. Henceforth, the juxtaposition of a spectacular event of violence – the murder of Amy Biehl, a white woman killed by black youths – with examples of quotidian and ordinary traumas must be read both as an attempt to emphasise that this type of extraordinary violence could erupt out of the slow accretion of everyday deprivation, and as an implicit criticism at the TRC’s narrowness of scope. It is then no surprise that *Mother to Mother* was published to coincide with the TRC’s five-volume final report in October 1998. Magona’s insistence on the suffering and social effects of the forced removals witnessed firsthand by Mandisa and her family resonates with Mahmood Mandani’s pointed critique of the TRC’s exclusive focus on bodily violence enacted against the individual, rather than whole communities. This for him produced a ‘diminished truth,’ ‘established through narrow lens, crafted to reflect the experience of a tiny minority: on the one hand, perpetrators, being state-agents; and, on the other,

²⁵² ‘And I named him Hlumelo, for even though I would be lying if I said his birth had been a cause for celebration, something that brought me pride, still I saw and thought and felt, that from him good things might come. Especially, the children, my grand-children. Hlumelo, Spring’ (*MTM* 136). By choosing this name, Mandisa foregrounds her investment and hope in her child, at the same time cause of her shame and bitterness, but also of pure joy.

²⁵³ In Zulu language, *makoti* means ‘a young married woman, a bride, a new wife.’

²⁵⁴ Samuelson, ‘The Mother as Witness: Reading Mother to Mother alongside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ 138.

victims, being political activists.’²⁵⁵ While the violence of apartheid, Mamdani carries on, ‘was aimed less at individuals than at entire communities. And this violence was not simply political. It was not just about defending power but also about dispossessing people of the means of livelihood.’²⁵⁶

Besides looking into examples of ordinary violence, Magona also exposes the patriarchal structures which affect and subordinate black women – in this case, embodied by the clan Mandisa belongs to. In so doing, Magona challenges the view of women as ‘secondary’ or ‘indirect’ victims, as inherited by the TRC public hearings, where women’s testimonies were mostly directed towards the suffering of their beloved men and eclipsed their own painful stories. As suggested by Samuelson, Magona avoids entrapping Mandisa within the stereotype of women as grieving mothers and wives: ‘Mandisa’s act of witnessing as a mother, though ostensibly an act of telling her son’s story, becomes a means to tell her own.’²⁵⁷ Indeed, by the end of the novel, we have trailed her life from early childhood until the hours before Mxolisi’s arrest.

Aligning with Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* where a group of ordinary women are given an alternative space where they can tell their own stories, in *Mother to Mother* the simple act of narrating and speaking as a mother enables Mandisa to tell some painful episodes of her life, which would have gone unheard otherwise, because they did not qualify as gross human rights violations. Through narrative Mandisa is then afforded an opportunity to reclaim her agency both as a woman and as a mother, which she had lost under apartheid (and colonial) conditions. Both novels thus question and expose the TRC’s exclusive and limited focus on ‘spectacular’ violence, and provide alternative spaces in order to investigate the gendered impact of apartheid and address the systematic, everyday humiliations and abuses enacted against many millions of South Africans.

While Ndebele and Magona investigate the ‘ordinary’ dimension of female trauma under apartheid, *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace* draw attention to the issue of sexual violence on women and expose the difficulty of articulating and representing such traumas, especially in public contexts as envisaged by the TRC hearings. They also emphasise women’s choice of silence as a means to claim ownership over their own

²⁵⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, ‘A Diminished Truth,’ in *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, ed. by Wilmot James and Linda van de Vijver (Athens and Cape Town: Ohio University Press and David Philip, 2001), 59.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Samuelson, ‘The Mother as Witness: Reading *Mother to Mother* alongside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ 137.

narrative, which, otherwise, could be potentially betrayed and misinterpreted if told to the ‘wrong’ audience. Although focusing on different aspects of female trauma, all four novels critically engage with the ways in which the TRC addressed such an elusive and complicated matter. The representation of female trauma is not the only flaw of the TRC project. In the following chapter, indeed, I resume the discussion about *Mother to Mother*, *Disgrace*, and *Bitter Fruit*, alongside analysing *The House Gun* in order to explore the ambiguity and hybrid dimension of terms such as ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation,’ thus suggesting different pathways from the reconciling journey promoted by the Commission. These texts constitute important reminders of how literature may become a site where, quoting André Brink, ‘the enquiries of the TRC are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature’, otherwise, ‘society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future.’²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ André Brink, ‘Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Postapartheid Narrative,’ in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, 30.

Chapter 3

Is Truth the Road to Reconciliation? Challenging the TRC's Concepts of 'Victim' and 'Perpetrator,' 'Confession' and 'Forgiveness'

between you and me
 how desperately
 how it aches
 how desperately it aches between you and me

so much hurt for truth
 so much destruction
 so little left for survival

where do we go from here

your voice slung
 in anger
 over the solid cold length of our past

how long does it take
 for a voice
 to reach another

in this country held bleeding between us

From Antjie Krog's *Country of Grief and Grace*²⁵⁹

3.1 Introduction

Is truth a precondition of forgiveness and reconciliation? If that is so, is the truth about the past recoverable? How can someone be certain to achieve the *truth*? How can South African society come to terms with a history of violence? The TRC played a fundamental role in the reconciling process with which the country engaged following the transition to democracy in 1994. Held under the banner 'Truth: the road to reconciliation,' the Commission's hearings aimed to rewrite the violent past of South Africa's apartheid era through the stories of both victims and perpetrators. The catharsis deriving from these stories of suffering and acknowledgement of wrongdoings was supposed to promote the healing and reconciliation of South Africa, contributing to the construction of 'a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and

²⁵⁹ Antjie Krog, 'Country of Grief and Grace,' in *Down to My Last Skin*, by Antjie Krog (Johannesburg: Random House, 2000), 95-100.

peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex' (NFWF 45).

The concept of truth acquires a particular resonance in the amnesty hearings, where perpetrators were asked to 'confess' their crimes in exchange for amnesty – as long as there was a full disclosure of the truth and their wrong actions were politically motivated. Adopting the Christian rhetoric of forgiveness, the perpetrators' confessions and acknowledgement of their 'sins' were meant to elicit victims' forgiveness as a paramount step in the long journey to South Africa's reconciliation. I have already discussed the heated debate and moral controversy which characterised the amnesty hearings in the first chapter;²⁶⁰ this third chapter will then focus on the assumptions made by the TRC to carry on both the reconciling and amnesty processes, namely, that it is possible to establish the truth, and, consequently, that the *truth* can help actualise forgiveness and reconciliation.

The four novels I analyse in this chapter – Magona's *Mother to Mother*, Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*, Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* – question and overturn those assumptions about truth and reconciliation. Although depicting different scenarios and perspectives, these four novels are all characterised by a certain level of moral ambiguity, and ethical concerns about collective and/or individual responsibility. As highlighted in the second chapter, *Bitter Fruit* is directly connected with the TRC proceedings and amnesty process; *Disgrace* envisions a space – a disciplinary committee – which allegorically resembles the context of the TRC hearings; *Mother to Mother* narrates the murder of American student Amy Biehl from the perpetrator's perspective. Although Magona's novel is set before the work of the Commission, the text invites the reader to reflect on the issues of truth and reconciliation and the categories of victim and perpetrator, since Amy's murderers applied for and were granted amnesty by the Commission. Finally, *The House Gun* enacts a proper trial which induces readers to question the effectiveness of the TRC proceedings. Directly or indirectly, these novels are related to the work of the truth commission; they also aspire to reveal post-apartheid violence as a legacy of apartheid, where old racial prejudices are still present, and, in so doing, they expose the difficulty of actualising reconciliation.

²⁶⁰ For example, the major objections were related to the concern whether the amnesty process could satisfy various criteria for justice, namely if a truth commission – through the amnesty hearings – could equally serve justice as well as the criminal justice system.

The establishment of the truth as envisioned by the TRC was deeply intertwined with the process of ascertaining responsibility for apartheid oppression and violence by distinguishing the two categories of victim and perpetrator. Section 2 is then dedicated to the analyses of *Mother to Mother* and *The House Gun*, which both challenge the possibility of determining the final *truth* and confront the complexities of attributing responsibility and blame: to what extent can individual responsibility be separated from collective responsibility? What are the criteria to define victim as separated from perpetrator and vice versa? Can a perpetrator be a victim of a violent society? In the attempt to answer these questions, *Mother to Mother* and *The House Gun* reveal the frailty of the TRC's reconciling discourse by both highlighting the hybridity of the supposedly discrete categories of victim and perpetrator, and exposing the normalisation of violence which still affects South Africa. As I have anticipated in my introduction, my understanding of hybridity is multivalent. In the previous chapters, I have underscored the textual hybridity of *Country of My Skull* and *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* as well as the crossing of the boundary between private and public domains in relation to the articulation of sexual trauma against women. Here, I focus on the hybrid and ambivalent boundary separating the two concepts of 'victim' and 'perpetrator,' which the TRC failed to acknowledge. In the fourth chapter, I will continue to explore this hybrid dimension but in terms of race by looking at the ambiguous category of coloured identity.

In section 3, I investigate the implications of public confessions and manifestations of contrition in the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, with particular reference to the context of the amnesty deal. This section concentrates on the discussions of *The House Gun*, *Disgrace*, and *Bitter Fruit*, which expose the inadequacy of the Christian rhetoric of forgiving after confession deployed in the public context of the TRC proceedings. By playing out different answers to the act of public confession, they suggest that the journey to reconciliation through the truth-telling process in South Africa is far from being achieved. Finally, in the attempt of reclaiming the private dimension of personal moments as those of confession, contrition, and forgiveness – which were instead publicly overused by the TRC, and, particularly, by the amnesty process – they also remind readers of the importance of fictional narrative in opening up questions and casting light on new paths and meanings.

3. 2 Blurring perspectives: who is the victim? who is the perpetrator?

3. 2. 1 Moral ambiguity in *Mother to Mother*

Although set in 1993, *Mother to Mother* was published in 1998 after the conviction of Biehl's killers, and coincident with the TRC's granting of amnesty to all four youths. This makes the violence still affecting the years of transition and South Africa's reconciling project central to the novel's concern. In plot terms, it is notable that the author ends the narrative with Mxolisi's imminent arrest: Mandisa is taken to see his son by those who are giving him a hiding place, but it is evident that the young man will not escape his destiny and will be soon captured. The novel thus engages with the issue of justice, but it does not attempt to offer any conclusive ending by withholding either the resolution of the legal trial and verdict or the subsequent amnesty hearings. This open-ended status is paralleled by the formal device of the epistolary mode which deliberately rejects closure. As highlighted by Samuelson, the conversation is left unfinished: 'the dialogic address suggested by the neat symmetry of the title – mother to mother – defers closure by reminding us that there is another story to be told beyond the confines of the novel.'²⁶¹ The absence of Mrs Biehl's response to Mandisa's letter interrupts and suspends the dialogue between the mother of the culprit and the mother of the victim.

In this regard, Whitehead observes that 'by leaving Mrs Biehl's response undetermined, Magona therefore opens up a crucial interpretative and imaginative space for the reader, which asks her to weigh up the evidence and decide for herself who or what is/are culpable for Amy's death.'²⁶² This resistance to closure implied in the maternal act of witnessing is fundamental at another level, because it immediately situates the novel in contrast with the reconciling project initiated by the TRC, whose main goal was to remember the violent past in order to help people reach 'closure' and move forward. In real life the face-to-face encounter between the two mothers occurs: Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, met with the family of Mongezi Christopher Manqina, one of their daughter's killers, after Mongezi's mother had sent Linda a

²⁶¹ Samuelson, 'The Mother as Witness: Reading *Mother to Mother* alongside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' 139.

²⁶² Whitehead, 'Reading with empathy: Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*,' 191.

message expressing sorrow at her son's responsibility for Amy's death. During the meeting, not only did the Biehls express their lack of desire to oppose the amnesty applications, but they even embraced Evelyn Manquina, and exchanged phone numbers and addresses. An article reports Linda saying:

'This is what it is all about,' she said. 'This is why Amy was over here, why we keep coming back, because of the heart and the soul of African people. And we just want the races to reconcile, for people ... on a one-on-one relationship, to make differences.'²⁶³

In the course of the amnesty hearing, Peter Biehl reiterates his and his wife's wish for reconciliation:

Just two months before she died, Amy wrote in a letter to the Cape Times editor, 'Racism in South Africa has been a painful experience for blacks and whites, and reconciliation may be equally painful. However, the most important vehicle toward reconciliation is open and honest dialogue.' [...] Amy would have embraced your Truth and Reconciliation process. We are present this morning to honor it and to offer our sincere friendship. We are all here, in a sense, to consider a committed human life which was taken without opportunity for dialogue. When this process is concluded we must link arms and move forward together.'²⁶⁴

I have already argued that Magona wants to focus on the perpetrator's perspective in order to insert his and his family's voices into a larger narrative of suffering, but, in withholding Mrs Biehl's response, *Mother to Mother* also refuses to underwrite the TRC narrative of unity and reconciliation. Magona's position further suggests disregard for the Biehls' expressed views, but I think that this choice must be read in relation to the overarching purpose of the novel, rather than the author's lack of respect or disagreement with the Biehls' decision itself: if it is true that the Biehls were able to forgive their daughter's murderers, thus reaching a certain level of closure, we cannot take for granted that this reconciling disposition was embraced by all victims – or by their families. The author's intent is then to open up questions as to the real efficacy of the Commission's work and the meaning of 'closure,' thus implying that many other people needed more time or could prefer other pathways from that of reconciliation.

²⁶³ 'Biehls Meet Mother of Daughter's Killer', *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 1997, accessed October 20, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1997-06-29/news/mn-8266_1_linda-biehl.

²⁶⁴ See *Long Night's Journey into Day*, an award-winning documentary film which follows four high-profile cases brought before the TRC amnesty hearings. Accessed October 20, 2015, <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/longnight.htm>.

In accordance with this attitude, the novel also abstains from final judgement over Mxolisi's murderous action. Mxolisi's mother, Mandisa, vacillates between the urge to apologise and seek forgiveness for his son's misdeed, and the need to justify his actions by inscribing them in the context of the nation's larger struggle:

My son was only an agent, executing the long-simmering dark desires of his race. Burning hatred for the oppressor possessed his being. [...] The resentment of three hundred years plugged his ears; deaf to her pitiful entreaties. My son, the blind but sharpened arrow of the wrath of his race. Your daughter, the sacrifice of hers. Blindly chosen. Flung toward her sad fate by fortune's cruellest slings. (*MTM* 224).

Commenting on *Mother to Mother*, Rita Barnard defines it as 'a deeply troubling performance,' for 'Magona implies that the killers are purely victims of circumstance – the products of apartheid's soul-numbing ghettos. The system, or so she asserts in her author's preface, is the only killer.'²⁶⁵ I disagree with Barnard's remark, because the author, through the voice of Mandisa, presents an ambiguous territory where innocence and guilt, forgiveness and condemnation can co-exist without resolution. In the first chapter, 'Mandisa's Lament,' the woman does acknowledge her son's culpability and asks God to forgive his 'terrible, terrible sin' (*MTM* 10). Rather than justifying or condoning Mxolisi's crime, the novel appears to intentionally avoid any defining label in which the young man could be categorised; this lack of definition and certainty also mirrors the type of instability and moral ambiguity characterising any transition period from an oppressive regime to a democratic order as it is in South Africa's case.

The description of the young man too reflects this indeterminacy and ambiguity, since it oscillates between words of praise – before the murder, he was regarded as a village hero for saving a girl from certain rape – and shameful names. In addressing directly Mrs Biehl, Mandisa observes that:

Three children have come from my womb. Three claim me as mother. Three. But now, since your daughter's unfortunate death, I have been called mother to so many more: Mother of the beast. Mother of the serpent. The puffadder's mother. There are those who even go as far as calling me Satan's mother. I know. With a mother's pierced heart, I know. All these names refer to but one of my children. (*MTM* 125)

²⁶⁵ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond. South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142-143.

If, on the one hand, Mxolisi is named the ‘host of demons’ (*MTM* 215), on the other, he can also be depicted as ‘the holy sacrificial son.’²⁶⁶ Not only does the name Mxolisi mean one ‘who would bring peace’ (*MTM* 146), but the young man is brought into the world by a ‘virgin birth’ – for the text asserts that Mandisa did not engage with sexual intercourse with her boyfriend – and her pregnancy is announced by Auntie Funiwe, who is significantly associated with ‘Biblical Elizabeth’ (*MTM* 113). Magona’s recreation of the killer as a Christ figure further unsettles the boundary between the TRC’s categories of victim and perpetrator, as Mxolisi did commit murder but the text also suggests that his culpability is compromised by his historical circumstances as one of the black oppressed. In this way, he encompasses both *victim* and *perpetrator*, and this hybrid status contributes to problematising the TRC’s wish for closure, which requires the clear identification of *who* is to be blame for Amy’s murder. The novel, instead, invites the reader to wonder who the real perpetrator is: the young man, Guguletu’s youth, or the anger and the suffering produced by centuries of history of colonisation and apartheid oppression? Or a convergence of both?

It is indeed not surprising that violence has surrounded Mxolisi and his friends – ‘the million, million lumpen, the lost generation’ (*MTM* 217) – for all their lives, and it is then often invoked throughout the novel by the recurring imagery of the storm. Starting more than three hundred years ago with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in South Africa, who named it ‘the place of storms’ because ‘the great blue river without end ate up their ships’ (*MTM* 187), the storm continues to blow through history. First, it assumes the form of the forced removals of apartheid in Mandisa’s youth, who ‘came to Guguletu borne by a whirlwind, perched on a precarious leaf balking a tornado, a violent scattering of black people, a dispersal of the government’s making’ (*MTM* 56-57). Then, the storm culminates in 1993, designated by the PAC (Pan African Congress) as the ‘Year of the Great Storm’ in which they aimed at ‘driving white farmers off the land,’²⁶⁷ and in Amy Biehl’s death under the enraged cries of desperation ‘ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET’ (*MTM* 220), a rallying slogan originated by the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), the armed wing of the PAC. The final pages of the novel focus on the detailed description of Amy Biehl’s violent death, which is

²⁶⁶ Samuelson, ‘The Mother as Witness: Reading *Mother to Mother* alongside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ 135.

²⁶⁷ ‘PAC’S Great Storm Returns to Haunt It,’ accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media%5C1997%5C9708/s970829a.htm>. Operation Great Storm was an offensive launched in 1993 by the Pan Africanist Congress’s military wing and it aimed at chasing away white farmers from their land, so that it could be reclaimed by Africans.

relentlessly associated with an unstoppable momentum of anger of the colonised black other: ‘the eruption of a slow, simmering, seething rage’, ‘the enactment of the deep, dark, private yearnings of a subjugated race’, and ‘the resentment of three hundreds years’ (*MTM* 224).

The same overwhelming rage against the white settlers led the Xhosa people to kill their cattle in 1857 and cause their own ruin in the attempt to drive away ‘the people with hair like the silken threads of corn’ (*MTM* 193). The episode of the cattle-killing is recalled in the novel by Mandisa herself, when she remembers her grandfather’s words: ‘the biggest storm is still here. It is in our hearts – the hearts of the people of this land’ (*MTM* 187). Schatteman observes that Magona’s reference to the Xhosa Cattle-killing ‘reinforces the concept of moral ambiguity and enables Mandisa to reinterpret her son’s crisis on a broader scale.’²⁶⁸ The text compares the official school version of this historical event with Mandisa’s grandfather’s interpretation: while the former describes Nongqswuse as a false prophet who manipulated her superstitious and ignorant people to kill their cattle and destroy their lives; Mandisa’s grandfather underlines the desperation of a people long vexed from war and disease and deeply resentful of the British, who had arrived to take possession of their land.²⁶⁹ In the interview with Attwell, Magona associates this overpowering feeling that propelled the Xhosa people to commit such an abominable act of destruction with the rage and despair of the children of the townships:

And now of course we are sitting with our children who have learned to kill, and who have no qualms in killing; young people who have learned to get their way by force – the lost generation. We were there when the generation was getting lost, and we didn’t stop it. [...] That was for me a similar thing to the Cattle Killings, where a prophet or prophets, a voice, a movement, a feeling, the general feeling, the mood of the moment, says – destroy everything and your lot will be improved. The same thing happened in 1857. I don’t know how these things happen and I don’t know why people don’t learn from history. You cannot advance by destroying everything.²⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the anger arising from the closing chapter – where the description of Amy’s death is punctuated with the slogans of the struggle, ‘ONE SETTLER, ONE BULLET!’, ‘AMANDLA! NGAWETHU’, and ‘BOERS, THEY ARE DOGS!’ (*MTM*

²⁶⁸ Renée Schatteman, ‘The Xhosa Cattle-Killing and Post-Apartheid South Africa: Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*,’ *African Studies* 67, no. 2 (2008): 278.

