DIGNITY, MEMORY AND THE FUTURE UNDER SIEGE: RECONCILIATION AND NATION BUILDING IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA


The inauguration of a democratically elected Government of National Unity in 1994 in South Africa represents a defining moment in the history and politics of the country. It marked the break with official apartheid which was condemned as a crime against humanity by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966. The post-apartheid era, in the eyes of many, represented an opportunity for the country to pursue more life-affirming developments in all aspects of its socio-economic, political and cultural life. Commentators frequently glossed the political changes as a ‘miracle’ since the country, in the preceding two decades, faced possible ‘racial conflagration’ and it was on the ‘edge of a precipice’. Consequently, political and socio-economic terms and programmes such as ‘reconstruction and development’, ‘redress’ and ‘transformation’ became part of the political landscape and discourses articulated by the government and civil society. There seemed to be a general perception that different forms of intervention, restoration and healing were necessary in order to counter the personal and social convulsions emanating from the inequality, inequity, violence and brutality that was symptomatic of the apartheid past. Not surprisingly, one of the imperatives of the new government was to foster a sense of peace, nation-building, national unity and reconciliation out of the disparate racial and social groups that inhabit the country. This foregrounded the need to create social and political imaginaries that symbolically evoke the desired and yet elusive collective ideals and identities. There was a feeling that in line with divine providence, “in the fullness of time” (Tutu, 1999: 37), the social contradictions and conflicts would be resolved and life would get better for all citizens.

This paper explores a number of silences and contradictions that characterize the contestations between individuals, social groups and the post-apartheid state with regards
to nation-building and reconciliation. It seeks to reveal the range of repressions that unity and forgiveness seem to be contingent on and how they, in effect, amount to new strategies of containment and the reproduction of abuse, poverty, injustice and alienation. It foregrounds the significance of the materiality and politics of the ordinary and the body in societies that are structured in racial domination, exploitation and violence. Furthermore, in the aftermath of violence and trauma, it argues that the social and political imaginaries that inform nation-building and reconciliation are underpinned by contestable assumptions about how to grasp the relations between the past and the present, trauma, memory and healing. These are complex processes and imperatives that, amongst other concerns, I explored in *Zulu Love Letter* in ways that centralized and validated the everyday experiences and forms of recovery used by individuals. I was particularly struck by how ordinary people, in their endeavours to grasp, deal with and overcome inequality, alienation and trauma, found succour in African spiritual and cultural rites and epistemologies. African ontology – particularly with regards to its elaboration of personhood, sociality and ancestral veneration – offered a more life-affirming and enriching alternative to the dis(contents) of the narratives and projects of the state.

South African viewers have tended to interpret *Zulu Love Letter* as another ‘cinematic take’ on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Even though the film is set against the backdrop of the success of the first democratic elections and the launch of the TRC, *Zulu Love Letter* is a story of two mothers in search of their daughters. Thandeka Khumalo is challenged with mending her estranged relationship

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1For films exploring themes related to the TRC see *Forgiveness* (Ian Gabriel, SA, 2004);  
2The idea of a TRC took shape before the negotiated settlement was finalised and it was given official status by the new parliament in 1994 with the proclamation of the Bill on National Unity and Reconciliation and the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* in 1995. From its mooting, the Nationalist Party and its Army Generals were adamant that the TRC would not be allowed to engage in ‘Nuremburg style’ trials. Also, since its inception, the premises, modalities and even key office-bearers of the TRC were deeply steeped in the Christian ideas of confession, contrition, forgiveness, reparation and reconciliation.
with her 13 year old daughter, Simangaliso, who grew up with her parents because of Thandeka’s career and activism. Tormented by a sense of guilt and grief that refuses to wane, Thandeka is battling to adjust to the changes around her. Her melancholic soul is compelled to confront her experiences of detention and torture when ghosts from the past reappear. Me’Tau, the mother of a young activist whose assassination Thandeka witnessed and reported, wants Thandeka to help in finding the body of Dineo so that she can be giving a fitting burial. Me’Tau’s quest parallels the existence and campaigns of social groups such as Khulumani (‘speak out’ in Zulu). Khulumani, whose members appear in the film, is a group of former victims and survivors of apartheid brutality. Amongst the range of interventions and projects that include campaigns to find the disappeared, Khulumani also instituted class action lawsuits in 2002 in the United States of America against transnational corporations who continued to do business in South Africa despite the imposition of sanctions. (Bell 2003: 349-50) For mourning to end and for healing to take place, the social pathologies that haunt the present must be recognized, exorcised and integrated into the national consciousness.

THE BOOK AND JUDGEMENT: HOW TO READ TREACHEROUS TRANSITIONS

In as much as 1994 marks a watershed moment in the history of South Africa, the lead up to the change in government and the ‘transition’ into a democratic ‘new’ South Africa was the result of a series of compromises in response to a range of sharp social-political and economic contradictions. Apartheid bequeathed to the new government led by the African National Congress (ANC) a considerable amount of historical baggage and debris. These must be understood, firstly, in the light of the general crisis in the political economy of South Africa. During its first 18 years in office, the developmental initiatives of the South African government were pulled in different directions because of its inability to reconcile and resolve key social, political and economic pressures. The main conflict remained the ANC’s commitment to redress social inequalities and its inability to radically
transform the social relations of inequality and exploitation that form the basis of the country’s racial capitalism. Paradoxically, the political legitimacy of the new government relies, to a considerable extent, on its ability to play the two tensions off against each other. Populist rhetoric (free education, health, housing and progressive labour laws) is extolled in attempts to retain the mass-support that brought the ANC into power. However, the installation of neo-liberal state and market-orientated macro-economic policies circumvented the developmental programmes that were pursued, initially, under the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and, later on, the Growth Economy and Redistribution framework (GEAR).

