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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF ENGLISH

**Violent Southern Spaces: Myth, Memory, and the Body in Literatures of
South Africa and the American South**

by

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ABSTRACT

'Violent Southern Spaces' examines the narratives, archetypes and metaphors of memory, myth and the body that writers from South Africa and the American South have used to contest histories of racial oppression and segregation. In so doing, it seeks to identify significant transnational interactions and connections between the aesthetic forms, politics and histories of literary texts from South Africa and the United States. By analysing texts and situations that are both analogous and singular, this thesis utilises Jean-Luc Nancy's *Inoperative Community* as well as Sam Durrant's *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* to depict how works of literature interrupt Southern and South African forms of community as well as the myths upon which they are founded.

Chapter One examines the tension between the narrative and anti-narrative dimensions of trauma in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and considers the conditions under which cultural trauma not only exposes the subject as a singularity, but also serves to create community via a collective identification with a mythic past. In their focus on the interruption of community as well as the disruption of the trauma narrative, these texts help us to better understand how certain myths have come to define the nation or region.

Chapter Two considers the manner in which community is enacted through departure in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*. Depicted as either a movement towards a more traditional notion of community and communion, or an exposure of the limits of community, there is a certain type of freedom evidenced in such departures—a freedom intimately connected to the being-in-common of community.

Finally, in Chapter Three Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* are compared in order to demonstrate how both writers interrogate the excessive accessibility that has come to define the poor white community whilst also writing communities akin to Nancy's 'community without unity'. This chapter further examines how both texts depict community as an active, interruptive idea, a continual unworking of totalising and exclusionary myths of collectivity upon which community (and the nation) is formed.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, Denise Anne Greenfield

declare that the thesis entitled: *Violent Southern Spaces: Myth, Memory, and the Body in Literatures of the American South and South Africa*

and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

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Introduction

South Africa and the American South: A Case for Comparative Study

There is no question that generations of Americans and South Africans, black and white alike, have found [.] in one another's experience new perspectives on their own predicaments, new ways of understanding and acting upon their worlds.¹

--James Campbell

At a time in which the very idea of comparison is being scrutinised, questioned, and expanded, the historian James Campbell suggests that the connections between the United States and South Africa will remain a lively field for scholarly investigation precisely because it has mattered profoundly to so many individuals in both of those nations. One need only recall, he observes, how powerfully the TV news reports of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s reminded Americans of the footage of earlier struggles closer to home, in places like Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. American student activists' fight for divestment in South Africa was therefore not simply a matter of foreign policy, but the expression of a desire for greater racial equity in the US.² Yet, despite a growing interest in the parallels between the histories of racial segregation in South Africa and the United States in comparative historiography,³ there have been no sustained, comparative studies of the correspondences

¹ James Campbell, 'Towards a Transnational Comparative History', *Beyond White Supremacy: Towards a New Agenda for Comparative Histories of South Africa and the US*, Collected Seminar Papers: 49 (London: School of Advanced Studies, 1997), p. 27. Cited from Rita Barnard, 'Of Riots and Rainbows: South Africa, the US, and the Pitfalls of Comparison', *American Literary History*, 17.2 (2005), p. 402.

² Barnard, p. 402.

³ See, for example, George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Raven, 1985); Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Anthony W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A*

between fictions from these two countries.⁴ Historically, the transnational links most emphasised have been those relating African-American culture and black South African modernity, and therefore, have focused on the south-eastern US (most often known by the regional term ‘American South’), with its extensive experience of slavery and racial segregation. The influence of African-American culture on black South Africans dates back to the nineteenth century, and by 1912 and the founding of the South African National Native Congress—renamed the African National Congress a year later—there was an established exchange between the South African leaders of this movement and African Americans.⁵ The decades of the 1940s and 1950s had given rise to an unprecedented migration of black South Africans from the rural towards the urban areas, a move that also saw a shift from the ‘traditional’ to the ‘modern’. As a result of this shift, black South Africans began to search for images that might represent this new black modernity. Finding these in apartheid South Africa was difficult, hence to represent black modernity, South Africans had to look elsewhere and they turned to popular American and African American images. Thus the

Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ntongela Masilela, ‘New Negroism and New Africanism: The Influence of United States Modernity on the Construction of South African Modernity’, *Black Renaissance*, 2.2 (1999); and Maurice S. Evans, *Black and White in the Southern States: A Study of the Race Problem in the United States from a South African Point of View* (Colombia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001).