²⁶⁹ The Xhosa Cattle-Killing (1856-1857) has aroused an ongoing interest from historians and authors of literary works, who have provided different, sometimes divergent, readings of this event throughout history. Concerning this, see Andrew Offenburger, ‘The Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement in History and Literature,’ *History Compass* 7/6 (2009): 1428-1443.

²⁷⁰ D. Attwell, Harlow, and J. Attwell, ‘Interview with Sindiwe Magona,’ 290.

220, 224) – is counteracted by a feeling of hope for the future of the children, the lost generation. As suggested by Samuelson, the penultimate chapter – where the final event takes place in the fictional world of the novel – ‘encourages us to think beyond this space of powerlessness through the reassertion of *ubuntu* within the realm of the “ordinary.”’²⁷¹ After being ostracised for Mxolisi’s crime, Mandisa is finally re-inserted in the whole community as hinted by the visit of her neighbours, who have gone ‘to cry with you...as is our custom, to grieve with those who grieve’ (*MTM* 214). In this display of human understanding, Mandisa finds hope for the future:

It is people such as these who give me strength. And hope. I hear there are churches and other groups working with young people and grownups. Helping. So that violence may stop. Or at least be less than it is right now. That is a good thing. We need to help each other... all of us, but especially the children... I pray that there may be help even for young people like Mxolisi. That they may change and come back better people. (ibid.)

In the passage above, Mandisa entrusts the possibility for a better future of the children to the wider community, who should take up the ‘mothering’ function and teach them to renounce violence.

Through the narrative devices of the maternal voice and the epistolary mode, *Mother to Mother* satisfies the TRC’s aim to promote reconciliation by bringing the world of the perpetrator into dialogue with that of the victim.²⁷² In Magona’s novel, the mother figure also becomes a vehicle to cross over racial and cultural barriers between Mandisa, a black South African woman who belongs to the world of the perpetrators of her son’s crime, and the mother of the victim, Mrs Biehl, white and American. However, the moral ambiguity resulting from the co-existence of guilt and innocence, anger and hope and the ambivalent depiction of Mxolisi – both a victim of historical political circumstances and a perpetrator – challenge the role of the TRC as the official pathway to reconciliation. Published to coincide with the TRC’s five-volume final report in October 1998, the novel invites the reader to reflect on and evaluate the work carried out by the TRC, especially in connection with the contradictory feelings of anger and hope characterising the period of transition. The absence of closure and final judgement of the novel is indicative of the long road that remains to be travelled to

²⁷¹ Samuelson, ‘The Mother as Witness: Reading *Mother to Mother* alongside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,’ 142.

²⁷² The promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 invites the Truth Commission to create a space where to air ‘the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations.’ See ‘Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995].’

achieve real reconciliation in South Africa. This aspect is further conveyed by Magona's choice to tell the story of Amy Biehl, a white American. Samuelson notices that 'one could query the choice of this specific event as opposed to, for example, the similar story of Lindy-Anne [sic] Fourie, the white South African girl killed in the Heidelberg Tavern massacre.'²⁷³ There are, in fact notable, parallels between the stories of Amy Biehl and Lindy Fourie, who died in the same year in an attack on a Cape Town restaurant executed by the APLA – the same party to which Amy's killers belonged. This obviously raises the question as to the reason why Magona preferred relying in her narration on the story of Amy Biehl, rather than on a similar story – such as the one of Lindy Fourie – but where both victim *and* perpetrator were South Africans. Despite the stated motivation provided by Magona – her acquaintance with the mother of one of Amy's killers – the question as to whether the conversation between the two worlds of victim and perpetrator *could have been possible* if Amy Biehl had been a white South African is too tempting and it cannot be ignored. The author's narrative focus might, in fact, signify her awareness of the abiding difficulties of imagining a cross-racial alliance between *South African victims and perpetrators* in the immediate post-apartheid period, thus suggesting that the efforts and the incredible work of the TRC need to be expanded in order to achieve real reconciliation in South Africa.

3. 2. 2 Hybrid identity in *The House Gun*

The moral ambiguity underpinning *Mother to Mother* also characterises *The House Gun*, which is Gordimer's first novel to be set firmly in post-apartheid South Africa. Gordimer's earlier fiction establishes her strong engagement with South Africa's historical and political situation, *and* her interest in the relationship between the political and the personal, the public and the private. Clingman points out that '[t]hrough the succession of Gordimer's novels there is then a dialectical interplay, in which the exploration of history and character, of external and internal worlds, becomes entirely indivisible.'²⁷⁴ In focusing on a private disaster, 'a Dostoyevskyan crime of passion'²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Samuelson, 'Reading the Maternal Voice in Sindiwe Magona's *To My Children's Children* and *Mother to Mother*,' 234.

²⁷⁴ Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 8-9.

which is not directly politically motivated, *The House Gun* seems to have turned away from the characteristic issues that have preoccupied the author in her previous works. Nonetheless, the South African context is invoked both by the narrator and the circumstances, so that it cannot be ignored. It is no surprise that, when interviewed about the novel, Gordimer asserts that:

[The House Gun] has to do with intimate human relations and how we know each other. It's about how children know their parents and how parents know their own children [...] Of course, it doesn't take place in a vacuum. It takes place in a particular time, in a particular city.²⁷⁶

Indeed, the novel unfolds the story of a young white South African man, Duncan Lingard, who kills a friend and former gay lover after discovering his betrayal with his current girlfriend Natalie. Shaped as a court drama, the reader mainly shares the perspective of Duncan's bewildered and anxious parents (Harald and Claudia), who try to ascertain the exact nature of the events that occurred and assess personal responsibility, while their son is put on trial. However elusive the relation between the personal and the historical/political might be in this text, it is obvious that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the unspoken background of the Lingards' story. The search for truth and the complex exploration of private crime, punishment and responsibility in *The House Gun* mirror the process initiated by the TRC whereby society is trying to understand itself and negotiate its painful violent past.

The opening sentence, 'Something terrible happened,'²⁷⁷ signals the irruption of a calamitous event in the liberal middle-class lives of Harald and Claudia Lingard. While watching evening news of disasters elsewhere in their 'townhouse complex with grounds maintained and security-monitored entrance' (ibid.), the arrival of the messenger Julian – who turns out to be a friend of their son Duncan – irremediably upsets the couple's comfortable life by breaking the news that a man has been shot and Duncan has been arrested for the killing. The couple is then forced to connect the political and public dimension of the news they are watching on the television with the

²⁷⁵ Patrick Lenta, 'Executing the Death Sentence: Law and Justice in Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* and Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 13, no. 1 (2001): 58.

²⁷⁶ Dwight Garner, 'The conscience of South Africa talks about her country's new racial order,' *The Salon Interview*, March 9, 1998, accessed October 20, 2015, http://www.salon.com/1998/03/09/cov_si_09int/.

²⁷⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *The House Gun* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998; New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 3. Citations refer to the Penguin edition. Subsequent citations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation *HG*.

personal piece of news concerning Duncan's arrest. Cheryl Stobie, in fact, emphasises that 'from the outset, the novel sets up a dialectic between, on the one hand, private and personal shocking news, and on the other, national and political disasters.'²⁷⁸ The association between 'domestic' violence and public/political/historical violence is suggested one more time later in the text:

[...] an indoor killing (homeground in the suburbs), lovers' obscure quarrel, gays' domestic jealousy, something of that kind, in comparison with the spectacular public violence where you can film or photograph people shot dead on the streets in crossfire of the new hit-squads, hired by taxi drivers and drug dealers who have learnt their tactics from the state hit-squads of the old regime with its range of methods of 'permanently removing' political opponents, from blowing them up with car and parcel bombs to knifing their bodies again and again to make bloodily sure bullets have done their work. (*HG* 157)

The passage above shows how not only does Gordimer trace the origins of post-apartheid violence to apartheid, but she also illustrates the all-pervading nature of this legacy which has affected the domestic sphere and remains insidiously habitual in South Africa. The title of the novel underscores this point: the gun is transformed into a 'domestic' item that '*happened to be there, on the table*' (*HG* 267) at the time of Duncan's crime, symptomatic of the normalisation of violence in post-apartheid era. As highlighted by the judge of the trial:

But that is the tragedy of our present time, a tragedy repeated daily, nightly, in this city, in our country. Part of the furnishings in homes, carried in pockets along with car keys, even in the school-bags of children, constantly ready to hand in situations which lead to tragedy, the guns *happen to be there*. (ibid.)

Post-apartheid violence seems to engender a 'new' culture of violence that invites individuals to own weapons as potential instruments of self-defence, thus transforming the *gun* into something akin to a house pet, something ordinary and expected.

The trope of the house gun becomes a leitmotif, especially in the second part of the novel when Duncan's trial occurs and the question of responsibility is raised. According to the defence, Duncan – who 'breathed violence along with cigarette smoke' (ibid.) – becomes a victim of the 'availability' of the gun, bearing 'no responsibility whatsoever for the *prevalence* of violence' (*HG* 271). The psychiatrist called by Motsamai, Duncan's lawyer, presents violence as an overwhelming and

²⁷⁸ Cheryl Stobie, 'Representations of "the Other Side" in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' *Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 12, no. 1 (2007): 65.

deterministic factor which affects the life of South African individuals, and, in so doing, he diminishes personal responsibility:

In a society where violence is prevalent the moral taboos against violence are devalued. Where it has become, for whatever historical reasons, the way to deal with frustration, despair or injury, natural abhorrence of violence is suspended. Everyone becomes accustomed to the solution of violence, whether as victim, perpetrator or observer. You live with it. (HG 226)

On the other hand, the prosecutor argues that the endemic violence permeating the social context cannot be regarded as a justification or exoneration, and, as such, Duncan should be held accountable for the crime he has committed:

Yes, the gun was there; the crime of vengeful jealousy with which it was committed is by no means *excused* by, but belongs along with the hijacks, rapes, robberies that arise out of the misuse of freedom by making your own rules. (HG 270)

As with Magona's novel, Gordimer's novel, too, poses the questions: who are the victim and the perpetrator in post-apartheid South African society? Is Duncan the real perpetrator of his friend's killing, or should society be held responsible for the violence inhabiting the streets, the houses, every sector of people's lives? Rather than providing certain answers to these, perhaps, unresolvable questions, the novel is engaged in raising these questions in order to invite the reader to reflect on the complexity of the present time which continues to be shaped by the oppression, the anger, and the violence of the apartheid era. Gordimer's avoidance of a definite solution is further conveyed by the judge's final verdict of Duncan's trial: in considering all the extenuating factors of the young man's emotional condition, the judge sentences Duncan to seven years imprisonment. I argue that the judge's 'mitigated' sentence is indicative of Duncan's ambivalent position: neither a real victim nor a real perpetrator, but something in between, and, as such, he receives a 'moderated' sentence.

The trope of 'the house gun' is also important at another level: 'the shared gun' becomes 'a symbol of the shared interchangeable relations' (HG 253-254) of the household where the murder takes place. David Medalie indeed observes that 'living in the house and cottage is an unconventional group of friends and lovers: mostly homosexual, but not entirely so; mostly white, but including one black; mostly male,

but including one woman; mostly South African, but including one foreigner.’²⁷⁹ In Gordimer’s fiction, the symbol of the ‘house’ as well as sexual expression between black and white have often signified the crossing and infringement of the racial boundaries imposed by the apartheid policy and taxonomy. On the one hand, the ‘house’ becomes a place where the encounter with the Other can occur; on the other, free sexuality goes hand-in-hand with political commitment since interracial sexual intercourse was prohibited during apartheid. It can be argued that the attribute of transgression behind the concept of the ‘house’ and free sexuality is potentially lost following the official demise of the segregation system. However, the image of the house seems to acquire a new symbolism: in Duncan’s words, the household where he and his friends live is (or maybe it would be better say ‘*was*’ prior to the murder) ‘better than a nuclear family’ (*HG* 208). In this regard, Medalie suggests that this household enacts ‘the society which the new South African constitution is making possible, one in which there is no discrimination on the basis of race, gender or sexual preference.’²⁸⁰ I agree with this observation to a certain extent. The multicultural, multiracial and sexual promiscuity of Duncan’s ‘alternative family’ clearly recalls the attempt to reconcile South Africa despite class, gender, sexual and racial diversity – which the country is experiencing since the first democratic election in 1994. It also hints at the possibilities for alternative concepts of family, which include homosexuality and interracial relations. The murder of one of the inhabitants, though, shreds the perfect image of the ‘rainbow nation’ promoted by the TRC, rather suggesting that the country’s journey to reconciliation has not been completely achieved yet.

The other leitmotif of the novel – ‘something terrible happened’ – also contributes to disturbing the concept of a reconciled nation, proving that violence can still penetrate every level of people’s lives. The text, in fact, evokes another traumatic event which occurred during Duncan’s adolescence and shook the Lingard family. While attending the boarding school, Duncan indirectly witnesses a tragedy and writes to his parents to tell them that ‘a terrible thing happened’ (*HG* 68): one of his schoolmates committed suicide and hung himself in the school gym. In receiving this piece of terrible news, the narrator comments on Claudia’s and Harald’s reaction:

²⁷⁹ David Medalie, “‘The Context of the Awful Event’: Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun*,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25, no. 4 (1999): 638.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

When Claudia and Harald received that letter they had been strangely disturbed; she saw, now, that this was the forgotten *other time*, first time, they were invaded by a happening that had no place in their kind of life, the kind of life they believed they had ensured for their son. (A liberal education – whose liberalism did not extend to admitting blacks, like Motsamai, they realized now). (HG 69)

Harald and Claudia are thus presented as a liberal middle class white couple who has always thought it could insulate itself in the private space of their home against the violence and, consequently, the impact of the apartheid regime. First, the suicide of their son's schoolmate, and then, more profoundly, Duncan's crime force the couple to abandon their complacent and cocooned existence and reassess their belief systems for comprehending the world: Harald and his religion; Claudia and her humanism linked with scientific rationalism. In the past, their contact with pain and suffering had been second-hand: Claudia as a medical doctor always explored the body of her patients 'with a plastic-gloved hand' (HG 13); Harald too dealt with suffering and disaster as the director of an insurance company with 'a pragmatically enlightened policy towards blacks' (HG 40), but the benefits he provided were merely pecuniary. The incarceration of their son leads the couple to a new realisation, a 'recognition of their inevitable implication in society, in history.'²⁸¹ While treating a black woman whose son is in jail, Claudia suddenly becomes aware that she 'is not the only woman with a son in prison. Since this afternoon she has understood that. She is no longer the one who doles out comfort or its placebos for others' disasters, herself safe, untouchable, in another class' (HG 17). In a similar way, Harald observes that they now belong 'to the other side of privilege. Neither whiteness, nor observance of the teachings of Father and son, nor the pious respectability of liberalism, nor money, that had kept them in safety [...] could change their status' (HG 127).

The Lingards' liberal education did not shield them against violence, but, more significantly, it did not prompt them to actively oppose the injustice of the apartheid regime, because they were not willing to lose their privileged place within that society:

The Lingards were not racist, if racist means having revulsion against skin of a different colour [...] Claudia surely had her proof that flesh, blood and suffering are the same, under any skin. Harald surely had his proof in his faith that all humans are God's creatures, in Christ's image, none above the other. Yet neither had joined movements, protested, marched in open display, spoken out in defence of these convictions. (HG 86)

²⁸¹ Isidore Diala, 'Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and André Brink: Guilt, Expiation, and the Reconciliation Process,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 2 (2001-2002): 54.

Here Gordimer criticises the white liberalism which had become an accomplice to apartheid oppression by passively accepting and benefitting from that system because of its fear of being deprived of all its privileges. Moreover, since the novel was published during the work of the Truth Commission, the author's complaint of white liberal indifference must also be associated with the TRC's failure to attract the bulk of the white majority, who refused to acknowledge their passive complicity with the apartheid regime by abstaining from participating in the Commission hearings. While recalling the tragic episode of the suicide of Duncan's schoolmate, the text uses the word 'horror:' 'what could it be that brought a boy to put a rope round his neck? The contemplation was horror – once removed, that's all' (*HG* 69). In using that word, horror, Kossew argues that 'Gordimer is invoking the colonialist mentality that links Conrad and apartheid.'²⁸² As well as the central paradox in *Heart of Darkness* is the juxtaposition between 'horror' and 'civilisation,' in *The House Gun* 'the liberal education "whose liberalism did not extend to admitting blacks, like Motsamai, they realize now" is the very place in which the horror resides. The threat is not from outside but from inside the citadel itself.'²⁸³ The type of horror upsetting the life of the Lingards does not come from a contact with the black Other, or in Conradian terms the darkness and incivility of the African continent, but within the boundaries of their liberal lifestyle, as exemplified by the suicide of Duncan's schoolmate in the boarding school.

In alignment with post-apartheid's aims for a new racial balance, Gordimer reinstates black agency through racial reversal: the accused is white, the defence lawyer Hamilton Motsamai is black. The Lingards now have to rely on the capacity and assistance of 'the stranger from the Other Side of the divided past' (*HG* 86):

[...] there is awareness that the position that was entrenched from the earliest days of their being is reversed: one of those kept-apart strangers from the Other Side has come across and [Harald and Claudia] are dependent on him. The black man will act, speak for them. They have become those who cannot speak, act, for themselves. (*HG* 89)

After an initial distrust of entrusting Duncan's life in Motsamai's hands, both Harald and Claudia start confiding in the black lawyer who becomes the only barrier 'between them and the Death Penalty' (*HG* 127). They accept Motsamai's invitation to pay a visit

²⁸² Kossew, "'Something Terrible Happened': Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* and the Politics of Violence and Recovery in Post-Apartheid South Africa,' 140.

²⁸³ Ibid.

to his house, though they ‘had never been to a black man’s home before’ (*HG* 165). Conquered by the cheerful and informal atmosphere of the ‘extended’ black family – ‘a brother-in-law, someone’s sister, someone else’s friend; unclear whether these were all guests or more or less living in the house’ (*HG* 167) – Harald and Claudia find some short-lived moments of relief from the anxiety of Duncan’s awaiting sentence. Claudia is even pictured dancing with a black man, ‘the skilful angles of her feet in response to her partner’s,’ their dancing imagined as ‘an assertion of life that was hidden in each’ (*HG* 175).

Although the Lingards’ dependence on Motsamai exemplifies the shifting of power relations between blacks and whites in the new South Africa, the description of the black lawyer is not very convincing and invalidates his function as a representative from the ‘Other Side.’ The character of Motsamai is indeed conceived as ambivalent: his English is described as ‘staccato and fluent’ but also ‘strongly accented’ with the ‘reverberating bass murmurs customary to [African languages] discourse’ (*HG* 40); he blends Western and traditional African appearance in his ‘well-cut suit’ and his ‘19th century African chief’s wisp of chin-beard’ (*HG* 244); he is a man ‘who has mastered everything, all contradictions that were imposed upon him by the past’ (*HG* 40). His physical features are depicted in stereotypical terms: ‘the whites of his eyes [...] strikingly clear-cut in his small mahogany face as the glass eyes set in ancient statues’ (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the reader does not have access to the interiority of Motsamai, who is mainly conveyed through the consciously liberal-minded yet unconsciously limited by old racial prejudices of Harald and Claudia, the main filters of the narrative. Stobie stresses the point that ‘Gordimer thus ironically renders the zone of racial alterity foreign, even while her purpose is to illustrate the necessity for change in post-apartheid political dispensation.’²⁸⁴ From her standpoint as a white South African writer with Jewish and Anglo-Lebanese origins, the author perhaps is expressing the complexities of finding a ‘new’ language to represent the Other in the new South Africa. Gordimer’s flawed depiction of the black lawyer Motsamai echoes Coetzee’s awareness of the limitations of language to provide a rounded description of the black Other, Petrus in *Disgrace*.

Before focusing on the character of Duncan, it is necessary to discuss more extensively the narrative style adopted by the text. As already mentioned, the main

²⁸⁴ Stobie, ‘Representations of “the Other Side” in Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun*,’ 73.

focus are Harald and Claudia and the story is primarily seen through their eyes. In accordance with Gordimer's transition from the conventions of formal realism to modernist elements witnessed in her late fiction, *The House Gun* is characterised by the use of interior monologue of the main characters/filters of the narrative and a visible avoidance of quotation marks for speech – with particular reference to the dialogues between Claudia and Harald. Here is an exchange chosen (almost) at random:

He was a happy boy. Wasn't he. Claudia did not have to ask Harald that question. Of course he was. What did they have to recall from what – the lawyer attributed to them – they 'thought over and done with'. As if there were to be something hidden; from him; from themselves. What did Duncan want of them. What did he need of them.

Have you still got the letter?

One of those box files in the old cupboard we brought when we moved. But there's only the first page.

Yes, he remembered; they had thought of it, unavoidable, in all their confusion after that Friday night. *A terrible thing happened* the boy wrote. They had accused each other over who was or was not responsible to tell their son *we're always there for you. Always.* (HG 158)

This is one of the many examples where Claudia and Harald attempt to comprehend their son and his actions. This particular episode refers to the aftermath of one of the Lingards's many visits to Hamilton Motsamai to discuss the defence strategy: as Motsamai wants to know more about Duncan's life, he has asked the Lingards to help him understand the young man, and the couple is now recalling the episode of Duncan's schoolmate's suicide.