The economic contradictions were exacerbated by the political stalemate that lay behind the ‘negotiated settlement’, a result of the fact that neither the Nationalist Party (which led during apartheid) nor the ANC or liberation movements could claim any decisive political or military victory at the moment of change. The deadlock foregrounded the problematic or tactics of government with the ‘new’ South African state seeking to master the “versatile equilibrium” (Foucault 1993: 203-204) that pertained. This is particularly with regard to how the government and civil society (especially powerful constituencies in the white community), use “strategic games...that...try to determine the conduct of others.... And...between the games of power and the states of domination, you have governmental technologies”. (Foucault, 1988: 19)

What is striking is that the ‘new South Africa’ relies on a sophisticated deflection of its unequal and unjust social relations from the terrains of the economy and politics onto a range of socio-political imaginaries that are meant to rationalize its impasses. Arguably, none are more important than the notions of ‘transition’ ‘nation-building’ and ‘reconciliation’. South Africans generally gloss the 18 years that have marked the post-apartheid period as ‘the transition’. The country, we are often told, is going through a ‘transition’ or is in a ‘state of transition’, with state sliding between referring to a form of
institutional governance and as a mental condition as in ‘the psyche / state of the nation’³. The assumption is that some unspecified but ‘transformed state’ is expected to replace the incongruities that beset the ‘transition’. Interestingly, between the hope and the ills that typify the present, the country’s history is often narrated through the use of ‘the book’ as metaphor. In this schema, history is analogous to a book with chapters that contain the past. A past that, admittedly, informs the present and future. The challenge is that the act of reading or interpretation demands a ‘forward-looking’ disposition that is capable of ‘turning the page’ on the past. Or, in the opinion of Bishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, “…now is the time to move on…. As a country we must find mechanisms whereby we can close ‘the book on the past’”. (Cochrane et all 1999: ii) The implication is also that how one reads or deals with the past will determine our standing when we are faced, on the ‘day of judgement’, with the ‘book’ of our own life. In other words, closing the book on the past facilitates a move away from bitterness and vengeance, and, simultaneously, frees us to fulfill the prerequisites of repentance and salvation. Repentance involves accepting and following the Lord’s grace and mercy (which is based on His unconditional forgiveness and the sacrifice of his Son on our behalf). Such premises, on both the secular and sacred levels, are strongly captured in the admonitory title of Tutu’s treatise on the TRC, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Tutu validates his claims by conjuring up a sense of temporality that is deeply bounded in Christian taxonomies and that erases the fissures and seizures of the ‘transition’. According to Tutu: “Yes, we have lived through a ghastly nightmare, but it has ended...as sure as day follows night”. (Tutu 1999: 210-211) The link between the past and the present is ruptured in a manner that literally suggest ‘leaving the past behind’. Such evocations of the future, in effect, empty the country’s history of its past and present and substitute the need to recognize and deal with *the past in the present* with the deification of forgiveness as the sine-qua-non of nationhood and progress.

³The ‘transition’ in crucial ways is more analogous to Gramsci’s ‘interregnum’ where “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. (Gramsci, 1971: 275)
The problem with the call to ‘come to terms with the past’ is that, as Adorno observed, it “does not imply a serious working through of the past” (my emphasis) but often, “it suggests, rather, wishing to turn the page and, if possible, wiping it from memory” under the guises of forgiving and forgetting:

One wants to get free of the past: rightly so, since one cannot live in its shadow, and since there is no end to terror if guilt and violence are only repaid, again and again, with guilt and violence. But wrongly so, since the past one wishes to evade is still so intensely alive. (Adorno 1986: 115)

The dilemma is that between ‘getting over the past’ and the ‘miracle of the rainbow nation’ is a deep sense and practice of amnesia that ignores the anomalies and pains of the present and their possible effects on the future. Ultimately, the recourse to forgetfulness has “had the effect of severing the moral moorings of our history” (Bell 2002: 4), a predisposition that is apparent in the indifferent responses to the struggles of ordinary people to secure the means of life.

DEATH, SUFFERING AND THE WAGES OF DEMOCRACY

Elsewhere I have contended that colonial modernity in South Africa (whether under Dutch and British imperialism or the internal colonialism of apartheid) manifested itself as violent and exclusionary, starting with the frontier wars of subjugation in the fifteenth century and finding a decisive elaboration in the creation of the South African state in 1910 and the attendant, if contingent, development of racial capitalism. Since its inception in 1910 in the Act of Union (which merged the previously existing four republics of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and the Free State), the South African state remained a white oligarchy that excluded Black South Africans from any formal participation in the affairs of government and national life in general. The segregationist policies followed by successive post-Union governments led to the development of a
society structured in racial dominance and exploitation, a condition that the Nationalist Party were to vigorously intensify with their apartheid policies when they came into power in 1948. Both segregation and apartheid, in line with the demands of their respective Native Policies, required the enactment of a series of laws that sought to define the ownership and control of not only the land but also, in crucial senses, all aspects of the lives of, especially, black subjects. The Native Policy amounted to a series of repressive and discriminatory legislation that was directed at Africans and meant to protect the interests of mining capital, white farmers and white workers. Africans, who constituted more than 75% of the population, were prohibited, amongst other things, from landownership outside the reserves (The Native Land Bill of 1911 and the Land Act of 1913 which set aside 7.3% of the land for African occupation), from being employed in skilled industrial jobs (Mines and Works Act (1911) and from breaking contract which was classified as a criminal offence (Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911). The movement and stay of black people in urban areas was regulated through influx control laws such as The Native (Black) Urban Areas Act No 21 of 1923, the Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act No 25 of 1945, the Population Registration Act of 1950, the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Promotion of Bantu Self-government Act of 1959.