⁴ For examples of comparative essays see Siphokazi Koyana and Rosemary Gray, ‘Growing Up with Maya Angelou and Sindiwe Magona’, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 2.4 (2001), 1-14; Fiona Mills, ‘Diasporic Displacement and the Search for Black Female Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* and Nadine Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*’, *Safundi*, 2.4 (2001), 1-8; Helen Lock, ‘Women in the Interregnum: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*’, *Safundi*, 3.2 (2002), 1-10; Lewis Nkosi, ‘Luster’s Lost Quarter: Reading South African Identities (William Faulkner and J.M. Coetzee)’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 41.2 (2005), 166-78; Stéphane Robolin, ‘Loose Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 52.2 (2006), 297-320; Desiree Lewis, ‘Theory and Intertextuality: Reading Zora Neale Hurston and Bessie Head’, *Safundi*, 9.2 (2008), 113-25. For a more general perspective comparing South African and American literatures, see Leigh Anne Duck, ‘Apartheid, Jim Crow, and Comparative Literature’, *Safundi*, 8.1 (2007), 37-43. Comparison with South African Apartheid even provides a focal point for C. Vann Woodward’s venerable *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); originally published in 1955.

⁵ In 1890 Orpheus McAdoo and the Virginia Jubilee singers visited South Africa, introducing African-American spirituals and gospel music to a black South Africa intelligentsia, who embraced these musical forms as expressions of modernity. This paved the way for the later entrance of jazz into South Africa in the 1920s, adopted by the emergent black proletariat in the cities. See Masilela, p. 52-53.

emergence of black modern identity and political resistance in South Africa is inextricably linked to a dialogue with African American modernity.⁶ Given the vigour of this historiographic inquiry, the documented links between African American and black South African popular cultural texts, music, and film, one must question the relative paucity of comparative studies on South African and US Southern literature. After all, thematic and contextual resonances between these literatures are sometimes unambivalent: Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, for example, argues that ‘literature from the American South, which springs from the same impulse as South African literature, is better appreciated [in South Africa] than literature from the rest of the United States,’ eliciting even ‘partisan responses’.⁷ But while numerous monographs and essay collections attest that historians use this comparative framework to think about racial oppression and conflict, literary scholars have, in relative terms, demurred. In a 2007 article titled, ‘Apartheid, Jim Crow, and Comparative Literature’, Leigh Anne Duck discusses some of the possible reasons for such a reluctance to engage in a comparison of the literary. There is the fact that disciplinary foci in South Africa and the US South have tended to discourage such literary comparisons. As Duck points out, Mzamane noted in 1991 that South African English departments were not especially interested in US literature, representing as it did a ‘hybrid’ or colonial culture.⁸ Likewise, although several US universities offer courses in South African literature, its place in the curriculum is tenuous at best: ‘such classes often depend on faculty interest and are introduced into the curriculum under the rubrics of postcolonial or even Commonwealth

⁶ See Colette Guldmann, “A Symbol of the New African”: *Drum Magazine, Popular Culture and the Formation of Black Urban Subjectivity in 1950s South Africa*’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 2003), pp. 7, 41.

⁷ Mbulelo V. Mzamane, ‘Apartheid Defines the Contours of American Literary Studies in Southern Africa’, in *As Others Read Us: International Perspectives on American Literature*, ed. by H. Gutman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), pp. 235, 227. Cited from Duck, p. 37.