Clingman argues that Gordimer's novel enacts a new mode of communication in post-apartheid South Africa, which is located through 'oscillation' (Harald and Claudia) and 'triangulation' (Harald, Claudia and Duncan) of voice, consciousness and perspective. He places special emphasis on the fact that Harald and Claudia are rendered as 'he/she' at crucial moments of decision and perception.²⁸⁵ Following his reasoning:

The implication is that Harald and Claudia are in this situation together, must make sense of the impossible together: that awareness is distributed, collective, and collaborative, even when different. *Oscillation* becomes a less sharp, in its

²⁸⁵ An example from the text might be after the messenger's announcement of Duncan's arrest: 'He/she. He strides over and switches off the television. And expels a violent breath. So long as nobody moved, nobody uttered, the word and the act within the word could not enter here. Now with the touch of a switch and the gush of a breath a new calendar is opened. The old Gregorian cannot register this day. It does not exist in that means of measure' (HG 5).

essence a more *forgiving*, mode of representation; for Gordimer's work it becomes a different version of perception and – in its deepest sense – communication in South Africa.²⁸⁶

I partially agree with Clingman's observation: the slash mark 'he/she' might suggest an oscillation of communication between Harald and Claudia – rather than a sharp separation and incomprehension – and, at the same time, it might also imply a certain degree of their sharing the burden of the knowledge of Duncan's offence. However, I argue that the use of indirect discourse, multiple focalisers, and the avoidance of quotation marks aim to call into question the very process of communication. Instead of being 'forgiving' – and, in a sense, reconciliatory – Gordimer's writing style dramatises the ambiguities and difficulties to understand and represent the Other in post-apartheid society: the Other being Duncan, but also the black lawyer as I have discussed above. In this regard, Stobie underlines that 'such unsettling techniques have the effect of rendering relative a number of issues: truth claims, memory, the ability to know another human being, or even oneself.'²⁸⁷ The passage I quoted earlier from the novel perfectly stages the doubts, the questions, and this effect of rendering relative the knowability of another human being.

In spite of the fact that the novel is about Duncan's crime and punishment, the character of Duncan is almost absent from the text, insomuch as the narrator wonders 'why is Duncan not in the story?' (*HG* 151), and 'Again, why is Duncan not in the story?' (*HG* 191). Elaborating on this, Medalie highlights that although some of Duncan's private reflections are produced in the text, he remains an enigmatic figure, and he identifies this with a modernist technique where 'the rendering of subjectivity serves only to deepen inscrutability revealing the inner life is not the same as explicating it.'²⁸⁸ In the post-apartheid world of *The House Gun*, who Duncan Lingard is, what he does, the reasons that motivate his actions are thereby ultimately indeterminate. The indefinite nature of Duncan's character is also mirrored in his sexual choices: albeit the term bisexual is never mentioned in the text, Duncan has love affairs with both boys (Carl Jespersen) and girls (Natalie). According to Stobie, Duncan functions multiply in the text: on the one hand, he embodies white violence and shame, inherited from the past and the feeling of guilt of the 'beneficiaries' of apartheid; on the

²⁸⁶ Stephen Clingman, 'Surviving Murder: Oscillation and Triangulation in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000): 149.

²⁸⁷ Stobie, 'Representations of "the Other Side" in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' 65.

²⁸⁸ Medalie, "'The Context of the Awful Event': Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' 642.

other, his bisexuality provides a new lens through which both his parents and the reader may reconceptualise differences and relationships in post-apartheid South Africa. Adopting Stobie's words, bisexuality 'represents a space of anxiety, related to excess, unappeasable appetite and violence, but also a space of opportunity [...] a mysterious ability to adapt which is essential in contemporary South African society.'²⁸⁹ Despite the inconclusive and uneasy resonances of Gordimer's deployment of bisexuality,²⁹⁰ I would argue that the hybridity underpinning bisexual subjectivity works convincingly to suggest the uncertainty and ambiguity of the period of transition which characterises South Africa in the '90s. It also invites us to read beyond binary and definite categories in relation to the apartheid era, but also to the TRC's rigid demarcation between victim and perpetrator.

Another important symbol of *The House Gun* is the child of Duncan's girlfriend. Despite having an uncertain heritage – being either Duncan's or Carl Jespersen's baby – Natalie's child provides hope, rebirth, a promise for the future, and a narrative commitment to hybridity. Writing on the ending of the novel, Clingman underscores that the figure of the child makes this text Gordimer's most optimistic in a long time:

In such a schema – not a triumphalist one by any means – Gordimer figures into this, her first novel set in the postapartheid world, the oscillating profusion of voices that must make South Africa's future, transcending the past by building new relations beyond the fixed geometry of the old, offering a vision of possibility.²⁹¹

The presence of the child is also significant at a more important level: the characters' reaction to this new birth indicates to what extent they are willing to negotiate reconciliation with the past. Whereas some scholars suggest that Harald and Claudia find 'a new way of living in the new South Africa, no longer cocooned in their own ignorance, and agreeing to take some responsibility for Natalie's baby,'²⁹² I rather argue that their attitude suggests a much more compromised level of reconciliation with the

²⁸⁹ Stobie, 'Representations of "the Other Side" in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' 71.

²⁹⁰ Bisexuality is, in fact, indirectly associated with the lack of restraint, for example, embodied by both Jespersen who is homosexual but has sexual intercourse with Duncan's girlfriend, and Duncan who is driven to kill his former lover.

²⁹¹ Clingman, 'Surviving Murder: Oscillation and Triangulation in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' 156.

²⁹² Kossew, "'Something Terrible Happened': Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* and the Politics of Violence and Recovery in Post-Apartheid South Africa,' 142. See also Stobie, 'Representations of "the Other Side" in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*,' 72.

past. After Duncan's sentence, for instance, the narrator underlines how the couple is reclaimed by its old ways of life:

Then old routines began to draw them along, in a return: the old contacts of every day, the context of responsibilities, faces, documents, decisions affecting others, whether to prescribe this or that antidote for someone else's kind of pain, whether the rise in bank rates could be contained without raising the monthly payments on housing loans, decisions in which a dead man on a sofa, a trial, seven or five years, had no relevance. Nothing else for it; nothing else for them. (HG 279-280)

The contact with the 'Other Side' seems to regress to the period prior to the trial and their dependence on the black lawyer: Harald and Claudia, in fact, lose touch with Motsamai and Duncan's black homosexual friend Khulu, who had almost become an 'adopted' son during the trial, always supporting and sitting beside the Lingards. As concerns Natalie's baby, they are reluctant to assume responsibility for him, and, only after Duncan's request, do they accept to financially help the child, but on the condition that 'arrangements should be made by Motsamai, and not in personal contact with them' (HG 291). Duncan hopes that perhaps in time Harald and Claudia will accept the child as part of their family, but as for the present situation they prefer avoiding any kind of contact with him and his mother Natalie.

By contrast, the character of Duncan embodies a new form of reconciliation, which is actualised through blurring the boundaries in opposing pairs such as homonormativity and homosexuality, victim and perpetrator, life and death. Recalling a passage from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, in the solitude of his cell Duncan realises the unbreakable bond between victim and perpetrator:

The passage about the one who did it and the one to whom it was done. 'It is absurd for the murderer to outlive the murdered. They two, alone together – as two beings are together in only one other human relationship, the one acting, the other suffering him – share a secret that binds them forever together. They belong to each other.' (HG 282)

Duncan, Carl Jespersen, and Natalie function simultaneously as victim and perpetrator thus making unclear the differences between the two distinct categories – Carl and Natalie, the treacherous adulterous couple, and Duncan, the murderer: 'Carl acted, I suffered him, I acted, Natalie suffered me, and that night on the sofa they acted and I suffered them both. We belong to each other' (ibid.). They share a secret 'that binds [them] forever together' (HG 282) even beyond Carl's death, and the product of this secret is Natalie's child: 'is it a girl, it looks like Natalie/Nastasya. No, it's a boy, it

looks like us, Carl and Duncan' (*HG* 243). Despite the uncertain paternity, Duncan decides to take care of Natalie's child, and, with his final gesture, he recognises the promise of life – no matter how ambivalent and contradictory – which is incarnated in the baby:

But I have to find a way. Carl's death and Natalie's child, I think of one, then the other, then the one, then the other. They become one, for me. It does not matter whether or not anyone else will understand: Carl, Natalie/Nastasya and me, the three of us. I've had to find a way to bring death and life together. (*HG* 294)

The child and, most importantly, his hybrid heritage represent a way to bridge the gap that separates victim and perpetrator, or, in this case, Carl, Natalie and Duncan, thus bringing together the dead with those still living.

Duncan's journey towards the reconciliation of opposites is also conveyed through his readings in the confinement of his cell. Dismissing Oedipus' self-mortification for his crime, Duncan exalts Odysseus's murder of Antinous – the most ferocious of Penelope's suitors – demonstrating his awareness that 'violence is a repetition we don't seem to be able to break' (*ibid.*). The allusion to Homer's epic poem *Odyssey* is by no means casual: like Duncan, Odysseus is both a victim and a perpetrator. After a twenty-year absence from his kingdom and his wife Penelope – first the ten-year Trojan war, then his ten-year return journey – Odysseus reaches Ithaca to discover that his household has been threatened by a group of unruly suitors. From the status of victim for his past suffering, the epic hero becomes a brutal avenger and slaughters all the suitors. By quoting the *Odyssey*, Duncan acknowledges the violence which still affects post-apartheid South African reality, and, most importantly, the contradictions and ambiguities which characterise that reality, a reality where victim and perpetrator belong to each other.

The House Gun pictures a society still pervaded by violence and old prejudices, where it is difficult to distinguish between individual and collective responsibility, the roles of victim and perpetrator, making the truth commission's aim of establishing the truth about the past arduous and, at the same time, ambiguous. In response to the TRC's deployment of strict definitions and binary categories through which it attempted to analyse the past, the novel advocates the existence of multiple perspectives, different pathways to be found in hybrid and contradictory natures as Duncan, who encompasses death and life, good and evil, victim and perpetrator.

3.3 Confession vs forgiveness, private vs public: alternative pathways to the TRC's amnesty deal

3.3.1 Crime and punishment in *The House Gun*

In addition to challenging the Commission's defined roles of victim and perpetrator, *The House Gun* also allows us to make a direct comparison with the TRC amnesty deal of forgiveness in exchange for 'public' truthful confessions by wrongdoers. As affirmed by the narrator, 'this is not a detective story' (HG 16) implying that despite the personal dimension of this domestic strategy, the novel does not focus on the murder itself but rather on issues of guilt, justice, punishment and expiation. Unlike detective stories where the reader is engaged with finding out the identity of the culprit through the guide of either the police or private detectives, in *The House Gun* there is no mystery to solve because Duncan's murderous act is revealed from the very beginning. The attention rather hinges on Duncan's trial and sentence, and on his parents' attempts to come to terms with this painful discovery. In embarking on questions about truth, justice, punishment and forgiveness, borrowing Kossew's words, Gordimer 'is presenting a kind of microcosm of the wider political process of remembering, forgetting and reconciling that was being played out in the [TRC] hearings.'²⁹³

The enactment of Duncan's trial is clearly reminiscent of the procedure of the amnesty hearings where witnesses were cross-examined in the attempt to establish the truth and potentially grant amnesty to those perpetrators who had sincerely acknowledged their responsibility in their politically motivated misdeeds. However, given the fact that the concept of amnesty does not include any kind of sentence or punishment, Gordimer's novel further invites us to reflect on whether truth is really attainable and whether the trial system is a better way to serve justice and act as an instrument of reconciliation.

The narrative orbits around the personal meanings of the 'truth' of Duncan's story. Poyner emphasises that:

²⁹³ Sue Kossew, "'Something Terrible Happened': Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* and the Politics of Violence and Recovery in Post-Apartheid South Africa,' 134.

In a novel in which little actually happens, we experience through this painstaking exhumation of truth his parents Harald's and Claudia's very private anguish over the shooting – there is no doubt over the young man's guilt – which allows Gordimer to move the discussion of 'truth' into the private, familial sphere.²⁹⁴

The first part of the novel is indeed dedicated to the Lingards' endeavour to understand the *facts* and the motives which led Duncan to commit such a personal crime of passion. Harald is particularly engaged with finding the truth and tries to revise the facts analytically:

Charge sheet. Indictment. Harald kept himself at a remove of cold attention in order to separate what was *evidence* against *interpretation* of that *evidence*. Circumstantial: that day, that night, Friday, 19th January, 1996, a man was found dead in a house he shared with two other men. David Backer and Nkululeko 'Khulu' Dladla came home at 7.15 p.m. and found the body of their friend Carl Jespersen in the living-room. He had a bullet wound in the head. He was lying half-on, half-off the sofa, as if (*interpretation*) he had been taken by surprise when shot and had tried to rise. He was wearing thonged sandals, one of which was twisted, hanging off his foot, and beneath a towelling dressing-gown he was naked. There were glasses on an African drum beside the sofa. One held the dregs of what appeared to have been a mixture known as a Bloody Mary – an empty tin of tomato juice and a bottle of vodka were on top of the television set. The other glasses were apparently unused; there was an unopened bottle of whisky and a bucket of half-melted ice on a tray on the floor beside the drum. (*Evidence combined with interpretation.*) There was no usual disorder in the room; this is a casual bachelor household. (*Interpretation.*) (HG 14-15, emphasis added)

As it emerges from the above passage, evidence – *fact* – is entangled with the process of interpretation, which, by definition, might vary according to different perspectives thus affecting the 'truth.' The absolute truth of a story appears to be inevitably dependent on interpretation and subjectivity. This is further confirmed when Senior Counsel Hamilton Motsamai discloses to Harald and Claudia that Duncan had had an homosexual relationship with the victim, Carl Jespersen: not only did Carl betray Duncan's friendship by having sexual intercourse with his current girlfriend, Natalie, but he was also Duncan's former lover who had rejected him and broken up the affair. This revelation is by no means enlightening about the motives behind Duncan's murderous act, but, at the same time, its truthfulness is not directly corroborated by Duncan. The narrative, in fact, mainly focuses on Harald's and Claudia's perspectives, who 'knew nothing. Nothing. That was it, that was so! It was an accusation, not from the lawyer, but from each to the other' (HG 114); while Duncan and his perspective are left on the

²⁹⁴ Poyner, 'Rerouting Commitment in the Post-Apartheid Canon. TRC Narratives and the Problem of Truth,' 185.

margins of the narration. The reader does not have access to the young man's consciousness and inner thoughts – except from a few glimpses at the end of the novel – and the whole *truth* of Duncan's story is consequently jeopardised by this lack of perspective.

It is then not a coincidence that during the trial there emerge different versions and interpretations of Duncan's character and actions; the State's and the defence's psychiatrists offer different pictures of Duncan's state of mind. According to the former, Duncan:

[...] is an individual in whom self-control has been strongly established since childhood. It is an axiom of his middle-class background. He is not led by emotion to act on impulse, he's deliberate in every course of action he takes, whatever that might turn out to be. (HG 200)

While the defence's psychiatrist lingers on Duncan's emotional stress which affected his ability to discern right and wrong:

[The defence's psychiatrist] found the accused to have been precipitated into a space of dissociation from what he was doing on the evening of January 19th, unable to exert proper control over his actions, which culminated in the death of Carl Jaspersen. (HG 227)

Relying on the conventions of forensic investigation, Gordimer presents conflicting interpretations of Duncan's state of mind when he shot the victim, and, in so doing, she denies ultimate knowability.²⁹⁵ In addition to exposing the contradictory nature of the truth and of the process of establishing that truth, Gordimer also wonders 'does the truth count? Can the truth save you?' (HG 257), in ways that provide thoughtful reflections on the TRC's assumption that the uncovering of the truth can heal and contributes to reconciling the country. Though it could be argued that the act of forgiving should be spontaneous and independent from the perpetrator's behaviour, it is undeniable that the TRC believed in mutual forgiveness and reconciliation between victim and perpetrator, and, to achieve that, it was paramount for the perpetrator to confess his crimes and be accountable for them by showing a certain level of contrition. However, *The House Gun* problematises the interdependence between truth and forgiveness promoted by the Truth Commission, and affirms a more complicated and unsettled viewpoint: 'A judge knows everything. He's the vicar of the god of justice, as the priest is the vicar of God [...]

²⁹⁵ See Simon Lewis, 'Under the Sign of the Gun: Welcome to the Postmodern Melancholy of Gordimer's Post-Apartheid World,' *Critical Survey* 11, no. 2 (1999): 64-76.

This knowledge, it's the basis of justice, isn't it? To know all is to forgive all? – no, that's fallacious' (*HG* 261).

Consistent with this position, Duncan has confessed his crimes and he is ready to accept the consequences of his own actions, but, in a similar way to David Lurie in *Disgrace* as I discuss later, he has not shown any sign of remorse or desire to be forgiven during the trial. Here, Duncan meditates on the question of remorse, and on his parents' attempt to understand his crime:

[Duncan] knows that there is the unanswered question in their regard on him every time they visit; needing a response. The judge stated it as a fact, not a question. 'He has shown no remorse'. How could they know, any of them, what they have a word for. How could they know what they are thinking, talking about. Harald and Claudia, my poor parents, do you want your little boy to come in tears to say I'm sorry? Will it all be mended, a window I smashed with a ball? Shall I be civilized a human being again, for the one, and will God forgive and cleanse me, for the other. Is that what they think it is, this thing, remorse. (*HG* 281)

Duncan locates remorse beyond mere performance and empty words to be said especially in the public context of the trial. Moreover, Duncan's invocation of religion invites a comparison with the TRC and its use of the Christian discourse of confession and forgiveness in the public spheres of politics and law. In this regard, I agree with Poyner's observation which suggests that:

Duncan recognizes the banality to which confession and accountability have been reduced under the auspices of 'Justice': that saying sorry in contexts such as this – Duncan's trial but also, by analogy, the Truth hearings – is inadequate recompense for the crimes committed both outside and under apartheid.²⁹⁶

Gordimer's interest in restoring the issues of confession, contrition, and forgiveness to a more private and personal level is also conveyed by her critical insistence on the theatrical aspect of Duncan's trial: 'So it was all a performance, for them, for the judge, the assessors, the Prosecutor, even Motsamai. Justice is a performance' (*HG* 237). This criticism echoes the TRC's need for public confession of human rights violations and the public performance of repentance and forgiveness as the main path to reconciliation. Concerning this, Michiel Heyns argues that the accounts of the agents of apartheid before the TRC amnesty hearings were not motivated from a real sense of remorse, but rather from a desire for amnesty. Quoting Jacques Pauw, Heyns carries on saying that

²⁹⁶ Poyner, 'Rerouting Commitment in the Post-Apartheid Canon. TRC Narratives and the Problem of Truth,' 185.

‘[the perpetrators] may say how sorry they are, but with few exceptions the only emotion they show is their feeling of desperation about their situation, which forces them to face their victims.’²⁹⁷

However, Gordimer does not stage an amnesty hearing but a trial where the accused will receive punishment and be sentenced to seven years imprisonment. The epigraph of the novel – ‘The Crime is the Punishment’ from Amos Oz’s *Fima* – also induces further exploration of the concepts of justice and punishment and asks whether the trial system is a more efficient means to serve justice rather than the amnesty process adopted by the TRC. Here, Gordimer discusses the degree of punishment with particular reference to the death penalty. Although capital punishment had been declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Law on 6 June 1995, the situation at the time of Duncan’s story (1996) was more uncertain. Motsamai explains to the Lingards that:

[...] the penalty hasn’t been exacted for some time, there’s been a moratorium, as you know, since 1990, when the scrapping of the Old Constitution became inevitable. It’s all about to go before the Constitutional Court now. [...] Only for the time being it’s still on the Statute Book. (HG 124-125)

By setting her novel in a time where capital punishment had not been formally removed from the Statute Book, Gordimer draws attention to the debate relating to the abolition of the death penalty. Harald, in fact, attends the sittings of the Court where the matter will be discussed, and he comes to the conclusion that the decision regarding capital punishment will not reflect popular sentiment:

They – the people clamouring out there beyond the townhouse complex and the prison where Duncan awaits the verdict of his trial – they will condemn him to death in their minds no matter what sentence the judges passes down upon him [...] In the air of the country, they are calling for a referendum; they, not the Constitutional Court will have the last judgement on murderers like Duncan. And referendum or not, Harald hears and knows, his son and sleeping Claudia’s shall have this will to his death surrounding him as long as he lives. The malediction is upon him even if the law does not exact it. (HG 241)

It is then interesting to highlight the point that Duncan is sentenced to seven years imprisonment some time before the Last Judgement of the Constitutional Law decides to formally remove capital punishment from the Statute Book. Duncan’s sentence

²⁹⁷ See Michiel Heyns, ‘The Whole Country’s Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000): 45.

represents a middle way between the options ‘a corpse for a corpse, a murderer for a murderer’ (*HG* 241) – that is, the death penalty – and the amnesty process supported by the TRC. Of course, being accused of a non-political crime, Duncan could not have benefited from the Commission’s amnesty hearings. Nonetheless, his sentence implies Gordimer’s desire to challenge the TRC amnesty process which was mainly based on the public usage of the personal (Christian) mechanism of forgiving in exchange for confession, of actualising reconciliation through the establishment of the truth. In *The House Gun*, the sentence becomes both a deterrent act and ‘a measure of mercy’ (*HG* 273), ‘punishment as rehabilitation’ (*HG* 272), since the judge takes in consideration some mitigating factors and Duncan’s exceptional emotional status at the time of the crime before deciding the final verdict. The author thereby envisions a concept of justice which includes both the pardon of the amnesty process and punishment of the trial system. This concept of justice, though, belongs exclusively to the public sphere of the law, and, unlike the amnesty hearings, it does not intrude into the personal space of contrition and forgiveness of the perpetrator. The type of reconciliation envisaged in *The House Gun* thus appears to be a more complex and ambivalent concept than the reconciliation promoted by the TRC’s motto ‘truth: the road to reconciliation.’