What is important for our purposes is that the creation of the colonial and apartheid economy and polity required an expansive but integrated range of socio-political interventions all predicated on the marshalling of the tropes of the land and the ‘native body’. The land and the ‘native body’ were seen as quintessential markers of the distance between the colonial rhetoric of ‘civilization’, ‘progress’ and ‘racial superiority’ (glossed as modernity) as against the supposed African incarnations of ‘barbarity’ and ‘racial inferiority’ (glossed as primitivity). The intent behind the political “economy” and “investment” of the land and the body (Foucault 1977: 25) was to re-organise the spatial organisation of the environment, its architecture, the modes of adornment and dress as well as the daily, work and leisure patterns and rituals of Africans as to render all these instances complaint and consistent with the colonial project. In short, African experiences of space, time and life were to be mediated via the new social forces that
drew alternative links between time, space, the body and consciousness in ways that seemed to pronounce powerfully on the differences between European and African polities, cultures and epistemologies. (Peterson, 2000: 21-31)

In attempts to proclaim the spatial, socio-economic and political imperatives that underpinned segregation and apartheid, the land, in an attempt to make it manifest colonial cartography, had to be mapped, fenced and renamed. Where necessary, it was even razed to the ground where its topography, stubbornly palimpsest, continued to carry the traces of its previous inhabitants. ‘Undesirable’ and ‘superfluous’ bodies (essentially millions who lived in areas designated as ‘white’ and those deemed not to be in ‘gainful employment’) were forcefully removed under so-called ‘resettlement’ and influx control policies. As a correlated exercise, ‘native bodies’ were subjected to the power of colonial authorities who sought to reconfigure them through education and training, including torture and death. The requisite black body was one that was docile and that accepted the designated status of being no more than carriers of water and hewers of wood as indicated in the infamous statement made by H.F. Verwoerd (former Minister of Native Affairs and Prime Minister from 1958-1966). Verwoerd emphasised that outside of the reserves or ‘homelands’, “[t]here is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour”. (Verwoerd, 1966: 83) Whether it was obedient or transgressive, ultimately, the black body was dispensable and, even when dead, it was still subject to a range of possible uses in the service of colonial narratives and power. The latter was particularly in response to the stubborn manner in which Africans continued to pursue essential human needs (such as comfort, compassion, love and dignity) and the means of life. These desires, ultimately, often, found expression in forms of resistance that increased the authorities’ recourse to death and the emblematic use of the dead black body to circulate fear in the attempt to manage Africans and their aspirations. During the Sixth Frontier War between the Xhosa and the British, King Hintsa, son of Khawuta, was executed on 12 May 1835 and his ears cut off as trophies. More than a century later, Mrs. Nombuyiselo Mhlawuli would ask the TRC for the return of her husband’s hand which was severed by the security police and kept at the police
station in a bottle of formalin. (Mlawuli, 1996: n.d.) From the 1970s until 1994, many activists were, after their assassination, mutilated, burnt and detonated and their limbs were used as deterring signs and as a demonstration of the power and the excesses permissible to those who, literally, controlled not only life and death but even the dead. It is no wonder that in responding to the death in detention of Steven Bantu Biko on 12 September 1977, Jimmy Kruger (then Minister of Justice) told a Congress of the Nationalist Party that “Biko’s death leaves me cold”.

A disconcerting aspect of the ‘new’ South Africa is the manner in which the black body has continued to be targeted as an object of subjugation, humiliation, criminalization and disposal. In her compelling study of the violence and fear that drives new forms of discrimination and segregation in São Paulo, Teresa Caldeira in *City of Walls*, writes powerfully to a number of social developments and challenges that are, in many ways, symptomatic of the politics of ‘transition’ and the ‘transgressive’ black body in post 1994 South Africa. She notes the disturbing trend of circulating discourses of fear in response to the rise in violent crimes, the concomitant building of exclusive, fortified enclaves under constant surveillance and the expansion of security services and ‘gung-ho’ forces. The moral panics, as always, involve the proliferation of prejudices (especially racial and class ones) against the ‘socially undesirable’ (the poor, homeless and marginal). The stage is then set for an expansive regime of policing that is based on the exercise of ‘cycles of violence’, the corrosion of the rule of law, the undermining of the judicial system and, finally, the erosion of the human and citizenship rights of the poor and undesirables. The deep irony is that all these forms of cruelty and displacement are occurring under a ‘transition’ away from totalitarian rule. What emerges is a “disjunctive democracy” that is characterized by “its contradictory processes of simultaneous expansion and disrespect for citizenship rights”, where “although social rights are reasonably legitimated, the civil aspects of citizenship are continuously violated”. (Caldeira 2000: 339)
In many respects, post 1994 developments have not marked a break from the acute, pervasive and transgenerational experiences of suffering for the majority of black people. Suffering and humiliation constitute distinct and continuous forms of trauma and they are less visible and discussed than the instances of violence and the abuse of human rights. Post-apartheid South Africa holds the distinction of having the worst income and wealth disparity in the world. Poverty and the gap between rich and poor has increased since 1994 and the country has surpassed Brazil as the most unequal society in the world. The majority of people’s access to social amenities and services such as education, housing and health continues to be determined along cleavages of race despite the growth of a black middle class. Between 1994 and 2002 when there was a change in the government’s treatment policy on HIV/AIDS, thousands of poor people living with HIV were denied access to life-prolonging and life-saving treatment. Crime, corruption, violence against children and women, high HIV-AIDS rates, xenophobia and racism are social problems that everyone regards as being extremely high and unacceptable. The feelings of fear and terror that stalks citizens has, amongst other developments, seen the call for the re-institution of the death penalty and the increasingly militarization of the society (evident in the proliferation of ‘armed response’ security companies) and the police. The police want to return to apartheid-style military tactics and ranks: they seek to be a Force and no longer a Service, led by a General and no longer a Police Commissioner. Criminals (read young black men) are regularly referred to in the media by the Minister and Deputy Minister of Police as ‘incorrigible bastards’ and police are under instruction to ‘shoot to kill’. Not surprisingly, a number of innocent citizens have been ‘regrettably caught in the cross-fire’ and ‘are unavoidable casualties of war’ (to paraphrase the ex-Deputy Minister of Police) and just as alarming is the increase in the number of alleged suspects who are killed during police investigations.

What is difficult to estimate are the range of daily struggles that poor people have to contend with, especially the everyday tribulations that subject them to experiences of humiliation and indignity that obliterate their self-esteem. There have been incidences of the police setting their dogs on unarmed suspects, black and homeless people beaten for
'fun’ or killed by civilians because they were ‘mistaken’ for criminals. In 2009 four white students (the Reitz Four) at the University of the Free State created a national uproar when they subjected five black workers to an ‘initiation programme’ in protest against the racial integration of residences at the institution. The workers, amongst other acts of racial abuse, were made to eat food into which the students had urinated. In 2005 a twenty-two year old young man, in Johannesburg, held an official of the Department of Home Affairs hostage with a toy gun in a desperate act to get an identity document. In 2009, in Pinetown in KwaZulu-Natal, another young man hanged himself after being insulted by an official at the Department of Home Affairs and failing to get an identity document. The inability to get an identity document effectively rendered him a non-citizen with no legal rights and access to a wide range of necessities such as a driver’s license, bank account, housing and employment. Poignantly, in his suicide note, the young man explained that since life without an identity document consigned him to a life of crime and eventually incarceration, he felt that he was left with no option but to take his own life. In 2010 a municipality in Khayelithsa, in Cape Town, erected open toilets without walls in an informal settlement. Residents who did not have the means to erect enclosures had the option of relieving themselves in full view of the public or find ways of covering their bodies and, hopefully, their daily disgrace.

Not surprisingly, despite a pending internal inquiry and the laying of charges against the Reitz Four with the Human Rights Commission and the police by the workers, the new and black Rector of the University, Jonathan Jansen, decided at his inaugural lecture to pardon the students as a “gesture of reconciliation, and the need for healing”. Again, the standard social metaphors of the book held sway, viz: “As we seek to close the book on Reitz, we are determined to open the book on a new and reconstructed future....” (Jansen 2010: 3) This act of absolution and munificence all happened, of course, in the usual absence of any expression of contrition by the students or any consultation of the workers by Jansen. Amidst the furore, Bishop Tutu felt obliged to applaud Jansen and remind the ‘vengeful and emasculated’ amongst us that “forgiveness is not for sissies”. (Tutu 2010: 1) Examples such as these erupt into public and evoke shame and revulsion, capture
headlines for a while before they are repressed into the national unconscious. As with all forms of psychic and social repression, the conflicts do not wither away but often return in more violent and threatening ways, demonstrating the difficulties of ‘closing the book’ whether on the past or on the inequities of the present.

AFRICAN ONTOLOGY AND THE SEARCH FOR THE DISAPPEARED

The denial of responsibility by the apartheid state for the whereabouts of missing activists meant that, after 1994, there was an upsurge in the number of people who felt compelled to trace and locate the remains of their loved ones. Over-and-above the need to hold the apartheid state accountable for its atrocities, the intervention was also motivated by personal wants, spiritual and cultural beliefs and responsibilities. Importantly, the foregrounding of personal, domestic and cultural prerogatives challenged the silences in the elitist and gendered narratives of African nationalism and it acknowledges the role and experiences of women and ordinary folk. It also recognizes the significance of indigenous knowledge systems and practices in the people’s resilient negotiation of the trials-and-tribulations of life under apartheid and democracy. Furthermore, in addition to the political and psychologically symbolic roles that their characters perform, Thandeka, Simangaliso and Me”Tau also serve as aesthetic subjects whose mere presence, identities and daily rhythms and rituals unsettle the rationality of the national political imaginaries.

In the case of Thandeka, her independent and assertive character is one that is ill at ease with the normative expectations of what patriarchy deems as acceptable behaviour by women.4 The ‘transition’ also marks a time where she has difficulties celebrating the ‘freedom’ that seems to engulf her associates. She is dismissive of the euphoria and the conspicuous consumption that seems to be driving the black elite. On a more personal

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4Zulu Love Letter was invited to form part of the inaugural South African Film Festival in Iran in December 2006, hosted by the Embassies of Iran and South Africa. It was subsequently not screened because Thandeka’s conduct (her assertiveness, smoking and style of dress) was deemed as inappropriate.
level, she is forced to restore the equilibrium between the personal and the political in her life: the child that she left with her parents is now a young woman with a personality and ideas of her own and she is critical of her mother’s lifestyle. The changes at Thandeka’s work and in her love affairs seem, somehow, to accentuate the all-round sense of disharmony that she feels. Then there is the guilt and shame that stems from feeling complicit in the death of Dineo and Michael Peters, a colleague who did not survive their detention. As Primo Levi powerfully observed, survivors guilt is underpinned by the agonizing question “Are you ashamed because you are alive in the place of another?” (Levi 2003: 62) And “there is another, vaster shame, the shame of the world” where “those who faced by the crime of others or their own, turn their backs so as not to see it and not feel touched by it…deluding themselves that not seeing was a way of not knowing and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity or connivance”. (Levi 2003: 65) Not surprisingly, many in post-apartheid South Africa claim to not have been aware of the injustices and atrocities of apartheid. In 1916 Solomon Tshekiso Plaatje published Native Life in South Africa in response to the Native Land Act of 1913. In it he petitioned the British government and people to intervene based on his invocation of a universal bond based on “mutual suffering”. Plaatje, like Levi, insisted that we are accountable when we do nothing in the face or knowledge of the suffering of others. (Peterson, 2008: 431)