3. 3. 2 Expiation as a personal form of contrition in *Disgrace*

Echoing both Duncan’s refusal to show remorse in the context of his trial, and Winnie Mandela’s disavowal of playing the role of an instrument of reconciliation by expressing public contrition as depicted in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, David Lurie, refuses to express publicly his remorse for his sexual abuse of his student Melanie. Consistent with his ‘passion’ for Romanticism, Lurie, however, confesses to have become ‘a servant of Eros’ (*D* 52) to justify his action before the disciplinary hearing set up by the Cape Town Technical University. After Melanie’s rape charges, the University decides to investigate these charges and to determine possible disciplinary action by establishing a committee which manifestly mirrors the TRC hearings – in particular, the Amnesty Committee hearings, where perpetrators were asked to disclose the whole truth. Significantly, Manas Mathabane, Professor of Religious Studies, is appointed as the chairman of the disciplinary committee and might be regarded as the corresponding Christian rationale embodied by Archbishop Tutu at

the TRC hearings. Mathabane specifies that ‘this is not a trial but an inquiry. Our rules of procedure are not those of a law court’ (D 48); in fact, as pointed out by Roy, ‘instead of investigating the rape charges and dispensing justice, the inquiry’s efforts seek to reach a compromise.’²⁹⁸ Despite his plea of guilty to all the charges laid against him, the committee also demands that Lurie makes a public statement ‘in the spirit of repentance (D 58), which should come ‘from his heart’ (D 54) and ‘express contrition’ (D 54) for what he did, along with accepting to undergo counselling. Lurie categorically refuses both to go to counselling and to make such a public statement; instead, he questions the sincerity of a public apology:

He shakes his head. ‘I have said the words for you, now you want more, you want me to demonstrate their sincerity. That is preposterous. That is beyond the scope of the law. I have had enough. Let us go to playing it by the book. I plead guilty. That is as far as I am prepared to go.’ (D 55)

Confiding in his daughter later in the novel, Lurie even criticises the public nature of what was required of him: ‘Private life is business [...] They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn’t oblige’ (D 66).

It is also worth noting that Lurie does not confess the rape explicitly; he rather admits to have been possessed by an ‘ungovernable impulse’ (D 52). Sanders stresses the point that the protagonist’s response to the disciplinary committee is anticipated by the author’s own observations on confession in his 1985 essay, ‘Confession and double thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky.’ In this essay, Coetzee discusses a number of secular confessions, both fictional and autobiographical, raising the question as to ‘whether secular confession, for which there is an auditor or audience, fictional or real, but no confessor empowered to absolve, can ever lead to that end of the chapter whose attainment is the goal of confession.’²⁹⁹ The author depicts the act of confessing as ‘one element in a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution,’ where absolution means ‘the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of memory [...] the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular.’³⁰⁰ By rejecting the act of ‘public’ confession as envisaged by his university, Lurie proves not to be interested in the kind of repentance that the public arena of the disciplinary committee might offer him, because repentance ‘is neither here nor there.

²⁹⁸ Roy, ‘Speaking with a Forked Tongue: *Disgrace* and the Irony of Reconciliation in Post-Apartheid South Africa,’ 706.

²⁹⁹ J. M. Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,’ *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 3 (1985): 195. See also Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 178-179.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse' (D 58). Through the character of Lurie, I then argue that Coetzee engages in questioning how the TRC transformed the Christian concepts of confession and forgiveness from private and personal moments of human beings to public instruments of reconciliation. Alongside criticising the spectacle and the public context of the TRC's hearings, *Disgrace* also challenges the cathartic effect and the idea of closure which both perpetrators and victims were supposed to experience during their testimonies. Conversely, Coetzee's novel proposes an alternative journey which entails a private form of repentance, redemption, self-reconciliation, and reconciliation with the Other.

The attack at the farm and its aftermath – particularly his daughter's principled refusal to conform to his expectations and denounce the men – affect Lurie's way of thinking and philosophy of life. Following his daughter's rape, Lurie is finally prepared to apologise to Mr Isaacs and his family for what he has done to Melanie, and ask for their forgiveness. Moving from the public context of the university disciplinary hearing and its demand of a public statement, he is willing to 'say what is on [his] heart' (D 165) in the private setting of the Isaacs's house: 'I am sorry for what I took your daughter through. You have a wonderful family. I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs Isaacs. I ask for your pardon' (D 171). To express the remorse he refused to show at the public inquiry, he humbly 'gets to his knees' (D 173) before Mrs Isaacs and Melanie's younger sister 'and touches his forehead to the floor' (ibid.). Through the example of Lurie's gesture, Coetzee is restoring to the moments of confession and contrition that dimension of privacy and personal connection with the Other that the TRC had undermined in the public context of its hearings. It might be argued that the theatricality and performativity of this gesture are reminiscent of the public spectacle of the TRC hearings. I think, though, that the context and the type of audience are significantly different here: in a way reminiscent of the private gathering of waiting women enacted in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, Lurie chooses his own audience in front of whom he performs his act of contrition and asks for forgiveness, rather than passively accepting the public setting of the University disciplinary committee. This gesture, however, only represents a first step of his long private journey to redemption for his wrongdoing and it cannot change his state of disgrace. Conversely, Lurie suggests to Mr Isaacs that his disgrace is a permanent state of being:

In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy

to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. It is enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term? (*D* 172)

Lurie is willing to accept his disgraceful condition as the punishment he deserves, but he claims his right to decide ‘his own terms’ in dealing with his shame.

A shift of his philosophy is also symbolised by Lurie’s resolution to reformulate his project *Byron in Italy* by altering the focus of his artistic work. Moving away from an emphasis on Byron, he tries to give voice to his mistress, Teresa Guiccioli, now ‘middle aged... a dumpy little widow’ (*D* 181), asking whether he ‘can find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman’ (*D* 182), and later to Byron’s abandoned daughter Allegra. In this new version, Teresa is trying to give voice to her lover – who is long dead – while Lurie, ‘the man in the ransacked house’ (*D* 183) is trying to give voice to the woman. L. Graham points out that ‘in his quest for the resonance of hidden voices and stories, Lurie discovers a certain amount of empathy and care, for the “plain ordinary” Bev Shaw,’³⁰¹ a volunteer who runs the animal refuge and with whom he starts a ‘love affair,’ although she is ‘a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck’ (*D* 72). In the process of reimagining his operetta, Poyner suggests that Lurie also revises ‘his own interpretation of the land (Lucy’s homestead) within a Wordsworthian schema,’³⁰² finally choosing the poet of Nature and Imagination over Byron’s salaciousness. On first sight, he had depicted Lucy’s farm as ‘poor land, poor soil [...] Exhausted. Good only for goats’ (*D* 64); now he is able to appreciate the ‘romantic’ beauty of the countryside:

The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard. City boys like him; but even city boys can recognize beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away. (*D* 218)

Perhaps, the most important change in Lurie’s worldview is signalled by his relationship with animals, which also dramatises his relationship with the Other. Boehmer rightly observes that ‘the primary other in the alternative ethical schema explored in *Disgrace* is not human, not historically degraded human, but the “wholly

³⁰¹ L. Graham, ‘Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,’ 443.

³⁰² Poyner, ‘Truth and Reconciliation in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,’ 69.

other,” as Spivak has described it – in this case, the extreme alterity of the stray dog.³⁰³ In the first half of the novel, Lurie shows his lack of concern and empathy for the ‘wholly marginalised,’ the silent animals, which he considers as belonging to ‘a different order of creation’ (*D* 74) from humankind. In spite of accepting Lucy’s advice to help Bev at the animal clinic, ‘he is repelled by the odours of cat urine and dog minge and Jeyes Fluid that greet them’ (*D* 72). His indifference towards animals had already been foreseen while he was giving a class on Byron’s poem *Lara, A Tale*. Talking to the students about Lucifer, ‘this being with the mad heart’ (*D* 33), he states that:

[...] we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster. Finally, Byron will suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the world. He will be condemned to solitude. (*D* 33-34)

Lucifer, a thing, might be associated with the voiceless animals, the extreme other, which humans cannot entirely love. Lurie’s preconceptions of animals are, however, challenged through his contact with dogs. Indeed, his job at the animal refuge mainly consists of helping Bev put down the dogs, which ‘are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: because *we are too menny*’ (*D* 146).³⁰⁴ While Bev administers the lethal injection, he holds them still, and little by little he forms a close bond with the dogs under his care.

This new affection for animals is also exemplified by his attempt to preserve the dogs’ bodily dignity; in fact, he bags and ‘escorts’ their corpses to the incinerator in order to stop the workmen from beating and breaking their bones so that they can fit inside the machine:

It would be simpler to cart the bags to the incinerator immediately after the session and leave them there for the incinerator crew to dispose of. But that would mean leaving them on the dump with the rest of the weekend’s scourings: with waste from the hospital wards, carrion scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the tannery – a mixture both casual and terrible. He is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them. (*D* 144)

³⁰³ Boehmer, ‘Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,’ 343.

³⁰⁴ Notably, Coleman observes that ‘the words in italics invoke the suicide note – “Done because we are too menny” – left behind by Little Father Time [from Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*] after he has murdered his two half-siblings, a grotesque incident in a fictional universe dominated by the tragedy of the sexual instinct.’ Coleman, ‘The “Dog-Man”: Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,’ 601.

Lurie cannot prevent the dogs' death, but he is determined to treat their bodies with dignity and respect. As the narrative unfolds, he realises that 'the clinic [...] becomes his home' (*D* 211), the dogs are *his* dogs, and he feels love for them: during the session, 'he and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love' (*D* 219). Boehmer asserts that the novel 'thus proposes animals as the essential third term in the reconciliation of human self and human other, where reconciliation equates with the embodying of an elastic, generous "kind-ness."' ³⁰⁵ As an example of an utmost gesture of love, Lurie decides 'to give up' the dog 'he has come to feel a particular fondness for' (*D* 214-215): being conscious that 'a time must come, it cannot be evaded' (*D* 219), he enters the operating room 'bearing him in his arms like a lamb' (*D* 220). The Christian symbolism of this image can also be interpreted as a further attempt to restore the Christian moment of love, and, by analogy, forgiveness and reconciliation, to a more private and personal dimension in clear contrast with the TRC public context.

It is not a coincidence that Lurie apologises to Mr Isaacs and asks for his forgiveness while developing a growing sympathy for animals, for the extreme alterity that they represent. His identification with dogs and his respectful carefulness for their bodies constitute part of Lurie's (secular) atonement which allows him to begin the reconciliation process with himself and with the Other, especially with his daughter. With Lucy expecting a child and choosing to accept Petrus's proposal of marriage and protection, Lurie initially confesses to Bev that he is not getting on well with his daughter, and has decided to pack his bags and move out from Lucy's place: 'the problem is with the people she lives among. When I am added in, we become too many. Too many in too a small a space. Like spiders in a bottle' (*D* 209). Lurie does not understand Lucy's determination in remaining in that place with the risk of being subjected to other attacks; moreover, he agrees even less with Lucy's desire to keep the child, the product of her rape:

The gang of three. Three fathers in one [...] They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself. And now, lo and behold, *the child!* [...] What kind of child can seed like that give life to, seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine? (*D* 199)

³⁰⁵ Boehmer, 'Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,' 346.

His different perspective of the fate of animals causes Lurie to reconsider his relationship with his daughter. By the end of the novel, his destructive fury at Lucy's rape lessens and he comes to accept her choices:

So: once she was only a little tadpole in her mother's body, and now here she is, solid in her existence, more solid than he has ever been. With luck she will last a long time, long beyond him. When he is dead she will, with luck, still be here doing her ordinary tasks among the flowerbeds. And from within her will have just issued another existence, that with luck will be just as solid, just as long-lasting. So it will go on, a line of existence in which his share, gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten. (*D* 217)

Parallel to Lurie's 'expiatory' journey, Lucy undertakes her own path towards reconciling herself with the consequences of her rape. Indeed, after discovering her pregnancy, she decides not to abort and, instead, learn to love her child: 'Love will grow – one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person' (*D* 216). For the sake of peace, her own and her child's peace, Lucy is 'prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice' (*D* 208), even accepting Petrus's proposal of marriage and protection. Despite Lurie's attempts to dissuade her from staying at the farm and keeping the child,³⁰⁶ and despite knowing that one of her rapists is Petrus's relative, Lucy looks at her marriage with the man as an advantageous 'alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep in under his wing' (*D* 203). Referring to the painting of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* which Lurie recalls after the attack, Coleman astutely notes that it anticipates Lucy's choice between her father's and Petrus's proposals. He explains that after their abduction, the Sabine women decided to stay loyal to their Roman husbands – though the Sabine fathers had prohibited intermarriage – and play the role of peacemakers between the two sides. Similarly, Coleman suggests, 'in the competition between her father Lurie and her "husband" Petrus, Lucy chooses the husband.'³⁰⁷

Refusing to act in terms of abstractions – 'guilt and salvation are abstractions' (*D* 112) – the young woman is not trying 'to expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present' (*D* 112), as Lurie continues to misread her choices. On the contrary, in her attempt to understand how she can live in post-apartheid South Africa, as McDonald

³⁰⁶ Lurie even advances the possibility to sell his house in Cape Town and help Lucy to settle down anywhere safer than the farm, such as, for example, in Holland where Lucy's mother lives.

³⁰⁷ Coleman, 'The "Dog-Man": Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' 609.

argues, Lucy negotiates ‘a postcolonial future for herself and the mixed-race child she is carrying.’³⁰⁸ Proving to be very ‘adaptable’ (*D* 210), Lucy is prepared to live as Petrus’s tenant and wife, and be under his protection, rather than giving up her life in the farm and running away towards a safer place. She chooses to live like a dog:

Lucy: ‘Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at a ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’

David: ‘Like a dog’

Lucy: ‘Yes, like a dog.’ (*D* 205)

The phrase ‘like a dog’ recalls the last sentence of Kafka’s *The Trial* where the protagonist, K., is finally executed: “‘Like a dog!’ [his killer] said: it was as if he meant the shame [or disgrace] of it to outlive him.”³⁰⁹ Lucy’s choice to start at ground level, at the mercy of Petrus, is significant at two different levels. On the one hand, it overturns the colonial relationship between the coloniser and the colonised other by transforming Lucy into the (black) Other’s tenant and almost ‘employee.’ On the other hand, Lucy’s choice signals the beginning of her private ethical journey towards self-reconciliation, which opposes the quasi-religious reconciliation fostered by the public process of the TRC, where victims were supposed to benefit from a cathartic effect after sharing their painful stories in public. However, it is important to note that, unlike Kafka’s novel, the phrase ‘like a dog’ here does not necessarily equate Lucy’s self-reconciling journey with ‘abjection;’ indeed, Lurie’s redemption is made possible by his acquired ability to recognise human and animal affiliations, and Lucy’s respect and love for animals is anticipated early in the text.

Boehmer emphasises that ‘while rejecting the abstraction of words like atonement, [Lucy] lives with what has happened to her by doggedly carrying on, by practical survival’ and suggests the idea of ‘secular atonement’, which in the novel entails ‘living through the consequences of a violent action, making private accommodations with a legacy of horror.’³¹⁰ Even though Lucy’s case is distinct from her father Lurie’s, since the young woman has committed no wrongs, she has, however, benefited from the wrongs committed by her white ancestors, and, as such, she engages in privately accommodating the painful consequences of the apartheid legacy and her

³⁰⁸ McDonald, ‘Disgrace Effects,’ 329.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Boehmer, ‘Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*,’ 349.

sense of guilt for her Afrikaner lineage. In this regard, I have already placed a particular emphasis on the implications of her rape and on the reasons which have led the woman to choose silence in the aftermath of her violation in the second chapter. Whether she refuses to report the sexual violence because it is a 'private matter' (D 112) and she does not want her suffering to be misinterpreted due to racial connotations, the young woman also acknowledges the possibility that her rape might be regarded as the price she has to pay for the abuses perpetrated by her white Afrikaner ancestors, 'the price one has to pay for staying on? [...] perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors' (D 158).

Although Lurie's and Lucy's downfalls have been propelled by two very different sets of events – he actively participates in his own, while she is forced to succumb to her rapists' violence –, both father and daughter have to rise again from their disgraceful and shameful condition, willing to start at a ground level. Opposed to the cold winter with which the novel opens, the characters' new start is symbolised by 'a season of blooming' (D 216), where 'the bees must be in their seventh heaven' (ibid.). And this new start also implies a new order, 'a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus' (D 117): now Petrus is 'his own master' (D 114), while Lucy has become his tenant and Lurie the dog-man.

Through the example of Lurie's private journey to redemption, self-reconciliation and reconciliation with the Other, Coetzee shows his scepticism about the public context where the process of confession and forgiveness demanded by the South African TRC's hearings should take place. Similarly, Lucy's journey to self-reconciliation following the rape occurs in private; she even refuses to report the crime to the police because of her claim of privacy. Moreover, as many critics have highlighted, *Disgrace* does not offer a solution nor a closure but an 'input' to start the journey to reconciliation that South Africa needs after its long history of colonisation and racial discrimination. In this regard, Sanders stresses that the progressive tense of Lurie's last sentence – when he carries his 'favourite' dog to the surgery to let Bev kill him, 'yes, I am giving him up' (D 220) – suggests that 'the book's *ending* may not be an end,'³¹¹ but it pictures 'a new footing, a new start' (D 218). In contrast with the TRC's main goal to depict 'as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed'³¹² during a 34-year period of South African

³¹¹ Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, 177.

³¹² 'Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995].'

history (1960 to 1994), Coetzee's novel may be regarded as a warning that the summary of past crimes fostered by the truth commission – in this case represented by the university disciplinary committee – does not entail automatic closure and reconciliation. *Disgrace* reminds the reader that the social closure and the public process of reconciliation promoted by the TRC needs to be further extended in the private hearts and intimate spaces of all South Africans.

3. 3. 3 Playing out the aftermath of the search for truth in *Bitter Fruit*: a quest for revenge?

If *Disgrace* explores both the perpetrator's and victim's perspectives, *Bitter Fruit* focuses on the victims' reactions to the confession of the wrongdoer, the retired police Lieutenant Du Boise who raped Lydia nineteen years before the events take place in the novel. In the second chapter I have investigated Lydia's trauma and her refusal to participate in the TRC's victim hearings to tell her story of suffering: the woman chooses instead to leave her house, and drive to an unknown destination disentangling herself from her family and her painful past to start a new beginning. Here I examine the reaction of another victim of Du Boise's crime, that is, the progeny of that action, Mikey, and his rejection of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In addition to motivating Lydia's departure from her burdening memories, the confrontation between Silas and Du Boise also triggers off Mikey's quest for a new identity and his personal response to cope with the discovery of a traumatic secret of the past. Indeed, without knowing the truth about the rape, and after Lydia's hospitalisation, Mikey senses that there is something – 'a shadow, a word, a name' (*BF* 26) – that separates his parents, and, like Odysseus's yearning for knowledge, he starts his journey to discover the truth. Significantly, Dangor associates the finding and the reading of Lydia's journal with Mikey's assignment on Homer's *Odyssey* for his English Literature class at University, and with Kafka's *Diaries*, a book waiting to be read for another course. Putting aside both these volumes, Mikey starts reading his mother's journal and finds out the reality of his own birth – 'a child of rape' (*BF* 126). This discovery arouses a turmoil of emotions and memories:

Suddenly, every tender touch, hug, or kiss on the forehead she had offered him no longer seemed like a spontaneous, simple, motherly gesture. He remembered the anguished look in her eyes when she held him, and how often she embraced

him so fiercely that he feared she wanted to tell him about some great wrong she had done. (*BF* 129-130)

Pondering his paternity, he also realises that his first assumption that Lydia's rapist – and his biological father – was 'white, as a boer' (*BF* 131) might have been wrong, and that it could have been 'a traitorous black man' (*ibid*).