Simangaliso’s character represented the most acute challenge to, not only the macro-politics of the state, but even of us as filmmakers. As a deaf person, her presence and signing fundamentally questioned the terms of engagement, even at the micro-level, that we took for granted in conversations about the thematic significance of the film in relation to nation-building and identity. We suddenly found ourselves having to deal with and open up to the insights, creativity and complexities that she presented as an individual and as a member of the deaf world. As hearing members of the creative team, the legibility of the entire process of filmmaking – which we have always taken for granted – was disrupted and required new ways of communication and work in response to the implicit and overt discriminatory practices that are traditional in film industry.
Similarly, there are countless other individuals and groups in the country that are excluded from national projects (together with their languages, concerns, resources and possible forms of enrichment) because we are unable or refuse to encounter them unless their shape, size and diction are amenable (in the prescriptive sense) to us.

Me’Tau, for her part, is illustrative of how ordinary people, faced with different forms of alienation, resort to African beliefs on the intrinsic relations between self and community, the living and the dead, and the sanctity of the body whether it is alive or passed on. The concern was the need to resolve the problems around the thousands who disappeared and who, should they have been killed, placed a number of spiritual and cultural liabilities on their relatives. The absent body, in the case of the disappeared, acted as a dialogic catalyst in, firstly, calling into question what is considered to be sensible and normative in the new dispensation and, secondly, by setting the scene for engagements with the violence and trauma of the past and post-apartheid South Africa. It is in this sense that the significance of the demands of groups such as Khulamani lie in the fact that they simultaneously insist on social transformation and justice while remaining clear that such interventions exceed juridicial and political understandings of justice. Through their sharp foregrounding of the significance of the intimate, visceral, spiritual and cultural, the actions of Me’Tau and Khulumani also speak, profoundly, to the foundational notions of self that inform many African cultures and that are in dissonance with the various forms of estrangement that are precipitated by whiteness and the post-apartheid state. Drawing on the magisterial work of Harriet Ngubane, there are three interrelated elements in this regard that I want to discuss. These are the concept of *Ubuntu* and it’s bearing on ancestral veneration, the practice of ritualized grief and processes of recovery for traumatized individuals.

Zulu ontology (which in its modern forms incorporates Christian tenets) conceives of existence as consisting of three worlds that are inextricably linked. The world of the living (the earth) exists below the ‘heavens’ (zulu) or ‘other world’ of the Supreme Being
uMvelingangi (the first Being) and above the world of the ancestors, Abapansi (those who live below). The ancestors are regarded as involved more directly in the day-to-day lives of people than the Supreme Being. Human nature and life, by extension, are also seen as forming an integrated totality with their composite parts and cycles based on mutual relations, interdependence and influence. This is captured in the saying “Umuntu umuntu ngabantu”, that is, a person is a person through other persons (Ubuntu). It suggests that people derive their sense of self and community not only out of natural, individual, or material qualities but out of the deep bonds that connect them with other human beings and the environment (especially land, animals and plants). Self and the world are intrinsically tied in an intricate net of reciprocal relations and obligations that create the desired moral order and equilibrium between the environment, the individual, the family and society (or the extended family which, ultimately, includes all humanity):⁵

The world is thought of as basically good with the people and ecology blending together in harmony, and all things being equal the people get the necessary blessings from the ancestors to enable them to maintain the balance in their lives. As long as a man has a relatively successful life, i.e. has good relations within his family and his fellow men, and a satisfactory economic situation, he considers himself as enjoying adequate protection and blessings from his ancestors. That is to say the ancestors normally bestow blessings, and withdraw them in exceptional circumstances only. (Ngubane 1977: 58)

Disequilibrium and illness is caused by natural (ageing, etc.) and unnatural causes (grasped as symptomatic of a complex range of forms of pollution or darkness – umnyama) as well as the neglect or infringement of ancestral appeasement and injunctions. It is expected that “everyone must establish and maintain a form of balance with his surrounding...but also between man and man”. (Ngubane 1977: 24) Balance, importantly, “should be understood to mean ‘symmetry’ or ‘order’ rather than, as usual, the central pivot in a counterpoise situation”. (Ngubane 19977: 27)

⁵For a discussion of the complex articulation (especially concerning the degree of prescription and choice allowed) between the individual and group and its implications for personhood see Menkiti, Wiredu and Gyekye.
cases of disequilibrium or disharmony, people are expected to *ukuzilungisa*, that is, to “restore order where there has been disorder”, in particular “‘the moral order’ in the symmetrical sense in relation to the position of people vis-á-vis other people, the environment, the ancestors and other mystical forces that produce pollution”. (Ngubane 1977: 26-27)

The bereaved are considered to be in a “state of pollution” (Ngubane 1977: 29) and they are expected to fulfill the modalities that inform burial rites that purify and restore the sacredness of the corpse and, on the other hand, initiate the processes that will conclude in ancestral veneration. Between the death of a person and their passage into the realm of ancestors, requires the observance of protocols and the performance of a series of ceremonies by relatives as part of their bereavement. Amongst many other concerns, the nature of mourning (*ukuzila*) and burial rites is contingent on factors such as the social status of the deceased and the cause of death. Where the person did not pass away at home, the soul of the deceased needs to be guided back to the homestead. Where the person died because of unnatural causes, including accidents, then, in addition, the site where they died needs cleansing. In the context of the abductions, assassinations and secret disposal of the remains of anti-apartheid activists, the absence of the body, the lack of knowledge of the place and cause of death, throws the processes of *ukuzila* into disarray and with it the attendant prerequisites for individual and group mourning and healing.

This is particularly because, upon death, “a dead body is believed to cast no shadow” since its ‘shadow’ (*isithunzi* or soul) departs “from the body in the form of the body, though invisible”: a dead person is initially an *isithunzi* until a sacrifice is performed following burial and the period of mourning. The sacrifice integrates the deceased with the body of the ancestors and also brings her / him back home as an *idlozi*” (ancestral spirit). In normal circumstances, after the burial of the deceased, there are a number of rituals that are performed before the conduct of the final one, *ukubuyisa*,...
which is undertaken at least one year following the burial depending on the financial and other contingencies in the family. The *ukubuyisa idlozi* (bringing home of the spirit of the deceased) also marks a key threshold in the processes of healing. Essentially it is a sacrifice (*umsebenzi*) that integrates the deceased into the group of ancestors. Only then, can the deceased be venerated as an ancestor. Before the completion of the *ukubuyisa* sacrifice “the deceased is believed to live alone away from other dead spirits (*amathongo*) and away from home”. A spirit that is not “integrated with the others wanders about and leads a lonely and miserable life”. It is caught “in some sort of ‘limbo’ or hell”, “a place of wilderness”, “in an in between state”. (Ngubane 1977: 50, 55, 73, 141) In the absence of any knowledge of the site, cause and remains of the corpse, no spirit can be escorted back home and neither can the different phases of ritualized grieving be undertaken. In essence, the bereaved are stuck in a void analogous to the ‘in-between’ condition of the departed spirit. In contrast to the ‘healed nation’, the bereaved continue to suffer “from unresolved grief”. (Herman, 1994: 183)

**TRAUMA, MOURNING AND RECOVERY**

One of the astounding characteristics of the ‘new’ South Africa has been the lack of generosity in according moments and spaces for people to deal with the complexities of their social conditions, mourning and healing. The fallacy is to assume that the nation (the body-politic) experienced pain and grief during the apartheid past, that such wrongs were acknowledged in processes such as the TRC and, moreover, that with the modalities of democracy in place, the nation is now in a position to overcome the pains of history. There are a number of problems with such a perspective. The first is the tendency to view the experiences of the individual and the body-politic (and their resultant metaphors) as conterminous and even interchangeable. Despite the deep links between the two, caution needs to be exercised about the kinds of relations and exchanges, as well as reciprocal influences that can be posited between the two. Post-apartheid South Africa has tended to
conjoin and simplify the individual body and the body-politic as similar in their experiences of social violence and ways of overcoming its impact. Hence the expectation on the victims and survivors of poverty and apartheid atrocities to, in light of the powerful arguments for forgiveness and reconciliation, forgo their personal concerns and needs in favour of national ones. In such a framing, forgiveness becomes a disempowering burden, especially if attempts to ‘deal with the past’ are pejoratively associated with the pursuit of not equality, truth and justice but ‘vengeance’ and ‘retribution’.  

The ills of the nation are not likely to be overcome if citizens are not granted the space and time to address their personal and localized anxieties in ways that are not, necessarily, consistent with or parallel to the initiatives and needs of the larger society. In many ways, this is Thandeka’s position. Thandeka insists on upholding the ethics of memory and mourning, firstly, through anger that is based on “righteous indignation” (Herman 1994: 189). Expressions of anger are not only “inevitable and appropriate feelings”, at times “the genuine expression of anger may be a prelude to forgiveness, if the conditions facilitate this”. (Moosa et al 2004: 142) Secondly, Thandeka demands restorative and redistributive justice as indispensable parts of the processes of healing and forgiveness. Both are fundamental to her sense of self-worth, recovery and the possibilities of effecting change in society. Also, one can argue that the deification of the ‘nation’ is, in reality the converse: it is also the individualization of social contradictions and dilemmas. In other words, instead of dealing with the social problems caused by apartheid and post-apartheid neo-liberal economic and political policies – which require economic and socio-political interventions - contradictions are recast as moral and ethical exigencies and their amelioration is projected as contingent on personal behaviour and responsibilities.

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6For an incisive reflection on the numerous, shifting and contending individual, social and community needs, contingencies and imperatives that inform “the complexity of forgiveness in contexts of political trauma”, see Moosa, Straker and Eagle “In the aftermath of political trauma: what price forgiveness”.  

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It would be erroneous to simply attribute the individualization of social contradictions to
the tenets of Christianity that frame much of the deliberations on forgiveness and
reconciliation. For one, there are long-standing disagreements amongst faith communities
in the country on such matters. Arguably, within the Christian communities, the Kairos
Document remains the signal and the most robust religious reflection on the nature, limits
and possibilities of reconciliation. The document was released by a group of black
theologians working in the townships of Soweto following the declaration of a state of
emergency on 21 July 1985. It addressed itself to a range of antimonies that continue to
bedevil post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on the precepts of Contextual / Black
Theology, the Kairos Document challenged the official ‘English’ churches’ positions on
reconciliation and peace. It cautioned against “the fallacy” of making
“reconciliation...an absolute principle” especially in contexts where “there are conflicts
that can only be described as the struggle between justice and injustice, good and evil”.
In its defence of “the Christian idea of reconciliation”, it insisted that “nowhere in the
Bible or in the Christian tradition has it ever been suggested that we ought to reconcile
good and evil, God and the devil. We are supposed to do away with evil, injustice,
oppression and sin – not to come to terms with it.... No reconciliation is possible in South
Africa without justice, without the total dismantling of apartheid”. (Kairos 1986: 10) The
document called for a sense of justice that is not solely predicated on “individual
conversions” nor on moralistic appeals to the conscience of the white community. It
stressed that the pursuit of justice also required the abolition of “structural inequality
(political, social and economic)”’. (Kairos 1986: 22)