Confronted by the dark secret of his conception, Mikey is compelled to make a journey in search of his roots, and of a new identity, which will result in his restless walking through the streets of Johannesburg. It is not a coincidence that among his books – which he has stolen from one of his professor's house – there is a copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: Mikey's wanderings recall both Leopold Bloom's day-long wandering through Dublin, and, even before, Odysseus's long sea-travel to return to Ithaca. Wondering about the purpose of his quest, Mikey asks himself whether he is really looking for 'evidence that he is indeed Silas's, that Lydia is wrong, that her usually infallible maternal instincts had been undermined by bitterness, by her fear of the worst, when she proclaimed him to be Du Boise's bastard son?' (*BF* 186).

His quest for roots leads Mikey to approach Silas's Muslim side of family. Indeed, his sense of not belonging, and of being rootless, has been haunting Mikey for a long time, even before his new-found knowledge about his mother's rape. While he blames his parents – 'Silas is a half-hearted Dutch Protestant, his soul confused by the omnipotence of Ali Ali's Islam' (*BF* 87-88), and Lydia's 'secretive and personal' Catholicism – for not giving him 'the choice of following one of their faiths' (*BF* 86), Mikey is instead welcomed by his Uncle Amin Ali's family, and, immediately, feels he belongs there:

[...] immersed in his family, these are his people, these dark-faced, hook-nosed hybrids; he longs to go and look in a mirror, seek confirmation of his desire to belong. Lydia must be wrong! How can Du Boise be his biological father? (*BF* 189)

Starting from this first meeting, Mikey begins to read the Koran and regularly visits the Mosque in Newclare and Iman Ismail, becoming more and more familiar with Muslim religion. Mikey's turning to Islam to look for answers had also been anticipated earlier in the text by his stealthily taking possession of Silas's holy Kaaba stone, a blue gem that his grandfather, Ali Ali – someone Mikey can identify with – had given to Silas before dying.

Roos highlights that ‘as the narrative unfolds, Islam is presented as the pure alternative to a young man rejecting a degenerate and uncaring Christian/Western style of life.’³¹³ Unlike the Catholic religion, which is described in the lurid terms of Lydia’s sexual obsessions, Islam – or, at least, in this *interpretation* of its vengeful side – offers a solution to Mikey’s revengeful desires. While asking for the Iman’s help in the search for justice ‘against one person [whose actions] represent an entire system of injustice’ (BF 196), Mikey is told the story of his grandfather, Ali Ali, who had escaped from India almost a century earlier after having avenged the rape of his younger sister by a British officer. As with Lydia’s case, Ali Ali’s sister’s rape emblematises a site of both colonial and patriarchal abuse of power, which caused the young woman’s banishment from her village, ‘condemned to spending the rest of her life in a madhouse’ (BF 201). The Iman’s words untangles the intersections between power, race, and sexual abuse on women:

There are certain things people do not forget, or forgive. Rape is one of them. In ancient times, conquerors destroyed the will of those whom they conquered by impregnating the women. It is an ancient form of genocide. It does not require a Sufi prophecy to see the design in that. The Romans and the Sabine women, the Nazis and Jewish women in the concentration camps [...] white South African policemen and black women. *You conquer a nation by bastardizing its children.* (BF 204, emphasis added)

As mentioned in the second chapter, *Bitter Fruit* narrates the story of another sexual abuse: Mikey’s friend, Vinu, and her incestuous relationship with her father. Vinu tells her story from the betrayed lover’s point of view: she seems not to acknowledge the taboo surrounding incest – at first, at least – but, on the contrary, she is upset because he ‘slept with someone else. [...] My mother’s friend. Mom caught them, confided in me, weeping so bitterly. I was angry, not for her sake, but for mine’ (BF 209). Moreover, her father even decides to go to counselling, and confesses he had abused his daughter, destroying Vinu’s memories, reducing ‘our love to a case of child abuse’ (ibid.). It is Mikey, after reading some lines from *Mesnevi*, who opens Vinu’s eyes, making her face the truth that ‘there was nothing beautiful about it. It was rape, Vinu, simple, crude rape’ (BF 210). Just at that point, Vinu feels to be released from that burden and, eventually, she can weep. The text again presents an *interpretation* of Islam as a possible answer, and solution, for traumas that the TRC, and its Christian orientation, seem not to be able to address.

³¹³ Henriette Roos, ‘Torn Between Islam and the Other: South African Novelists on Cross-Cultural Relationships,’ *Journal of Literary Studies JLS/TLW* 21, no. 1/2 (2005): 64.

According to Frenkel, Mikey's execution of the two wrongdoers suggests:
 a further link to the TRC and its underlying Christian ethos where sins or past histories are confessed and forgiven. This idea is inverted when Mikey takes responsibility for punishing the sins of his own, as well as Vinu's, father. He chooses self-administered retribution, placing his actions outside of the Christian framework of forgiveness, asserted by the TRC.³¹⁴

Despite Vinu's father's confession – which, significantly, is mentioned in part two, entitled 'Confession' – and Du Boise's application for amnesty, Mikey will reject the Christian concept of forgiveness, looking instead for retribution in the homonymous section.

The novel underlines that Mikey's resolution of revenge is not affected by his encounter with Nelson Mandela, symbol of the 'New' South Africa, and strong supporter of the work of the TRC, while randomly wandering through the city – after witnessing the scene of his mother having sex with João at Silas's birthday party. In one interview quoted by Graham, Dangor, in fact, asserts that 'in wanting to forgive and forget so quickly, we swept a lot of things under the carpet.'³¹⁵ Through the examples of Lydia (as discussed in chapter 2) and Mikey, *Bitter Fruit* thus questions and destabilises the Christian discourse of forgiving after confession, one of the main assumptions on which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was built, and aimed towards, as a basis for national reconstruction. Earlier in the text, Mikey had even referred to Archbishop Tutu:

He can no longer think of the future without confronting his past. Christ, he thinks, I am beginning to sound like Archbishop Tutu. And what does *he* know? He has never been raped, nor is he a child of rape. (*BF* 131)

This passage explicitly conveys Mikey's disavowal of the possibility that the Commission, embodied in this case by the figure of Desmond Tutu, could understand, and heal, all traumas of South Africans, particularly those related to rape.

A last observation must be made in connection with Mikey's name. Throughout the novel, Mikey's search for a new identity that can accommodate his traumatic discovery about his conception is also dramatised, first, by his request to be called by his real name, 'Michael' – as a sign to 'have taken back his identity' (*BF* 206) – and, then, by his new birth, his becoming 'Noor', the avenger. In the end, Mikey thanks Iman Ismail for his help and goes into hiding after killing Vinu's father and Du Boise:

³¹⁴ Frenkel, 'Performing Race, Reconsidering History: Achmat Dangor's Recent Fiction,' 159-160.

³¹⁵ S. Graham, *Mapping Loss*, 97.

‘He, too, is going to die, Noor will be incarnated in his place. May Michael’s truth live on after truth’ (*BF* 277). Although it might be argued that Dangor risks stereotyping Islam as a vengeful religion, I think that the point he is trying to make is not essentially related to religious issues. The author’s emphasis is, rather, to challenge how the TRC adopted the Christian concepts of confession and forgiveness in the public context of the amnesty hearings. To this end, he depicts Mikey as rejecting the Commission’s and his father’s worldview to embrace something completely different from the Christian rationale. Dangor is intimately familiar with Islam, given the fact he was born into an Indian and Muslim family. Nonetheless, I would argue that the novel’s focus on the complexities of articulating trauma in a public context, and the different responses to trauma enacted by the characters steer the reader away from a religious-centred reading of the novel.

In this connection, Gunne notices that ‘there is no resolution or redemption at the conclusion of the novel,’³¹⁶ but Dangor is engaged in employing a story of rape in order to raise difficult questions and expose the TRC’s limits in addressing the pain, violence and brutalities of the apartheid regime. Both Dangor and Coetzee are interested in disclosing racial hatred and sexual violence as underpinning apartheid and still affecting post-apartheid South Africa, thus suggesting that the work of the TRC was far from being sufficient to actualise reconciliation in South Africa. I have already dwelled on the intertwinement between race and gender, and race and sex with reference to the sexual violations that occur in *Disgrace* – Lurie’s sexual abuse of a coloured girl, and Lucy’s rape by a gang of black youths – and those can be regarded as examples of post-apartheid violence. Duncan Lingard’s crime too exemplifies the persistence of violence in South Africa even after the demise of the regime, though in Gordimer’s novel the kind of violence depicted is motivated by ‘love passion’ and not by racial hatred. In *Bitter Fruit* Lydia’s rape takes place in the apartheid period, but the time of the narration, that is, the years of the TRC, is not immune from violence, rage, and disorder. Besides the brutality of Mikey’s revenge, Dangor also reveals the ambiguity, the prejudices and shame still surrounding ‘coloured’ identity. I shall return to, and further explore, the hybrid and ambivalent dimension of race and colouredness in the fourth chapter, which is dedicated to a close reading of Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*.

³¹⁶ Gunne, ‘Questioning Truth and Reconciliation: Writing Rape in Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* and Kagiso Lesego Molepe’s *Dancing in the Dust*,’ 176.

The analyses of the four novels that I have conducted in this chapter show the shortcomings of the reconciling discourse deriving from the truth-telling process and the amnesty deal, along with the weaknesses of the Commission's binary logic of victim/perpetrator. The novels are engaged with creating alternative reactions to trauma and to the perpetrator's act of confession, which belong to a more personal dimension and diverge from the reconciling pathway envisaged by the public project of the TRC. The authors do not conceive these alternatives as the only possible responses to violence and trauma, but they do aim to expose the contradictions and the moral ambiguity still reigning in the interregnum, which seems not to be ended with the work of the TRC and its efforts to promote closure and reconciliation. An interregnum made of grief and grace, anger and hope for the future, where hybridity might play a paramount role in transcending the strict dichotomy victim/perpetrator in the still long journey South Africa has in prospect to reconcile itself.

Chapter 4

Coloured Identity During and After Apartheid: Complicity, Hybridity, and Ethics in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*

Coloured
The word is out
Does the label stand
Can I stand the label

Coloured in
Coloured out
What is Coloured all about
[...]

Coloured pride
The great divide
The face we share
The roots we hide
To escape the truth
The fears inside

Black by day
White by night
Stuck in the wings
While the rest take flight
[...]

From *Distinguished Umbrella* by Malika Ndlovu³¹⁷

4. 1 Race, colouredness and the TRC

As a key instrument of reconciliation and transition to democracy, how did the TRC engage with the more complicated impacts of racial classifications of South Africa's past? To what extent were racialised identities played out within the TRC proceedings? Did the Commission move beyond the replication of binary categories of 'black' and 'white'? After investigating how the TRC dealt with women's trauma – both ordinary and extraordinary – and questioning the reconciling power of truth in particular relation to the amnesty process, this final chapter focuses on the issue of race and on the complexities of coloured identity through the analysis of Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* (2006).

³¹⁷ Malika Ndlovu, 'Distinguished Umbrella,' in *Ink @ boiling point : A Selection of 21st Century Black Women's Writing from the Southern tip of Africa*, ed. by Shelley Barry, Deela Khan and Malika Ndlovu (Cape Town: WEAVE, 2000), 46.

Most novels that I have discussed in my previous chapters reveal that 'race' continues to play a crucially definitive role in post-apartheid society, thus suggesting that the TRC's discourses of nation-building and the concomitant implications of 'the rainbow nation' have struggled to dismantle racial and racist boundaries and their ramifications. *Bitter Fruit*, for instance, unmasks how the enduring legacy of colonial and apartheid discourses of race and miscegenation have been internalised by South African society through the example of coloured identity. Here, Dangor depicts coloured people as perceived in post-apartheid South Africa as a hybrid, 'bastard kind' who 'weren't white enough in the past [...] they're not black enough now' (*BF* 215). Their beauty is also associated with impurity, miscegenation, and shame which expose the still unresolved contradictions at the heart of coloured identity formation. The author, indeed, uses terms such as 'sinister beauty' (*BF* 71), 'dirty honey' (*BF* 222), 'diabolical charm' (*BF* 244), 'bastard gold' (*BF* 274) to describe the compelling, overpowering, and dangerous beauty of Mikey and Vinu, both involved in different types of sexual transgression: Vinu has an incestuous relationship with her father, a white Afrikaner, and Mike, besides being the child of rape, has sexual intercourse with older white women, who cannot turn away from his beauty. The perception of shameful beauty is further conveyed by Lydia's immoral attraction towards her son, albeit 'she dare not explore in her own self the source of that sexual desire for her son, suppressed now, an uncomfortable knowledge reshaped into an agonized, intellectual concern' (*BF* 244).

Another example of the ongoing impacts of the old racial prejudices in the new South Africa is enacted in *Disgrace*: Lucy is a white Afrikaner and she has been raped by a gang of three black youths. Her father David suggests that if the rapists had been 'white thugs from Despatch' (*D* 159), perhaps, Lucy would be more inclined to report the crime to the police, rather than withdrawing into silence. He even insinuates that his daughter's rape was 'history speaking through them [...] a history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors' (*D* 156). David's comments invite the reader to reflect on whether in 'this place being South Africa', 'at this time' (*D* 112), it is possible for post-apartheid society to be rid of all the old racist prejudices and shape identity and interactions without a racial/racist lens.

According to Nahla Valji, the persistence of a racist mind-set and racial inequalities in the new South Africa is to be attributed to the avoidance of a necessary

and proper dialogue on the issues of race and racism during the life of the TRC.³¹⁸ It is ironic, given that the entire political and economic system of the apartheid state was indeed organised on the principle of racial divisions, that specific questions about race and racism were absent from the interrogational framework of the Commission. This is also observed by Madeleine Fullard, who asserts that:

[...] by circumscribing the borders of its mandate to violence directed at the body, and by implicitly casting race/racism and politics as two separate domains, the TRC effectively sidestepped the traumatic issues and trenchant debates around race, racism and the legacy of apartheid.³¹⁹

It is worth remembering that the TRC adopted a narrow definition of gross human rights violations, which, on the one hand, focused on bodily violations that occurred in direct consequence of political repression and strife (killing, abduction, torture, or severe ill-treatment), but, on the other hand, it ignored the more endemic everyday violence of the apartheid racial engineering. In this sense, it is particularly significant that in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (1995), there are no explicit references to racism or race, apart from the national desire to build a ‘future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex.’³²⁰ It is surely no coincidence that, though confirming the existence and the defining role of racism in South African history, the TRC final report acknowledges the narrowness of its mandate:

Racism

127) There were cases in which people were victims of racist attack by individuals who were not involved with a publicly known political organization and where the incident did not form part of a specific political conflict. Although racism was at the heart of the South African political order, and although such cases were clearly a violation of the victim’s rights, such violations did not fall within the Commission’s mandate.³²¹

Whereas those who were affected by violent physical repression could participate in the healing journey carried out by the TRC, millions of people who endured the machinations of apartheid through the system of racial classification, the pass laws, the

³¹⁸ See Nahla Valji, ‘Race and Reconciliation in Post-TRC South Africa,’ accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.csvr.org.za/wits/papers/papnv3.htm>.

³¹⁹ Madeleine Fullard, ‘Dis-placing Race: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Interpretations of Violence,’ accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.csvr.org.za/wits/papers/paprcpt3.htm>.

³²⁰ ‘Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995].’

³²¹ ‘TRC Final Report,’ Vol. 1, Ch. 4, Para. 127.

forced removals, the loss of land and their associated system of migrant labour were excluded. Fullard defines the Human Rights Violations (HRV) statements as ‘a key site of displacing the language and practice of racism from the accounts of the past.’³²² She carries on quoting a TRC statement taker who comments:

We rejected many, many cases which came to us simply because they were not falling within the political act of the Commission [or part] of the political ambits. [...] A lot of people couldn't accept the fact that because of what this ‘white’ person did to them it is not a gross human rights violation [...] the racial issue was never addressed in terms of what happens to people because [they were] discriminated against racially.³²³

Of course, TRC HRV statements and testimonies were not entirely devoid of race. Perceptions of race and episodes of racism indeed surfaced from victims’ accounts but as a corollary of the main story, namely, the story of gross human rights violations which fell into the Commission’s strict definitions. These peripheral references to the racially constructed relations of power, which determined the quality of life of many millions of South Africans, ‘formed an “uninterrogated” landscape in which the gross human rights violations stood.’³²⁴

However, the exclusion of the issue of racism resounds more strikingly in the TRC’s amnesty hearings, which constitute the most legally and politically controversial aspect of the Commission’s functioning. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act stated that ‘in order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives committed in the course of the conflicts of the past.’³²⁵ In other words, racism was not to be taken as a motive for committing a gross human rights violation, and the Amnesty Committee could only accept those applicants whose acts took place with a political objective under orders of, or on behalf of, or with the approval of, a known political organisation. In addition to this, the Act also specified some detailed criteria for assessing whether an applicant’s conduct could qualify as being politically motivated or not. Despite the centrality of race and racism in the South African conflict, then, the amnesty process acted to silence race from the accounts of

³²² Fullard, ‘Dis-placing Race: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Interpretations of Violence.’

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ ‘Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 [No. 34 of 1995].’

perpetrators, and, most importantly, this denoted an understanding of race/racism and politics as belonging to two separate domains – the one private and the other public, respectively.³²⁶ Beyond this, the most significant problems concerned the Amnesty Committee's daily decisions in determining which acts were deemed to be politically motivated and which were not. Such decisions, in fact, proved to be very controversial, and often appeared to be resolved quite arbitrarily. In some instances, racially motivated violence was deemed to be 'political' – or carried out in the name of a known political organisation –, while in others it was not, with the result that some were granted amnesty for such actions whereas others were denied it.

Rather than being regarded as a mistake or a flaw of the TRC project, one strand of academic criticism has argued that, since the Commission was precisely an instrument of reconciliation and national unity, the silencing of racism was a deliberate omission in order to pursue the image of 'rainbow' nation for the new democratic South Africa.³²⁷ Whatever the case is, the increasing focus on race and national debate around racial inequalities which have taken place after the end of the TRC's mandate – the National Conference on Racism in Johannesburg in 2000, and the World Conference against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban in 2001, for example – suggest that the work of the Commission has not been sufficient, and it is necessary to keep the dialogue on racism and racial conflict still open.

Continuing this dialogue on racism, this chapter focuses on the case of coloured identity, which has most certainly been a highly contested South African identity. Situated in the interstice between white and black racialised social identities, coloured identity has been often dismissed as a social product of the apartheid racial classification system. This reading is blind to the power relations inherent in the cultural formation and representation of Coloureds. Zimitri Erasmus, for example, emphasises the necessity to re-imagine coloured identities in post-apartheid South Africa in a way which does not deny creolisation and hybridity as constitutive of South African historical and political experiences.³²⁸ Mohamed Adhikari complains of a general lack of familiarity with the history of the coloured community in South Africa, which he

³²⁶ See Richard Wilson, *The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the post-apartheid state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³²⁷ See Fullard, 'Dis-placing Race: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Interpretations of Violence.'

³²⁸ Zimitri Erasmus, 'Re-imagining Coloured Identities in post-Apartheid South Africa,' in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place. New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town*, ed. by Zimitri Erasmus (Cape Town: Kowela Books, 2001), 21.

argues is a direct consequence of the marginality of the coloured people.³²⁹ However, despite Adhikari's concerns, I think there is an established body of literature that addresses the history of Coloured South Africans and allows readers to familiarise themselves with the racial, social, and political implications of the cultural formation of coloured identity.³³⁰

Indeed, to fully understand Coloureds' cultural formation, it must be acknowledged that a discourse of racial and ethnic classification in South Africa is rooted in the colonial period, before the establishment of the apartheid regime. Erasmus argues that coloured identities were formed 'in the colonial encounter between colonists (Dutch and British), slaves from South and East India and from East Africa, and conquered indigenous peoples, the Khoi and San.'³³¹ The result was not 'just a "mixture" but a very particular mixture comprising elements of Dutch, British, Malaysian, Khoi and other forms of African culture appropriated, translated and articulated in complex and subtle ways.'³³² However, despite different configurations, both colonial and apartheid discourses of classification are based on biological notions of identity, which have contributed to the ambiguity, ambivalence and negative connotations associated with the category of Coloureds. By analysing the South African Native Affairs Commission (Sanac) Report,³³³ Thiven Reddy highlights that its main assumption rested on the distinction between 'pure races', 'pure blood' – such as Europeans and (black) Africans – and 'mixed race', which implied the mixing of blood, such as the case of Coloureds.³³⁴ That differentiation, of course, led to all the negative connotations which were associated with racial impurity and miscegenation, and characterised both colonial and apartheid eras.

³²⁹ See Mohamed Adhikari, *Not White Enough. Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 1.

³³⁰ For relevant histories of Coloured South Africans, see Ian Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (London and New York: Longman, 1987); Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African 'Coloured' Politics* (New York: St Martins Press; Cape Town: David Philips, 1987); and R. van der Ross, *Myths and Attitudes: An Inside Look at the Coloured People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1979). Among more recent studies, there are of course Zimitri Erasmus's *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place* which I have quoted from above, and Zoe Wicomb's famous essay 'Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,' in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, ed. by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³³¹ Erasmus, 'Re-imagining Coloured Identities in post-Apartheid South Africa,' 21.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ South African Native Affairs Commission (1903-1905) was appointed to formulate a language for the state to talk about, for and on behalf of the natives, along with establishing general principles for governing the lives of the subaltern majority.

³³⁴ See Thiven Reddy, 'The Politics of Naming: The Constitution of Coloured Subjects in South Africa,' in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place*, 64-79.

Robert Young traces the origins of miscegenation back to what he identifies as the colonial desiring machine, ‘a compulsive libidinal attraction disavowed by an equal insistence on repulsion’ towards black women.³³⁵ Indeed, although perceived as morally despicable, sexual relations between whites and the natives (and imported slaves) were quite common in the 17th and 18th centuries: interracial intercourse was then unofficially tolerated in order to provide the colonists with the opportunity to satisfy their sexual desires and impulses with black women, without having the financial burden to import and support European women. Whilst turning a blind eye to this phenomenon of miscegenation, the colonists, however, ensured to maintain the political and social boundaries between themselves and the Other by some forms of sexual control. The uterine descent rule, for instance, postulated that the children of slave black women inherited the legal status of their mothers, thus maintaining the social distance with the white father and relinquishing him from parental responsibility. Another form of social control was the prohibition of slave marriages, meaning that only free persons could marry; hence, if a white person wished to marry his black lover, he had first to purchase her freedom.³³⁶ The offspring of this dialectic of attraction and repulsion were those of mixed descent towards whom the colonists tended to adopt a ‘schizophrenic’ attitude: ‘not accepting them [mixed race people] as white, yet reluctant to have them simply become part of the broader black populace (the indigenous Khoisan and other black slaves).’³³⁷

To return to coloured identity, Adhikari identifies four main features that help understand its complexity. First, the desire to be accepted into the white dominant society, with the consequence of sharing white privileges and benefits. This desire of assimilation is very important to comprehend Coloureds’ complicity with the apartheid regime, and the ensuing sense of shame for this complicity – a concept which I elaborate on later in this section. The second feature is Coloureds’ intermediate position between the white minority and the large African majority, captured in referencing coloured people as ‘brown,’ and in Afrikaans as *bruinman*. The third feature encompasses a range of negative and derogatory connotations which are attached to the

³³⁵ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, 149.

³³⁶ Concerning the uterine descent rule and the prohibition of slave marriages, I am clearly making reference to the colonial period before the abolition of slavery in 1834. For a more exhaustive recount, see Cheryl Hendricks, “‘Ominous’ Liaisons: Tracing the Interface between “Race” and “Sex” at the Cape,’ in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place*, 29-44. This article depicts the Cape area as a profoundly race-based society since the 17th and 18th centuries, when the intersections of sex and race played a fundamental part in the cultural, social, and political formation of what apartheid defined as Coloureds.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

concept of Colouredness. Coloured people are described in terms of lack or deficiency of racial authenticity. Adhikari observes that ‘coloured people were therefore deficient in the positive qualities associated with racial purity and handicapped by negative ones derived from racial mixture.’³³⁸ These features have contributed to the marginalisation of Coloureds as a group and to their own perception of themselves as marginal – the last feature in Adhikari’s categorisation.

It was during the apartheid regime, however, that coloured people suffered the most severe violations of their civil rights. The Nationalist Party imposed a racial classification system on all the citizens through the Population Registration Act of 1950, which would determine the ‘lifeworld’ of the apartheid subject. This act, in fact, required people to be identified and registered from birth as belonging to one of four distinct racial groups: White (Europeans); Black (pure blooded individual of the Bantu race); Coloured (mixed race) and Asians (Indian descendants) – though these classifications were largely arbitrary, based on considerations such as family background and cultural acceptance as well as on appearance. According to the Act:

A White person is one who is in appearance obviously white – and not generally accepted as Coloured – or who is generally accepted as White – and is not obviously Non-White, provided that a person shall not be classified as a White person if one of his natural parents has been classified as a Coloured person or a Bantu [...]

A Bantu is a person who is, or is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa [...]

A Coloured is a person who is not a White person or a Bantu.³³⁹

To perfect its classificatory system, and to avoid the crossing of boundaries from one racial group to the other, the government resorted to a series of amendments and other acts. For example, in 1959, Coloureds and Asians were formally classified into various subgroups, including Cape Coloured, Malay, Griqua, Chinese, Indian, ‘Other Asian’ and ‘Other Coloured.’ The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 outlawed marriage and sex across the colour line, respectively. The Group Areas Act of 1950 allocated each racial group to different

³³⁸ Adhikari, *Not White Enough. Not Black Enough*, 14.

³³⁹ It is remarkable to notice that the Act defined a coloured person in a negative fashion with reference to other racial groups, namely, in terms of what it was not rather than asserting what it was. Perhaps, this also reflects the fluidity and ambivalence of coloured identity, along with suggesting the point that all racial categories are arbitrary constructs rather than reports of reality. For a more exhaustive analysis on the complex interplay among race, language and cultural difference see ‘*Race, Writing, and Difference*,’ ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1986).

residential and business sections in a system of urban apartheid. An effect of the law was to exclude non-Whites from living in the most developed areas, which were restricted to Whites. Adhikari points out that the Group Areas Act was ‘probably the most hated of the apartheid measures among Coloureds because property owners were meagrely compensated, long-standing communities were broken-up, and alternative accommodation was inadequate.’³⁴⁰

Fearing to lose their position of relative privilege, and be relegated to the status of Africans, coloured political organisations responded to this increasing segregationism by adopting a separatist strategy with respect to African identity, thus reinforcing the existing racial boundaries and contributing to the exclusion and subordination of African people. Of course, some Coloureds chose the alternative to join black unity in the antiapartheid struggle, but that represented just a tiny minority of the coloured community. Feelings of marginality and vulnerability continued in the 1990s, which, alongside a sense of alienation from the African majority, led the coloured community to ally with their former oppressors and vote for the National Party in the 1994 first democratic elections.³⁴¹

This brief summary of some key points in the history of the coloured community in South Africa is certainly not exhaustive, nor conclusive. Here I want to emphasise that coloured identities were formed in the context of racialised relations of power and privilege, which deeply affected their experiences in relation to both white and black African identities. Erasmus acknowledges that ‘growing up coloured meant knowing that I was *not only* not white, but *less than white*; *not only* not black, but *better than black*,’³⁴² which made his position fragile and ambiguous. On one hand, the meaning of being coloured was associated with a feeling of humiliation and shame for being *less than white*, which also aroused the desire for assimilation into the white supremacy. On the other hand, being *better than black* justified and encouraged their complicity with the racist dominant discourses about the subordination and inferiority of the black African Other. In this sense, *Bitter Fruit*, once again, provides us with a significant example through Silas’s brother-in-law, Alec, who confesses to Silas to have worked for ‘the cops’ (*BF* 216), the police system, because he could not stand pain. In an epiphany, Silas connects Alec’s voice with one he had heard on the night of Lydia’s

³⁴⁰ Adhikari, *Not White Enough. Not Black Enough*, 4.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 10. See also Wicomb, ‘Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa.’

³⁴² Erasmus, ‘Re-imagining Coloured Identities in post-Apartheid South Africa,’ 13.

rape, and he deduces that Alec was present that night: 'A traitor. Silas stopped himself. What a crude word. Who knows what goes on in the hearts of people who are confronted with such stark choices: work for us, betray your friends and comrades, or endure unending pain' (*BF* 216). These internal contradictions are thus at the heart of coloured identity formation, and they persist beyond the apartheid regime.

As highlighted by Adhikari, Coloureds continue to feel marginalised in postapartheid society, but this time from the African government: 'first we were not white enough and now we are not black enough.'³⁴³ An explanation for this sense of marginality and of not being 'enough' might be the little attention given to specifically addressing coloured identity in the TRC healing project. While the truth commission held special hearings on women and prison experiences, alongside institutional hearings (business, health sector, legal community, media, faith community), no special hearings focused on the case of coloured people. This is not to suggest that the TRC final report disregarded the 'visible' conditions of coloured people under apartheid law, but it failed to address the historical and social implications along with the 'in-between' status inherent in coloured identity. In their essay 'Crossing the Colour(ed) Line: Mediating the Ambiguities of Belonging and Identity,' Grunebaum and Robins examine how coloured identity was (inadequately) addressed by the TRC through the analysis of a particular testimony by a coloured ANC activist and combatant held at the special hearings on prison. The two scholars place particular emphasis on how the attention was focused on 'the TRC narrative of heroic suffering and resistance, non-racialism and nationbuilding,' rather than on the witness's painful encounter with her own colouredness within the prison community.³⁴⁴ Although people from the coloured community bore witness at the TRC public hearings, the primary attention of their telling was, indeed, on those traumas which fell into the strict definition of victim provided by the Commission, and excluded racial discourses or what it meant to be coloured during apartheid and beyond.

In the light of this, I now discuss Wicomb's novel, *Playing in the Light*, which provides a perceptive example of the coloured experience during the apartheid era and beyond. First, I will examine the protagonist's quest for truth and her confrontation with

³⁴³ Adhikari, *Not White Enough. Not Black Enough*, 176. The author provides a body of evidence that the living standards of Coloureds – especially the working classes – have suffered significantly since the establishment of the democratic government.

³⁴⁴ See Heid Grunebaum and Steven Robins, 'Crossing the Colour(ed) Line: Mediating the Ambiguities of Belonging and Identity,' in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place*, 158-172.

the upsetting discovery about her coloured origins. Here, Wicomb indirectly expands the very strict definition of trauma provided by the TRC by bringing to the fore the contradictions and hybrid dimensions inherent in coloured identity, as well as in the construction of race in post-apartheid South Africa. Secondly, the novel also invites reflection on the relationship between truth and reconciliation in the context of the TRC project. The discussion will conclude with the analysis of the narrative viewpoint of the novel. By concentrating on the issue of authorship, I will focus on ethical questions raised by the narrative: who is the narrator? Whose story is this? Who has the right to tell the story? And how do these questions relate to the testimonial process adopted by the Truth Commission?

4. 2 In search of an identity: colouredness, mermaids, and hybridity

Narrated in the third person, *Playing in the Light* is set in post-1994 Cape Town, precisely during the TRC proceedings. The title evokes both Dick Hebdige's *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (1989), and Toni Morrison's essay-collection *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), which investigates the presence of blackness (especially of an African-American tradition) in American literature. Both works serve to announce Wicomb's thematic concerns in *Playing in the Light*: the presence of coloured identity in South African society dominated by white supremacy, and the phenomenon of passing for white.³⁴⁵ The novel focuses on Marion, a self-made white Afrikaner woman who owns and runs a travel agency, despite the fact she has never travelled outside the Cape Town metropolis. The novel is then constructed around the protagonist's difficult confrontation with her past and her discovery about her coloured origins. It follows Marion around Cape Town, from her flat in Bloubergstrand to her city office, from her city office to her parents' house in Observatory, where her father John has been living alone since the death of Marion's mother Helen. Marion's first real travels are both connected with her search for the truth about her past, and they take the form of identity journeys: first, to a missionary settlement near Wuppertal in the Cederberg, where the protagonist makes an extraordinary discovery about her real identity as a coloured person; secondly, Marion's vacation abroad in the United Kingdom to deal with that discovery.

³⁴⁵ In this regard, see Andrew Van Der Vlies, 'The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 588.

Marion's story is also interspersed with a narrative describing her parents' own story of passing for white in the 1950s. The practice of passing for white was a direct consequence of both the ambiguous Population Registration Act, and the devastating Group Areas Act. To secure the privileges reserved for persons classified as white, John and Helen Campbell – Marion's parents – took advantage of the paleness of their skin and of the ambivalent definition of white provided by the act, which was mainly based on appearances. As observed by the narrator, Marion's parents had 'history on their side. It was the Population Registration Act that allowed them brand new lives.'³⁴⁶ After discovering her parents' subterfuge, Marion visits the National Library in Cape Town in the attempt to do some research about the apartheid racial classification system and understand her parents' story as play-whites. To the woman's disappointment, there are no records for 'play-white;' she and the librarian imagine that play-white 'must be a condition of whiteness; but whiteness itself, according to the library's classification system, is not a category for investigation' (PL 120). The librarian then suggests they 'will have to look up coloureds [...] which doesn't make any sense, but what else can they do?' (PL 120). Since this too leads nowhere, the remaining option is to look up the classification law itself and the various amendments to the term 'white.' They find that from 1950 onwards, the legal definition of race was social rather biological, supported by baffling discourses about the appearance of a 'white person,' and more unsettlingly, in a 1962 amendment, whiteness is defined 'in terms of what is not' (PL 121). In response to these contorted and unhelpful racial definitions, Marion hears 'shocking laughter peeling from her own throat' (ibid.), which is immediately followed by the librarian's. This brief scene in the library exposes the arbitrariness and ambiguity of the apartheid racial classification system, where all definitions relied on each other, and most importantly, on a definition – whiteness – which Marion cannot find.³⁴⁷

As the narrative unfolds, it is revealed that the idea of 'becoming' white occurs when John Campbell is mistaken for white when he applies for a job as a traffic policeman at the Traffic Department in Green Point, a job reserved only for white persons. Helen interprets this event as 'a gift, a sign from above that they should set about the task of building new selves, start from scratch and not be content with what

³⁴⁶ Zoë Wicomb, *Playing in the Light* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 113. Subsequent quotations will be given directly in the text, with bracketed page numbers and preceded by the abbreviation PL.

³⁴⁷ See Minesh Dass, 'A "place in which to cry:" the Place for Race and a Home for Shame in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 23, no. 2 (2011): 144.

happened accidentally' (*PL* 128). Whether being coloured meant restrictions, 'new voters' roll, job reservation, Group Areas Act' (*PL* 151), 'whiteness is without restrictions. It has the fluidity of milk; its glow is far-reaching' (*ibid.*). John and Helen then marry hastily without the presence of embarrassing coloured family members or friends; they reinvent themselves as white English-speaking South Africans by refining 'the vocabulary of the master race' (*PL* 124). To anglicise her name, Helen Karlese transforms herself into Helen Charles, thus getting rid of the 'nasty possessive. Could it be that these Afrikaans names ended with –se spoke of an unspeakable past, of being the slave of someone called Karel?' (*PL* 128). She also has to acquire 'the correct codes of whiteness in her social and domestic conduct, dress, church affiliation, personal relationships.'³⁴⁸ Vigilance and secrecy become the Campbells' guidelines for reinvention. Helen allows herself and her husband no space within which their secret could be articulated, not even in the safety of their bedroom, which instead 'had lost its privacy too' (*PL* 124). Later in the novel, Marion will come to realise that the pursuit of whiteness is all-encompassing and 'is in competition with history. Building a new life means doing so from scratch, keeping a pristine house, without clutter, without objects that clamour to tell of a past, without the eloquence – no, the garrulousness – of history' (*PL* 152).

Although this task of identity reinvention did not include reproduction, because a child might have exposed them as coloureds and play-whites, Helen becomes pregnant and decides that her child – who 'arrived with pale skin and smooth hair' (*PL* 125) – 'would grow up in ignorance, a perfectly ordinary child who would take her whiteness, her privileges, for granted' (*ibid.*). Helen Campbell's achievement would have been her legacy to Marion, 'a new generation unburdened by the past' (*PL* 150). Helen's obsession with whiteness – and the constant fear of being exposed as belonging to the coloured racial category – transforms the woman into a rigid and unaffectionate mother who urges little Marion to keep out of the sun and stay indoors even in summer, in order to preserve the purity of her white skin. Marion's childhood consists, in fact, of 'endless rules and restrictions and excessive fears' (*PL* 60) and is devoid of friends or visitors:

[...] until they acquired decent things, from decent furniture to decent teaspoons, although, no sooner would they get a coveted object than it would be

³⁴⁸ J. U. Jacobs, 'Playing in the Dark/ Playing in the Light: Coloured Identity in the Novels of Zoë Wicomb,' *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 20, no. 1 (2008): 12.

superseded by something even more desirable, more decent. Decency, it transpired, was an endlessly deferred, unachievable goal. (PL 167)

Family members could only visit if they were fair-skinned and able to meet Helen's expectations in terms of 'proper' behavior. John is thus forced to distance himself from his dark-skinned family; his sister Elsie, despite having fair skin, is however banished from the Campbells' house due to her lack of table manners.

Interestingly, Helen's obsession with whiteness as racial purity is further conveyed by her repulsion of John's tender nickname for Marion – 'his meermin, his little mermaid' (PL 22). Helen is horrified by the hybrid nature of this mythological creature – half-woman, half-fish –, asserting that mermaids should be ashamed 'of being neither one thing nor another. No one likes creatures that are so different, so mixed up' (PL 47). Due to the ambivalent nature of the mermaid, which clearly recalls the 'in-between' condition of coloured identity, Samuelson insightfully observes that this mythological figure 'is suggestive of the negative construction of the identity from which Marion's family "passes" away ("not fully one thing or another"), and of the experience of "passing" itself.'³⁴⁹ Helen, in fact, has to endure sexual harassment from Councilor Carter in order to obtain the affidavit which defines both John and herself as white persons. Commenting on Helen's degrading bartering of sex for whiteness, Olaussen highlights that this is also presented 'as an act of complicity within a racist society – the identity she wants to attain can be reached only through an act which feeds into racist stereotypes where concupiscence and blackness converge in the white imagination.'³⁵⁰ In the article 'Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,' Wicomb discusses the intersection between sex and racial discourses, and the sense of shame associated with miscegenation:

Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Meg Samuelson, 'Oceanic Histories and Protean Poetics: The Surge of the Sea in Zoë Wicomb's Fiction,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 554.

³⁵⁰ Maria Olaussen, 'Generation and Complicity in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* 35, no. 1 (2009): 155.

³⁵¹ Zoë Wicomb, 'Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,' 92.

Helen's attempt to escape the shame of being coloured – and its intermediate status which resembles so closely the condition of the mermaid – can be accomplished only through the (in her eyes) shameful act of miscegenation. To Helen's relief, miscegenation produces whiteness and purity, not brownness and the 'degeneracy' she fears.

To return to Marion, *Playing in the Light* opens with the young woman sitting on the balcony, 'the space both inside and out' (PL 1), which signals from the outset the 'novel's engagement with being in transition, liminality and in-betweenness.'³⁵² This opening scene of the balcony is particularly interesting because it functions at multiple levels. In addition to recalling the liminal condition of coloured identity itself, it also prefigures the precarious position Marion will soon assume as she discovers the truth about her parents' story of play-whites. Besides, while sitting there, a guinea fowl dies unexpectedly at her feet, and she wonders 'will others, the enemies, line up on her balcony wall' (ibid.). In this sense, Robolin points out that 'in a novel that explores the complex terms of racial identity in the new South Africa, the death of this fowl symbolically sets the tone for the text's general mode: disturbing the settled meaning of the past and present.'³⁵³ The falling of the black-and-white guinea fowl, so ubiquitous in South Africa, might be interpreted as a premonition of Marion's finding of her coloured ('black-and-white') identity and the imminent disruption of her inner life. Furthermore, the scene of the balcony gives the narrator the opportunity to describe Marion's apartment complex, which is located in the northeastern seaside suburb of Bloubergstrand and carefully protected by high security measures:

A respect for property is precisely what this new luxury block on the beachfront at Bloubergstrand can guarantee [...] Security – you have to pay for it these days, especially if you are a woman on your own. No point in having a glorious outlook on the sea, with the classic view of Table Mountain on the left and Robben Island on the right, if you are not secure. Here, your property is inviolable. (PL 2)

The narrator's emphasis on the protection of person and property in 'these days' – which too reflects Marion's concern – suggests the necessity for fortification, militarisation, privatisation and segregation even in post-apartheid South Africa, where the past racial conflicts and subsequent violent acts still affect the country. Marion's

³⁵² Lidia De Michelis, 'House, Memory and the Nightmares of Identity in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' *European Journal of English Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 75.

³⁵³ Stéphane Robolin, 'Properties of Whiteness: (Post)Apartheid Geographies in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 12, no. 3-4 (2011): 350.

residence's proliferation of monitored security measures is also reminiscent of the Lingards' 'townhouse complex with grounds maintained and security-monitored entrance' (*HG* 3) in Gordimer's *The House Gun*. However, despite the protective enclosure, both residences are not inviolable nor immune from any perturbing news. Marion's insulation from the external world does not protect her either from the intrusion of the dead guinea fowl or the haunting past about her parents.