Kairos also questioned the “blanket condemnation of all that is called violence” since
“how can acts of oppression, injustice and domination be equated with acts of resistance

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7For a wide-ranging reflection on the relation and responses of Faith Communities to
apartheid and the TRC see “Faith Communities and Apartheid: A Report prepared for the
Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the Research Institute on Christianity in South
and self-defence?” Again, the document linked “the naked violence of the police and army” to “structural” and “institutional” forms of violence. (Kairos, 1986: 13) Yet after 1994, especially in the build-up to and during the TRC hearings, it seems that one way in which a bridge could be built to negotiate between ‘recrimination’ and ‘forgiveness’ was to create a range of assumed individual and socio-political equivalences. In a tit-for-tat move, whiteness drew parallels between the brutality and violence of apartheid and the crimes and abuse of human rights that were also committed by black people and the liberation movements. Artists have also been unable to avoid the impulse of such disavowal and even much lauded texts such as Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull and J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace have been incapable to resist the ‘lure / law’ of equivalences. While there are enough cases to validate such positions, what should be clear is the expedient attempt to recast and postpone direct engagements with the central predicament. Instead of putting systemic, racialized violence under scrutiny and making it and perpetrators accountable, perpetrators and victims were drawn together “on the basis of equal responsibility and apparent joint culpability....” Truth became “a dangerous thing” since “within the upper echelons of both sides, there was much to hide.... Unity became the watchword, reconciliation the means.” (Bell 2003: 285) One can only fear the sense of impunity that such pacts create amongst the powerful and elite.

Again, many, including sections of the faith communities, rejected the premises that framed such equivalences. In a presentation made to the TRC by Mr. D.K. Koka, a representative of the African traditional religious community, he noted that:

I must here submit the truth that I tried my best to scrape the bottom of the barrel in search of the drops of guilt by my goals, not me as an individual but in a collective single plurality, and I failed to find one in the course of the struggle. This puts me to a point where I say, we can remark that the guilt of the oppressor and the oppressed shall never be the same and faced from the same angle, for they are operating on different levels and therefore the structuring of forums where the two sectors can express themselves sometimes needs to be reconsidered. (Koka, 1997: n.p., emphasis added)
Koka’s anguish is reminiscent of Primo Levi who, in reflecting on the relations and complicities between victims and persecutors inside the Lagers, feels that “…it is imprudent to hasten a moral judgement” on “the concurrent guilt of the individual”. Levi is adamant that it “must be clear that the greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state…” He is unequivocal in his rejection of the attempts to create equivalences, or in his words, the “exchange of role between oppressor and victim”: “I do not know, and it does not interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer”. Furthermore Levi writes “I know that the murderers existed…and still exist…and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affection or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth”. (Levi 2003: 22-33)

It is often ignored that there are crimes that simply cannot be forgiven because of the extraordinary pain, destruction and loss of life they caused and to do so is to cede whatever ethical codes we claim as human beings. Also, there seems to be little appreciation that forgiveness and reconciliation surpass the boundaries of black-and-white-relations. Individuals like Thandeka and Me’Tau need to come to terms with themselves and their experiences, relatives need to reconcile within families, relations between neighbours and communities need to be restored where these have been broken. Furthermore, traumatized individuals do not always apprehend time as a neat and chronological sequence nor do they attach the same significance to the relation between time and experience as metaphors of the book and state ideologues do. Neither do they deal with trauma in the manner that societies would often prefer them to.

In contrast to the neatly self-contained categories and linearity underpinning metaphors of the book and the national imaginary, we were clear during the writing, production and editing of the film, that cinema can present a more complex and experimental take on the
issues under exploration. We settled on an aesthetic that would not be narrated or resolved according to the classical three-act structure but one that would try and approximate a loose and open-ended structure. Similarly, we favoured strategies of visual composition that, like the film’s thematic concerns, allowed for a plurality of temporalities, presences and generic styles (from realism to fantasy) to co-exist within the same frame or sequence. This was in order to create the possibility to render an event from changing points-of-view and in different ways (including the use of interlude sequences that were slowed down and shot at 16 frames per second instead of the customary 24 frames per second). All these aesthetic strategies were to suggest possible multiple and contending apprehensions and meanings, all, hopefully, aiding in destabilizing established patterns of recognition, association and interpretation.\(^8\)

Hence, for Thandeka, the fragments that serve as the mnemonic symbols of the past continue to manifest themselves in the present. The Toyota Corolla that is the mark of the apartheid snipers is confused for the one parked in front of her flat. The women dressed in black are the embodied monuments to the missing and the dead. The attempts by the police to verify whether Bouda’D is an illegal immigrant by checking the inoculation on his arm is reminiscent of apartheid influx control practices which often used physical attributes as markers of race and belonging or foreignness. Whereas Thandeka’s interludes are meditations on the difficulties and politics of memory, Simangaliso’s one’s are magical premonitions on her fears and hopes for the future. For Me’Tau, the squalor and dust on which her match-box house seems to have rooted itself in, is symbolic of how, for many amongst the lower classes, continuing poverty, discrimination and alienation remain constant even though there has been a change in government. In short,

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\(^8\)For illuminating discussions of, especially, the use of flashbacks (or interludes as I prefer to call them) in *Zulu Love Letter* see Jacqueline Maingard *South African National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2007), 168-178; her “Love, Loss, Memory and Truth” in Peterson et al, *Zulu Love Letter: A Screenplay*, 6-14; and Marie Kruger “‘The only truth I know is what I felt with my entire body’: Traumatic Memory in *Zulu Love Letter*” in *Research in African Literatures* 43 (1), 2012.
the poor and survivors of trauma may find themselves caught up, in Lawrence Langer's brilliant formulation, in “durational time” instead of “chronological time”. (Langer 1993: 263-73) In such instances, the passage of time does not confer forgetting, closure or redemption since survivors remain revisited by “a past that will not pass”. (Spiegel 2002, 159) Survivors such as Thandeka are called upon to confront the mental debris that ‘speaks’ – whether through silence (or the unspeakable), nightmares, hallucinations, guilt or anger - to their experiences of trauma, shame and guilt. Recovery entails a phase of “immersion in a past experience of frozen time; the descent into mourning feels like a surrender to tears that are endless”. (Herman, 1994: 195)