Her journey towards the truth is indeed propelled by unwelcoming signs such as nightmares, haunting memories and blurred images in the waters of the ocean from her balcony view. Indeed, Marion's four-poster bed undergoes a significant transformation: from a place where she could take shelter protected by the 'cocoon of draped muslin after a hard day's work, the noise of the world dampened to a distant hum' (*PL* 2), it develops into a source of unexpected anxieties, where the woman suffers panic attacks and feels 'trapped in endless folds of muslin; the bed grows into the room, fills it, grows large as a ship in which she, bound in metres of muslin, flounders' (*PL* 54). Marion has also been having recurrent disturbing dreams of an old country house with a loft:

In the dream, Marion wanders through the house. It is still; there is no one. But in the kitchen there is the smell of coffee beans just roasted and the palpable absence of a woman who threatens to materialise, first here and then there [...] Marion keeps going out to the stoep to get away from the shape of the woman, but cannot tell whether it is the back or the front of the house, and so must return indoors. In the telling, it would seem this is the key to the dream. (*PL* 30)

In a second dream, this elusive figure of the woman 'who threatens to materialise' becomes 'an old woman sitting on a low stool' (*PL* 31) in the loft, who triggers the memory of Tokkie, Marion's beloved black nanny, a sort of 'substitute mother' for the little girl. In reality, Tokkie will turn out to be Marion's maternal grandmother, who Marion was made to believe was a mere servant in order not to compromise the Campbell's façade of 'white persons.'

The link between these nightmares and reality is the picture of Patricia Williams, an anti-apartheid activist, whose photograph has appeared on the cover of the *Cape Times* newspaper along with reports of her testimony at the TRC public hearings about being tortured by the security police. Marion finds Patricia Williams's features uncannily familiar, and her image starts persecuting the young woman, like a personal ghost, who 'hisses a command to remember, remember, remember...' (*PL* 54). Marion

also comes to associate the face of the woman with Tokkie while staring in horror at the ocean from her balcony:

[...] she stares in horror at an enlarged face floating on the water, a disfigured face on the undulating waves, swollen with water [...] It is not until she goes back indoors that recognition beats like a wave against the picture window: Tokkie, it is Tokkie's face on the water. (PL 55)

On the one hand, Patricia Williams's image acts as a double, who unsettlingly resembles the dear Tokkie; on the other hand, she becomes 'a silent, personal ghost, who inhabits only [Marion's] very private life, which admittedly has expanded to include an interest in the TRC proceedings' (PL 76).³⁵⁴ Notably, Marion's interests in the politics and history of her country change throughout the novel. She initially dismisses the TRC hearings and avoids newspapers, because:

The tired old politics of this country does not divert her. She has no interest in its to-ing and fro-ing, and is impatient with people in sackcloth and ashes who flagellate themselves over the so-called misdemeanours of history, or with those who choose not to forget, who harp on about the past and so fail to move forward and look to the future. (PL 48)

The connection Marion makes between Patricia Williams and her beloved Tokkie prompts her to develop an interest in her country's political matters, 'a world she has never known, never wished to explore' (PL 74). Moreover, this connection gives Marion the 'uncanny certainty' that there is 'a mystery about her own birth' (PL 62) and drives her to start a journey to find out more about Tokkie. She assumes (wrongly as it turns out) that she is an adopted child and the old woman played an important role in her adoption. Since she does not obtain any answers from her ageing father, she decides to travel to Wuppertal, where there is said to be someone who knew Tokkie. The young woman believes that Tokkie's family would be able to give her some information about her biological parents.

It is, in fact, in Wuppertal that Marion discovers her coloured origins. Marion visits Mrs Murray who tells her that she had known a woman called Tokkie Karlese. At first, it seems that this person cannot be connected with Marion's life, but then Mrs Murray, while kneeling to bandage Marion's injured foot, has an epiphanic experience of recognition, which is reminiscent of one episode from the *Odyssey*. Similarly to the

³⁵⁴ See De Michelis, 'House, Memory and the Nightmares of Identity in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' 74.

maid Eurycleia, who recognises Odysseus while bathing him by his scar just above his knee, Mrs Murray perceives a certain resemblance between Marion and Mrs Karlese:

O gits, it's like seeing a spook, because from down here with your face tilted like that you look the spitting image of Mrs Karlese my dear! [...] who would have thought old Mrs Karlese would want to come and spook me, of all people? Now that really is something, that her shadow should fall over your face like this. (PL 97)

While Mrs Murray thinks that her house is haunted by Mrs Karlese's ghost, this is Marion's moment of truth, of learning about her lineage and that Tokkie is Helen's mother, her grandmother. The travel to Wuppertal is enlightening from another point of view, because it also exposes the Coloureds' complicity with the apartheid racist system. The community Marion finds in Wuppertal is indeed described by her hostess as 'decent coloured people' who 'voted for the Nationalists' (PL 96). Mrs Murray is making reference to what Wicomb has defined as 'the shameful vote of Cape coloureds for the National Party in the first democratic elections'³⁵⁵ in 1994, a fitting example of the ambiguous position occupied by Coloureds during the period of transition to democracy.

Marion is not alone in her journey to uncover the past, but she is accompanied by her coloured employee Brenda McKay, 'her friend and spectral double.'³⁵⁶ There are, in fact, meaningful parallels between the two young women that also reveal the different contexts in which they grew up: Marion lives in her own flat, which seems 'to spring from the glossy pages' (PL 2) of *Home and Gardens* magazines, protected by high security measures and cocooned by her four-poster bed; Brenda lives in a dangerous township and shares her bedroom with her mother, forced to listen to her 'tossing and sighing, the horrible rumblings of the old lady's stomach in the heat of the night' (PL 38). Despite these differences, they grow fond of each other and the unexpected encounter with a strange character, Outa Blinkoog, along the road to Wuppertal solidifies their friendship. The old man, who draws a 'ramshackle cart' (PL 86) full of beautiful things, is described as a 'peacock man, a brightly coloured creature from mythology, a messenger from the gods' (PL 87). Marion and Brenda share an improvised picnic with the old man, who launches 'into a narrative that has no end, each fragment leading to another' (PL 88). Van Der Vlies underlines the fact that the

³⁵⁵ Wicomb, 'Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa,' 93.

³⁵⁶ Dirk Klopper, 'The Place of Nostalgia in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 23, no. 2 (2011): 151.

narration of this enchanting storyteller evokes ‘the TRC’s project of narrative collection and collation.’³⁵⁷ Likewise many TRC witnesses who had been enduring many years of painful silence before being given the opportunity to tell their stories at the public hearings, ‘it is as if the man [Outa Blinkoog] has waited all his life to tell his story: a flood of words bursts unsolicited from his curved, girlish lips’ (*PL* 87-88). Before departing from the two young women, Outa leaves them a lantern as a farewell present, made of coloured glass which allows ‘the last hour of candlelight [to be] sweetened with bright colour, so there’s no place for sadness’ (*PL* 91). This is a gift ‘that neither one nor the other will own’ (*PL* 92), but it will come to signify inspiration and willingness for both of them: Marion is impelled to travel, a journey that is part escape from the discovery about her past and part quest for a new identity, and Brenda to fulfil her dream of writing.

After learning that her parents had turned their backs on their coloured families and community and crossed over – ‘play-whites’ –, Marion is left with ‘a terrible feeling of emptiness’ (*PL* 106) and displacement because ‘she is, after all, not the person she thought she was’ (*ibid.*). This discovery urges Marion to reflect on her own hitherto unquestioned ‘whiteness,’ and on the issue of race as envisioned in present-day, supposedly ‘non-racial’ South Africa:

It may be true that being white, black or coloured means nothing, but it is also true that things are no longer the same; there must be a difference between what things are and what they mean. These categories may have slimmed down, may no longer be tagged with identity cards, but once they were pot-bellied with meaning. The difference – that is what Marion cannot get her head around. How can things be the same, and yet be different? (*ibid.*)

Marion is in an odd place, where things are different but the same. Once she was white, now she is coloured and she wonders whether she will have to cross over to embrace her new racial identity. Yet, ‘there can be no question of returning to a place where [her] parents once were’ (*PL* 107), because those places have lost their meaning in the new South Africa. The young woman confides in Geoff, her suitor, that what she can ultimately do is to ‘keep crossing to and fro, to different places, perhaps that is what the new is all about – an era of unremitting crossings’ (*ibid.*). Through this image of endless crossings from one place to another, Wicomb perfectly conveys the sense of hybridity, and metamorphosis which characterise the post-apartheid era, where people need to

³⁵⁷ Van Der Vlies, ‘The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*,’ 586.

rediscover a new meaning for the concept of racial identity, a meaning that overcomes the rigidity and static nature of the apartheid regime. Furthermore, hybridity also counterposes the binary-based approach which informed the work of the TRC. Against the neat division between blacks and whites, between victims and perpetrators as established by the truth commission, Wicomb foregrounds the hybridity of coloured identity, by demonstrating both its shameful complicity with the apartheid state and the violations that coloured people had to experience due to that very same regime. Marion – the mermaid – is then hybrid with reference both to her newly-found coloured identity, and to her ambiguous position in the history of her country: she is a ‘victim’ of her parents’ decision to play-white, which has deprived the woman of her true origins, but she is also a ‘perpetrator’ for the privileges she has benefited from as (supposedly) belonging to the category of white people for most of her life.

As anticipated above, Marion decides to momentarily leave her business and travel to Europe, to nowhere in particular. Abdulrazak Gurnah places a particular emphasis on the role of Outa Blinkoog’s lantern in Marion’s decision to go on a journey:³⁵⁸

The candlelight glows green, red and blue through the rough shapes of glass, spreading a magical warmth. Brenda’s cry of delight is silenced by her mother, who turns from the screen to hiss but cannot help smiling her own admiration. [...]
[Marion] has brought the lantern over on impulse and now, under the warm insistent light, an inchoate thought flickers and writhes into being [...] she knows precisely why she has come to see them.
I’m going away, she says. (PL 184-185)

The most important stage of her journey abroad is perhaps in London, where Marion rents a small one-bedroom apartment and begins reading South African novels – Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974) and J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977).³⁵⁹ Paradoxically, it is in ‘this alien world’ (PL 197), where she reads narratives of the place from which she is momentarily far away, that Marion can start to comprehend the history of South Africa and think of it ‘as her country’ (ibid.). Her response to *The Conservationist* is particularly visceral – ‘the hole in her chest seems to fill up with words’ (PL 190) – and, by identifying with the anonymous ‘play-white girl

³⁵⁸ In connection with this see Abdulrazak Gurnah, ‘The Urge to Nowhere: Wicomb and Cosmopolitanism,’ *Safundi : The Journal of South African and American Studies* 12, no. 3-4 (2011): 274.

³⁵⁹ It is worth underlining that both novels are 1970s narratives of the *real* or *imagined* re-emergence of dead bodies on pastoral farms where they had been buried, a warning perhaps that the past will continue to haunt the present if not addressed properly. In Marion’s story, it is the truth about her identity that haunts the woman and drives her to make a self-knowledge journey.

with coarse features, cheap make-up, and a give-away hairline of frizzy roots' (ibid.), she wonders 'how many versions of herself exist in the stories of her country?' (PL 190-191). This encounter with South Africa through the practice of reading, combined with the lack of sunlight of the British summer, makes her cry constantly. At this stage of her inner journey, Marion is grieving for both a loss and a re-discovery of the self, and for the versions of the self she could never know. Her cry thus becomes a cathartic experience, which she decides to fully embrace: 'there is something about being cocooned in a single room, about the bleakness of the days, that must be endured, like sitting an examination' (PL 191).

The reference to *In the Heart of the Country* is also significant. Wicomb appears to engage in dialogue with Coetzee's insistence on the fictionality of fiction and with his literary agenda about exposing the ideology of power encoded into language. James Wohlpart distinguishes two levels of narrative in Coetzee's text: Magda's narrative, the story that she tells, and the narrative technique of the novel, the way in which the story is told.³⁶⁰ The novel is presented in a diary-like format of 266 consecutive sections in which Magda tells her story. Wohlpart argues that Magda attempts to subvert the ideology of power inherent in the master-slave discourse by killing her father, an old Afrikaner man, and by bringing about a new code, where she can speak to the servants Hendrick and Anna with the language of the heart: 'the words have come out without premeditation. I feel joy. That must be how other people speak, from their hearts.'³⁶¹ However, Magda comes to understand that 'the destruction of the old order, symbolized in her father, will not allow any subversion of the ideology of power because that ideology is already encoded into language.'³⁶² Indeed, she returns to the master/slave discourse in order to communicate with the servants. On the contrary, Wohlpart further argues, the narrative technique of the novel does allow such a subversion, because Coetzee 'creates a text that opens up a dialogue with the reader, a true dialogue of equality much like that which Magda desires to establish with her servants.'³⁶³ The reader is, in fact, placed in the position of participating in the creation of meaning by being 'compelled' to revise or re-interpret the meaning of a previous section in light of

³⁶⁰ James Wohlpart, 'A (Sub)Version of the Language of Power: Narrative and Narrative Technique in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 35, no. 4 (1994): 219-228.

³⁶¹ Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), 87.

³⁶² Wohlpart, 'A (Sub)Version of the Language of Power: Narrative and Narrative Technique in J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*,' 221.

³⁶³ Ibid., 223-224.

the information of a new section. The lack of coherency and the many indeterminacies allow multiple readings of the novel, but they also allow the reader the freedom to create different interpretations.

To return to *Playing in the Light*, Wicomb's reference to Coetzee's text serves at two levels. First, its elusive narrative technique creates a parallel with the unsettling narrative structure adopted by Wicomb, thus raising ethical questions as to the 'real' owner and narrator of the story and the 'real' possibility of narrating the Other, as I discuss in the following section. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that Wicomb chooses to make reference to this specific novel where the protagonist Magda fails to find a way in which she can communicate with her servants without using the master/slave discourse. Although *Playing in the Light* is set in post-apartheid time, the dialogue with Coetzee's text suggests that Marion too – and maybe the South African country as well – has still to struggle to find a language which is devoid of the ideology of power and through which it is possible to communicate with and narrate the Other, a concern that also characterises *Disgrace* (the character of Petrus) and *The House Gun* (the character of the black lawyer Motsamai).

Significantly, Marion appears not to be able to recognise some connections between her own experience and Magda's narrative:

When she turns to her book she is cheered by Magda's fictionality and the flimsiness of paper. This is what helps her to persevere with Magda's mad murders and phantom couplings: they are preferable to the stories of real people coming through walls, and what's more, *they have nothing to do with Marion*. (PL 204-205, emphasis added)

Of course, Marion has been haunted by the phantasms of the past as well as Magda has been: these phantasms – either in the forms of nightmares or uncanny images – have driven the young woman to make her journeys to self-knowledge, first to Wuppertal, then abroad in Europe. The text, however, does not provide any definite answers about Marion's response to the discovery of her coloured origins. On the one hand, she does change her attitude towards history and her country, a change which is shown, for example, by her growing interest in the TRC proceedings, and in South African fiction. The discovery of her colouredness also involves a complex revision of her relationships not only with her elderly father John, but also with his family that her parents had disavowed in the past. Marion, in fact, visits her aunt, John's sister Elsie, at Fairways, a coloured area, and confronts another aspect of her past. Another signal of the woman's

change is her decision, on her return from her travel abroad, to leave her flat in Bloubergstrand because it now seems too ‘dark, unwelcoming, unfamiliar’ (PL 209), and buy a bigger house so that her father can live with her.

On the other hand, Klopper argues that Marion ‘seems still to be trapped in repression, knowing now where she comes from but unable to act upon this knowledge, ignorant, perhaps resistant, to what it demands of her.’³⁶⁴ Once back in Cape Town, she returns to her old office routine, she ‘sits at her desk, it’s as if she has not been away’ (PL 212). Most remarkably, the novel ends with a quarrel between Marion and Brenda, which suggests that Marion still has a long journey to make to reconcile with her new identity, and, more generally, with the history of her country. At learning that Brenda has written the story of her own father John, Marion is enraged and kicks Brenda out of her car, shouting: ‘why don’t you write your own fucking story?’ (PL 217).

This lack of understanding between the two women certainly undermines their newly-created friendship, and the choice of ending the novel with a quarrel leaves the reader with unanswered questions: will Marion be able to find ‘the language of heart’ that Magda could not find in order to communicate and reconcile with Brenda eventually? Will she reconcile with the story of her parents and her legacy? Will she fully embrace her colouredness? And what would that entail? Looking at the wider TRC project of reconciling South Africa, and it is clearly no coincidence that the novel is indeed set during the years of the TRC – , Wicomb’s choice must be interpreted as an attempt to challenge overly-easy discourses of reconciliation which did not fully consider the profound contradictions inherent in racial identities, including those related to the coloured community. The author does not provide either a definite answer or a solution to the issue of ‘racial’ reconciliation – both at a personal and a historical level – , but through this open ending she invites the reader to reflect on the importance of keeping the dialogue about the past open and of searching for different answers.

4. 3 Ethics, narrative and truth

In addition to investigating the impact of the apartheid classification system on a coloured family – as well as on the meaning of racial identities in the post-apartheid era

³⁶⁴ Klopper, ‘The Place of Nostalgia in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*,’ 153.

–, *Playing in the Light* also draws attention to the narrative strategies of perspective and voice. The scene with which the novel ends, the confrontation between Marion and Brenda, has important ethical implications concerning the ‘ownership’ and authorship of the narrative.

In a similar way to the role played in Marion’s journey, Outa Blinkoog’s gift acts as an inspiring force which encourages Brenda to accomplish her dream:

All her life she has wanted to write, and literally could not get as much as a sentence onto paper, but lately, in the last few weeks [...] It started by lighting the lantern in the bedroom while her mother and the others watched television. Just staring at it seemed to drown out the noise so that, well, lying on her bed she just started writing. (PL 217)

Brenda has been looking for a story to write, and explains to Marion the reason why she could not write her own story – the story of an ordinary coloured girl – preferring instead John’s story:

Writing my own story, I know, is what someone like me is supposed to do, what we all do, they say, whether we know it or not, but Christ, what story do I have to tell? I’m no Patricia Williams, with adventures under my belt. Mine is the story of everybody else in Bonteheuwel, dull as dishwater. [...] Now your father, there’s a story – with his pale skin as capital, ripe for investment. (PL 217-218)

Marion becomes angry and accuses Brenda of appropriating her father’s story: ‘that’s enough. Get out. I know my father’s fucking story’ (ibid.). The passage continues, ‘Actually, Brenda says, I suspect you don’t’ (ibid.), hinting at the possibility that Marion might not know the whole story.

Earlier, I presented *Playing in the Light* as the narrative of Marion’s discovery about her parents’ past as play-whites and of how she responds to that. A third-person narrative voice speaks as if from the woman’s consciousness, recording her thoughts and feelings, conjuring up her memories and images from the past. Interwoven with her story of discovery, there is also the narrative of how her parents created and maintained their white identity, and some of this narrative derives from Marion’s recollections of childhood. The final quarrel between Marion and Brenda casts a new light on the novel’s narrative structure, though. As it turns out, while the narrative may tell the story of Marion, apparently from her consciousness, it may not be Marion’s story at all, but someone else’s story, someone who is herself embedded in the third-person narrative as

a character, that is Brenda.³⁶⁵ At the end of *Playing in the Light*, the reader, in fact, learns that Brenda has written a novel based on John's recollections, disclosed to Brenda while Marion was travelling abroad. The reader is, therefore, left with the possibility that the novel Brenda has written may be the very same novel the reader has in hand, which tells the story both of Marion's discovery of her coloured ancestry, and of how Brenda has come to know that story. Besides, according to this interpretation, Brenda might also be the narrator, which further complicates the narrative structure.

There are, however, some gaps in this theory because some episodes are positioned outside Brenda's ken. For example, the narrative of Helen's bartering of sex in exchange of the white identity for herself and her husband, or other family matters, such as the courtship and marriage of Tokkie, cannot be known to Brenda, since they are not known even to John or to Marion herself. Of course, being the narrator, these episodes could possibly, though perhaps not very credibly, be Brenda's fictionalisation of John's recollections of the past. Whatever might be the case, the narrative structure is certainly unsettling, and it raises interesting questions related to the authorship, ownership, and reliability of the narrative. Who is telling the story? Whose story is this? If Brenda is the narrator, is she reliable? Is she telling the truth about Marion's family's story, or has she taken some poetic license? Furthermore, does Brenda have the right to tell someone's else story?

The episode with Outa Blinkoog confirms the novel's interest in the ethics of narrative, with particular reference to the 'dangers of narrating or narrativising'³⁶⁶ the Other. While recounting her encounter with Outa Blinkoog to Geoff, Marion wonders whether 'she and Brenda imagined the man' (PL 106) and realises that 'her account of him is silly, a betrayal. Try as she may, she makes him sound clownish' (ibid.). Van Der Vlies highlights that, here, the narrative is testing 'the limits of its own hospitality, or the ability of any narrative to host the otherness of others' narratives without doing them harm.'³⁶⁷ At issue then is the ethical question as to the possibility for writers, historians, witnesses of any kind to tell other people's story without any attempts to manipulate or appropriate it. This concern is a recurring theme in Wicomb's fiction, and her previous novel, *David's Story* (2000), represents another extraordinary example where she addresses the questions concerning the representation of coloured identity,

³⁶⁵ See Klopper, 'The Place of Nostalgia in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' 150.

³⁶⁶ Van Der Vlies, 'The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*,' 587

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

and the narrative encounters with notions of ‘truth.’ The protagonist David Dirkse is a high-ranking coloured MK fighter who decides to write his story in 1991, when the old regime has started to disintegrate. To that end, he hires an unnamed, female writer, whose task is to piece together the information David provides and write his autobiography. From the outset, the novel explicitly sets out to undermine any presentation of the narrative as truth. Indeed, in the ‘Preface’, the unnamed, female writer/narrator declares that the novel ‘is and is not David’s story’:

He would have liked to write it himself. He has indeed written some fragments – a few introductory paragraphs to sections, some of surprising irony, all of which I have managed to include in one way or another – but he was unwilling or unable to flesh out the narrative. [...] He wanted me to write it, not because he thought that his story could be written by someone else, but rather because it would no longer belong to him. In other words, he both wanted and did not want it to be written.³⁶⁸

The narrator is frustrated with David’s inability to complete the story he claims to want to tell, and, throughout the whole novel, she has to negotiate his story with him, trying to assemble the fragments he brings her. The most significant gaps in the narrative refer to David’s fellow comrade, Dulcie Olifant, and her story of torture at the hands of both the security forces and the liberation movement. David is also particularly unwilling to disclose that he and Dulcie have shared some form of romantic connection. At some point, the narrator describes a specific fragmentary document David has presented to her:

Truth, I gather, is the word that cannot be written. He has changed it into the palindrome of Cape Flats speech – TRURT, TRURT, TRURT, TRURT – the words speed across the page, driven as a toy car is driven by a child, with lips pouted and spit flying, wheels squealing around the Dulcie obstacles.³⁶⁹

Borrowing Van Der Vlies’s words, in *David’s Story* Wicomb deploys the author/narrator in order to ‘undermine the veracity of any project pretending to truth,’³⁷⁰ which mirrors, though in a less experimental way, the unsettling narrative structure of *Playing in the Light*, whose veracity the reader cannot be completely certain of.

³⁶⁸ Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2000; New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), 1. Citations refer to the Feminist Press edition.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

³⁷⁰ Van Der Vlies, ‘The Archive, the Spectral, and Narrative Responsibility in Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*,’ 596.

Although *Playing in the Light* does not draw particular attention to the work of the TRC, Wicomb's concerns about the ethics of narrating the Other establish a direct connection with the Commission's testimonial practice, *and* its aims to both provide people with the opportunity to tell their stories of suffering at the public hearings, and piece together the history of apartheid South Africa through those testimonies. The Commission also worked on the assumption that the acts of uncovering the past and establishing the truth about that past would have facilitated the reconciliation among the several ethnicities of South Africa. In my first chapter, I have discussed how the testimonial process – taking statements; selecting a representative group of testimonies; the interpreting and translating procedures – created a huge gap between the original testimony and how that testimony was translated, transcribed in the TRC archives, re-told in different contexts, and, sometimes, also reported in the media. Testimonies tended to gradually lose a certain degree of veracity from the original account once people left the witness box and their stories were engulfed in the re-telling TRC machine (translation, transcription, comments and retelling in other public contexts), thus creating several perceptions/versions of the same story. The predictable difficulties generally associated with the articulation of trauma – the witness's unreliable memory, for instance – are then exacerbated by the TRC machine which, despite the aim to create a safe place for witnesses to tell their own stories, generated the production of many narrators for the same narrative – the commissioners, the translators and interpreters, the reporters and journalists, historians and other scholars. It is important then to wonder as to the ethical implications of the TRC testimonial process: who is the real narrator: the witness, the translators, the TRC commissioners, or other commentators? Who has the right to tell the story? Whose stories are these after passing from one context to another?

By challenging the reliability and veracity of the narrative process in *Playing in the Light* – as well as in *David's Story* – Wicomb is also questioning the validity of narrative projects that purport to a singular truth, which certainly include the TRC testimonial practice and final written archive – the TRC final report. In both her novels, Wicomb explores the ways in which people seek to recover and narrate the past. The choice of unsettling narrative structures and multiple perspectives thus invites the reader to wonder whether the past is recoverable in any true sense, and whether it might facilitate real reconciliation. In this regard, Scully underlines that Wicomb's novels 'resist the housekeeping work of historical writing. Writing about the past will not make

things clearer.³⁷¹ Marion, for instance, returns to her past in the attempt to better understand her present, but she finally finds little solace and no definitive answers. The novel, in fact, ends with the suggestion that Marion might not know her father's story completely. Rather than 'truth' as a reconciling discourse, Wicomb undermines the TRC's main assumption that truth is the only road to reconciliation. First, the author challenges the mere idea that the truth about the past is achievable. Secondly, she rejects the healing power of 'truth' just as Marion rejects reconciliation with Brenda in the final scene of *Playing in the Light*. Moreover, by focusing on the case of coloured identity – and on the phenomenon of 'play-white' – Wicomb is also indirectly questioning the Commission's lack of interest in the history of Coloureds. Even if the TRC could have solved the obstacles associated with the interpreting and transcribing processes in terms of veracity, the resulting truth would have, however, been deficient and incomplete. The inadequate attention dedicated to coloured identity by the TRC project³⁷² reveals the Commission's incapability of fully comprehending the necessity to move beyond the binary 'black-and-white' in order to properly address the multifaceted racial question in South African history.

Significantly, the narrator in *David's Story* asserts that 'truth is too large a thing even for those who take on vast projects like changing the world, that it can only be handled in titbits.'³⁷³ Both *Playing in the Light* and *David's Story* appear to contribute to the work of those 'vast projects like changing the world' – like the TRC, for instance – by investigating and challenging the ethics of narrative, the recoverability of the past and the reconciling power associated to that past. They draw attention to the complex case of coloured identity and the question of its historical representation – which becomes particularly relevant in the post-apartheid era depicted in *Playing in the Light* – , thus addressing those 'titbits' of truth about South Africa's racial/racist past which was instead neglected by the TRC project. Although my analysis primarily focuses on *Playing in the Light*, both Wicomb's texts follow in the steps traced by the other novels that I have discussed in the previous chapters. These two novels represent another example of how literature is able to both critique and complement the work initiated by

³⁷¹ Pamela Scully, 'Zoë Wicomb, Cosmopolitanism, and the Making and Unmaking of History,' *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 12, no. 3-4 (2011): 308.

³⁷² As I have highlighted in the first section of this chapter, not only were the issues of race and racism almost excluded from the interrogational framework of the TRC mandate, but the Commission did not even hold special hearings addressing the case of coloured identity, thus overlooking a fundamental piece of the puzzle of South African history.

³⁷³ Wicomb, *David's Story*, 146.

the TRC by providing the reader with questions, not answers, with prompts for further reflection, not closure. In so doing, they help continue the engagement with the ongoing quality of projects such as 'truth' and 'reconciliation' in a traumatised society like South Africa.

Conclusion

The line ‘Is not the truth the truth?’, uttered by Sir John Falstaff in William Shakespeare’s *Henry IV part 1*, is the epigraph of Gillian Slovo’s 2000 novel *Red Dust*. Slovo is the daughter of two famous South African political activists deeply involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, Joe Slovo and Ruth First, but, surprisingly, *Red Dust* is her only novel set in South Africa – though, of course, in her 1997 memoir *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country*, the author recounts her childhood in South Africa and her relationship with her parents. Although adopting the formulaic strategies of detective fiction and court drama, the novel attempts to offer a critical response to the work of the TRC by exposing some flaws of the amnesty deal, with particular reference to the showy performance of the amnesty-seeker/ perpetrator and the complexities and ambiguities underpinning the process of establishing the truth. In this sense, Dorothy Driver underlines that Slovo’s text proposes ‘a view in which truth and reconciliation are contaminated by power, and where any stability in the concepts of truth and memory is deftly undermined.’³⁷⁴

Set in the mid-1990s, the novel enacts the encounter between the victim Alex Mpondo, a MK activist and now a prominent ANC Member of the Parliament, and the perpetrator police interrogator Dirk Hendricks in the context of the TRC proceedings. Sentenced to fifteen years’ imprisonment in 1993 for the death of a detainee called Desmond Ngoepe, Hendricks has applied to the TRC for amnesty against the advice of his former colleague Peter Muller, once a senior member of the security force. Despite the fact that Hendricks’s sentence only refers to the death of Ngoepe, he has added to his amnesty application the torture of Alex Mpondo, in case relevant evidence emerges during the amnesty process. Hendricks’s amnesty hearing also prompts a search for the truth about the death of Steve Sizela, Mpondo’s comrade who was caught with Mpondo by the security police. Prosecutor Sarah Barcant has been called back to South Africa from New York by her former mentor Ben Hoffman to assist Mpondo oppose Hendricks’s amnesty application, and direct her questions in order to bring to light the torture of Steve Sizela.

³⁷⁴ Dorothy Driver, ‘Gillian Slovo’s *Red Dust* (2000),’ *Scrutinity 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 12, no. 2 (2007): 108.

Red Dust, like the other texts discussed in this thesis, supports the main argument of my thesis, that is, literature is a crucial site in which to interrogate and extend the key issues unearthed by the historical and social project of the South African truth commission. The TRC has been an engaging source of writing – fictional and non-fictional – since the 1990s, and the novels analysed in this thesis have been selected as exemplary texts among the many others, which present stories dealing with issues such as memory and truth, guilt and confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.³⁷⁵ Throughout the explorations of *The House Gun*, *Mother to Mother*, *Disgrace*, *Bitter Fruit*, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, and *Playing in the Light*, I have delineated a definition of literature as a social and historical instrument, which is able to complement the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission by challenging, criticising, and accommodating some flaws and ambiguities that have characterised this project of collective remembering. The function of these texts, in my readings, has been to give the TRC and people's testimonies an afterlife, in order to invite readers to keep the dialogue about the past open and to actively think about the strategies adopted in addressing that past.

The TRC was primarily founded to assist South Africa during the period of transition from the apartheid regime to a democratic order by exposing the violence that shaped the history of the country, and fostering reconciliation among all South Africans through the truth-telling and testimonial practices. To accomplish its main goal, the Commission had to identify the definition of gross human rights violations, and the distinction between 'victim' and 'perpetrator' of the apartheid system. The Commission's reconciling discourse was based on the credo 'truth: the road to reconciliation,' which assumed that the full recoverability of the truth about the past was possible through the establishments of the roles of 'victim' and 'perpetrator,' and, following on from this, that the truth had an effective healing and cathartic power.

My discussion of the six novels has shown the shortcomings and inadequacy of these definitions and categories, which proved unable to encompass all the nuances and complexities which have characterised South Africa's interregnum and recent past. On the one hand, the TRC attempted to give justice to those people who had been silenced by the oppressive and racist apartheid rule. On the other hand, this truth commission

³⁷⁵ Some other examples might be Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995, original edition *Die Reuk van Appels*, 1993), Mike Nicol's *The Ibis Tapestry* (1998), and Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). See Maria Paola Guarducci, *Dopo l'Interregno. Il Romanzo Sudafricano e la Transizione* (Roma: Aracne, 2008).

proposed a strict definition of ‘victim’ of gross human rights violations, which was mainly based on extraordinary single-event bodily violations, and divided the South African society in two main groups, ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators.’ Although privileging the encounter between them as the main focus, the TRC continued to adopt a binary approach similar to the one used by the apartheid regime – black versus white; ‘oppressed’ versus ‘oppressor,’ colonised versus coloniser –, thus failing to address the ‘grey zones’ and ‘in-between’ positions in terms of race, gender, and registers of trauma.

Literature, by contrast, has powerfully addressed these ‘grey zones’ by enacting the uncertainty, instability, and multiple hybridities characterising the apartheid system, the period of interregnum, and also the work of the TRC. Both in terms of storyline and narrative strategies, the six novels have rejected the binary vision which opposed black and white under apartheid, and the relationship between victim and perpetrator during the years of the truth commission. They foreground the arbitrariness of categories such as ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ by blurring the boundaries between them, although deploying different contexts and viewpoints. In *Mother to Mother* and *The House Gun*, for instance, the environment and the historical/political/social circumstances appear to play an important role in determining the destiny of the ‘perpetrators.’ Far from condoning or justifying their crimes and misdeeds, the authors are rather engaged with undermining the rigid definitions of victim and perpetrator adopted by the TRC, and with emphasising the difficulties of ascertaining the truth. *Disgrace* and *Bitter Fruit* dramatise situations in which the reader is similarly troubled by uncertainty about the categories of victim and perpetrator: in the former text, the perpetrator David Lurie is guilty of sexual abuse of one of his students, but he and his daughter later become the victims of a gang assault, a situation which is further complicated by racial and racist implications; in the latter novel, the ‘fruit’ of a rape becomes a perpetrator who avenges his mother by killing the rapist.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela and *Playing in the Light* too address the inadequacy of the TRC’s definition of trauma and victimhood. Ndebele draws attention to the type of ordinary, quotidian trauma which was poorly addressed by the TRC interrogational framework. The author also places particular emphasis on female trauma, since women were more likely to suffer from everyday humiliations as a result of the combination of apartheid oppression and patriarchal subordination. On the other hand, Wicomb focuses on the ambivalent and ‘in-between’ condition of Coloured South Africans, highlighting

both their complicity with apartheid and their marginality in relation to the mandate of the commission.

In connection with the assumption about the healing power of truth, these literary texts challenge the Commission's reconciling discourse by envisaging different pathways from those mapped out by the TRC. For example, in *Bitter Fruit* the quest for revenge is opposed to the act of forgiveness; silence is preferred over the testimonial practice of the TRC public hearings by Lydia and Lucy in *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace*, respectively; in all the novels private journeys towards atonement, self-reconciliation and reconciliation with the Other are singled out from the TRC mechanism of public confession and manifestation of contrition of the amnesty process. It is no coincidence then that most novels might be related, directly or indirectly, to the myth of Odysseus, which symbolises the archetype of journey *par excellence*.

However, each author makes reference to the myth in different manners in order to accommodate his/her own purposes. Ndebele depicts Penelope as a strong woman who, tired of awaiting her husband Odysseus, has reclaimed her own agency and has decided to join her descendants' journey towards self-reconciliation. Dangor associates Mikey's quest for the truth about his identity with Odysseus's yearning for knowledge; this quest leads the young man to embrace revenge and kill his mother's rapist, which also evokes Odysseus's revengeful act of slaughtering Penelope's suitors. This episode of Homer's poem is directly quoted in *The House Gun*, when Duncan exalts Odysseus's murder of Antinous, the most ferocious of Penelope's suitors. This reference is by no means casual because, like Odysseus, Duncan might be described as both victim and perpetrator. This association, by analogy, could also be extended to David Lurie and Mxolisi and their ambivalent position of victim/perpetrator, though neither Magona nor Coetzee quote Homer's poem. Finally, the epiphanic scene of *Playing in the Light*, where Mrs Murray bandages Marion's injured foot and recognises her as a relative of Mrs Karlese, echoes the maid's recognition of Odysseus while bathing him. This moment is particularly significant for Marion because it prompts her journey to reconciliation with the truth about her past newly discovered.

The dimension of hybridity, and the related sense of uncertainty, have played a fundamental role in my analyses of the novels. Earlier I have discussed how the TRC failed to encompass the multifaceted dimension of South African history and society by overlooking the hybrid nature underpinning the categories of victim/perpetrator. By contrast, my understanding of hybridity has been multivalent and I argue that it has also

been conveyed at a narrative level. Though relying on different narrative strategies, which range from the employment of multiple focalisers and perspectives to the use of indirect discourse and the avoidance of quotation marks, from the adoption of a *mélange* of genres to unreliable narrators, these texts are ethically concerned with calling into question the very process of communication and narrativisation, with particular reference to the Other, both in terms of race and gender. In *The House Gun*, for example, the narrator seems unable to fully represent the hybrid figure of the protagonist Duncan Lingard – a bisexual ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ –, insomuch as he/she wonders ‘why is Duncan not in the story?’ (HG 151), and ‘Again, why is Duncan not in the story?’ (HG 191).

The crossing of the boundaries between writing, storytelling and oral performance, between facts and fiction, and the brief foray into magic realism which characterise *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* might be interpreted as Ndebele’s attempt to question the objective and realistic approach of the truth commission’s narrative. The same *mélange* of genres is present in Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, where the journalist combines prose and poetry, her personal experience and feelings with a documentary style in the format of some TRC testimonies’ extracts, thus suggesting that the ‘truth’ is a more nuanced and subjective concept rather than the establishment of cold facts. With a similar purpose, Wicomb challenges the reliability and veracity of any narrative project that strives for a singular ‘truth.’ In *Playing in the Light*, readers are indeed left with doubt about who the real narrator is and whose story is being narrated, which further complicates the achievement of the truth.

Playing in the Light and *Bitter Fruit* also play out the hybrid domain of coloured identity: they expose the complicity with the apartheid regime and the negative connotations still associated with this ambivalent ‘racial’ category. *Bitter Fruit* and *Disgrace* address the uncertain demarcation between public and private, political and personal, racial and gender dimensions that are deep-rooted in interracial rape. Hybridity is finally presented in terms of sexuality as it is shown by Duncan’s bisexual relationships in *The House Gun*. This multivalent concept becomes the literary answer provided by the novels in their attempt to address and canvas South Africa’s contradictory past and transition period.

Red Dust too questions the meanings and implications behind the categories of victim and perpetrator. During his amnesty hearing, Hendricks reveals an upsetting truth about Mpondo’s breakdown under torture, which forces the man to confront what he

had successfully repressed as he finally comes to realise the possibility of a terrible truth: Steve Sizela did not betray him, but he betrayed Sizela. From this moment of sudden recognition, which comes as an epiphany to Mpondo, the man occupies the double position of ‘victim’ of torture and, at the same time, that of ‘perpetrator’ for being indirectly responsible for his comrade’s death. Slovo is also particularly concerned with describing the ambiguously close relationship between torturer and tortured: ‘they were bound to each other, these two enemies, Alex Mpondo and Dirk Hendricks,’³⁷⁶ ‘out of the most terrible circumstances he and Alex had forged a link. It was inevitable.’³⁷⁷ Besides blurring the two roles of victim and perpetrator, the novel even questions the healing power of truth, wondering ‘the truth: had any of them uncovered it? And if they had – had it made them better? Sometimes, Alex doubted it.’³⁷⁸

At this point, one could wonder why I did not include Slovo’s text in my overarching discussion as it seems to share many similarities with the other literary texts in their critique with the supposedly discrete categories of victim/perpetrator. At an early stage of my research, I considered focusing on this novel but, in light of the more complicatedly hybrid strategies deployed in the texts discussed in this thesis, *Red Dust* staged its engagement with the TRC a little too directly and without the degree of ambivalence evident in the selected texts.

Although less engaging if compared to the other novels, this brief reference to Gillian Slovo’s *Red Dust* allows me to highlight the existence of other texts challenging and commenting, to different extents, on core assumptions of the South African TRC project, thus implying the fundamental wider role of literature in analysing our history and society. My point here is to suggest that the research presented in this thesis, investigating the intersections between trauma, memory, and narrative, and between testimony, truth, fiction, and reconciliation, can be productively expanded by addressing a wider range of South African texts. Perhaps, even more importantly, the issues raised in this thesis can be extended to include a wider comparative and transnational approach. Truth commissions have, in fact, become a common pathway in the landscape of countries experiencing a period of transition from authoritarian systems, civil and/or ethnic conflicts to democratic orders. Since 1974 there have been approximately thirty

³⁷⁶ Gillian Slovo, *Red Dust* (London: Virago, 2000; New York and London: Norton, 2002), 186. Citations refer to the Norton edition.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

truth commissions around the world, with the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission finishing its mandate in December 2015. In countries deeply affected by traumatic political and historical situations, literature and history become intrinsically connected and interdependent in the analysis of the past and the present. Literature can assist the healing project carried out by truth commissions, as well as it renegotiates the key concepts of trauma, truth and reconciliation. Long before the establishment of the South African TRC, Nadine Gordimer, indeed, claimed about her writing that:

The change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society – that is to say, history – and my apprehension of it; in writing, I am acting upon my society, and in a manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me.³⁷⁹

Devoid of any pretense of objectiveness and closure, literature must be considered a complementary but necessary instrument which can assist society in reflecting on the past and on the way that past has been addressed by, for example, historical and social projects like truth commissions, thus opening up questions and casting light on new perspectives and approaches. Writers thus act as facilitators who keep the dialogue about the past ongoing and open for reinvestigation and reinterpretation, in the attempt to critically engage with the present and the future of society.

³⁷⁹ Gordimer, 'Selecting My Stories,' 115.

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