Judith Lewis Herman presents a nuanced and persuasive discussion on trauma and recovery. She identifies three stages of recovery for traumatized people: the establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning and reconnection with ordinary life. (Herman: 1994, 133, 155) I would like to draw on her reflections, in some detail, on remembrance and mourning. Remembrance entails narrating the story of trauma and then deciding on what needs to be done. Testimony will confront the survivor with the unexplainable question of why she had to suffer the atrocity and she will need to “examine the moral question of guilt and responsibility and reconstruct a system of belief that makes sense of her underserved suffering”. (Herman, 1994:178) Testimony, Herman stresses, is geared towards “integration, not exorcism”, it marks a “belief in the restorative power of truth-telling…as a ritual of healing” and it “has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial” (Herman, 1994: 181). With regards to the different types of psychological, physical and social loss that trauma brings, Herman offers sharp insights concerning the intricacies of mourning and forgiveness, including the difficulties associated with mourning and the resistance to it. The latter, she suggests, “most frequently” can appear “as a fantasy of magical resolution through revenge, forgiveness or compensation”. The “revenge fantasy is often a mirror image of the traumatic memory, in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed”. It “is one form of the wish for catharsis” but instead of bringing “relief, repetitive revenge fantasies actually increase her torment”. Herman
suggests that “during the process of mourning, the survivor must come to terms with the impossibility of getting even”. Instead, it is preferable if her fury “changes into a more powerful and satisfying form of anger: righteous indignation.... Giving up on the fantasy of revenge does not mean giving up on the quest for justice; on the contrary, it begins the process of joining others to hold the perpetrator accountable for his crimes”. In contrast, some survivors attempt “to bypass the outrage altogether through a fantasy of forgiveness”. Here, “the survivor imagines that she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma through a willed, defiant act of love”:

But it is not possible to exorcise the trauma, through either hatred or love. Like revenge, the fantasy of forgiveness often becomes a cruel torture, because it remains out of reach for the most ordinary human beings. Folk wisdom recognizes that to forgive is divine. And even divine forgiveness, in most religious systems, is not unconditional. True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought and earned it through confession, repentance and restitution. Genuine contrition in a perpetrator is a rare miracle....Mourning is the only way to give honor to loss, there is no adequate compensation. As grieving progresses, the patient comes to envision a more social, general, and abstract sense of restitution, which permits her to pursue her just claims without ceding any power over her present life to the perpetrator. (Herman 1994: 189-190)

The third stage of recovery involves the survivor reconciling with her new self, reclaiming the world and “finding a survivor mission” where they recognize “a political or religious dimension in their misfortune” and that its meaning can be used as “a basis for social action”. The survivor mission transforms “her own story into a gift for others” as she “comes to understand the issues of principle that transcend her personal grievance against the perpetrator”. However, “she also recognizes...that holding the perpetrator accountable for his crimes is important not only for her personal well-being but also for the health of the larger society. She rediscovers an abstract principle of social justice that connects the fate of other to her own”. (Herman: 1994: 207-209) After noting that “recovery is never complete”, Herman suggests that “the best indices of resolution are the survivor’s restored capacity to take pleasure in her life and to engage fully in
relationships with others”, that is, “to turn her attention from the tasks of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life”. (Herman 1994: 211-212)

Conclusion

The attempts to imagine a ‘new’ South African nation – ‘united in its diversity’ - remain seriously flawed in a number of respects. In the first instance, the new political imaginaries do not allow, even on the level of ideology, for a sustained and meaningful wrestling with the politics of race, poverty and inequality, violence and trauma, both in the past and in the present. It remains unclear how ‘nation building’ and ‘reconciliation’ are to move beyond being only ideals if, as a society, South Africa continues to deny and repress the many and transgenerational personal, social and economic challenges that are its historical legacy. With the attainment of democracy, the reluctance to implement restorative and redistributive justice and to jettison free-market policies has led to the reproduction and increase in suffering and socio-economic disparities. The future, arguably, is more under threat by the weight of the present rather than by ‘the burdens of the past’. In such a context, evocations of imaginaries such as the ‘rainbow nation’ are indulgences in chimerical games. While they may offer reasons for hope they also, on the other hand, frequently come across as more adroit strategies of rationalizing or reinventing the status quo, now without the veneer of crass racism, oppression and exploitation and under the remit of nation building, reconciliation and democracy.

Furthermore, there is no easy walk to healing and not all the paths commence from or lead to official interventions. Ordinary people have embarked on journeys in search of self-preservation and restoration, compassion and dignity, through establishing the appropriate relationships with the divine, ancestors, the land, self and community. The routes of African ontology, ritual and art have been crucial in this respect. In Zulu Love Letter, the psychological and physical manifestations of trauma are symbolically
embodied, negotiated and resolved through ritual therapy. Simangaliso’s ‘Love Letter’ suggests the therapeutic role of bead-work and the arts, especially their capacity to foster love and healing through memory-work. The film is an extension of this idea. It is an attempt at the public and interactive commemoration of the violence of the past, keeping it alive in the national consciousness as to, in its own small way, serve as an archive and a deterrent against a repeat of the violent history it engages. It is, ultimately, also a ceremony, tribute and gift to victims and survivors.

Bibliography


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