⁸ Mzamane, p. 220; Duck, p. 37.

literature'.⁹ Meanwhile, and perhaps more pertinently, US Southern literary study has been dominated by an 'exceptionalist paradigm' until the very last years of the twentieth century, with the result being a quite insular and restrictive approach to regional writing. Hence, forms of transnational study that situate the US South, for example, in relation to Caribbean or other Latin American nations have been far more prominent than have comparisons of literature from the American South and South Africa.¹⁰ In addition, the paucity of thought on South African cultural forms and politics in the US academy might result from the long-standing dominance of West Africa and the Middle Passage in the cultural imagination of the United States. Thus, the reasons for the scarceness of comparative literary work on South Africa and the American South appear as complex as they are varied. Nevertheless, as I undertake this comparative project I endeavour not only to contribute to what I hope will become a growing field of comparative literary work on these two places, but to expand and develop the methodology of theorists such as Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha who describe the transnational dynamics of postcolonial cultures in terms of translation, hybridity and the legacy of slavery and colonialism, in an effort to re-define 'the South' as a transnational space of aesthetic, political, geographical and cultural inquiry.

It is worth noting that exactly what constitutes 'the South' is a subject of some debate within the US. Geographically, the American South, or simply 'the South', is an area comprising the South-Eastern and South-Central United States. The region is known for its culture and history, having developed its own unique customs, musical styles and varied cuisines that have helped distinguish it in some ways from the rest of the country. Currently the United States Census Bureau defines the Southern region of the US as including sixteen

⁹ Duck, p. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid.

states further divided into subregions: The South Atlantic States; the East South Central States; and the West South Central States.¹¹ Specific parts of the South are often identified using the descriptors: Deep South, Old South, New South, and Southern Appalachia, amongst others. The most popular definition of the South, however, has remained that region comprised of the eleven states that seceded during the American Civil War to form the Confederate States of America.¹² One need only note the plethora of colleges and universities across the country offering programs in ‘Southern Studies’ to realise that the South has not only been America’s crucible for social and cultural change, but has remained a permanent fixture in the American imagination. The categories of inquiry shaping Southern studies most profoundly are wide ranging and include: criticism and theory in gender, sexuality, race, the body, and redefined issues of region generated by postcolonial studies and ‘new’ geography. Hence, more and more these programs seek to represent and analyse many Souths and Southern regions, as they offer critical scrutiny of the idea of a monolithic ‘South’. Hence, what it means to be ‘Southern’ is changing, just as what it means to be South African is also continually evolving.

It should be further noted that in undertaking this comparison, I am certainly not suggesting that the US South and South Africa are identical in terms of cultural, political, and historical geography, for of course, they are not. The most obvious difference being that the South is a region of the United States, whilst South Africa is a nation-state. Nevertheless, the American South and South Africa share a history—of dispossession, of socioeconomic

¹¹United States Census Bureau, 2007 Economic Census, ‘Regions and Divisions’; [http://www.census.gov/econ/census07/www/geography/regions_and_divisions.html], accessed 22 October 2013. The sixteen Southern states are: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

¹²South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina seceded to form The Confederate States of America, or Confederacy, prior to and just after (in the case of the latter four states) the start of the American Civil War.

hardship, of political and cultural conflict. By far the most recognised, and discussed similarities revolve around apartheid and racial segregation. In essence, the legacies of slavery and of conquest established a common pattern of discrimination in both regions. From their colonial origins in the mid-seventeenth century, white South Africans and Americans practiced slavery and invoked multiple cultural, biological, and ethnographic justifications for racial and ethnic inequality. To put it simply, blacks were sacrificed on the altar of white unity and supremacy. The result was the evolution of two of the most egregious systems of repression and exploitation of black subjects, and the development of equally renowned countervailing campaigns for racial justice.¹³

In view of these similarities, one must, nevertheless, remain alert to the pitfalls of comparison. For example, Rita Barnard discusses Nelson Mandela's call for the creation of a 'Rainbow Nation' in his inaugural address; and notes how Mandela's use of this national trope echoes Jesse Jackson's 1988 appeal for a 'Rainbow Coalition'. Barnard explains how the rainbow metaphor has almost antithetical implications in South Africa and the US—in the latter it has served as an emblem of multiculturalism, the predominant ideology of US race relations since the 1980s; while for South Africa and its official ideology of 'nonracialism', the rainbow with its separate bands of colour is not really an ideal emblem in this context.¹⁴ Barnard also reminds us that *rainbow* is not the only word that has in recent

¹³ For example, the Civil Rights and South African nonviolent resistance campaigns of the 1950s and 60s, the Black Power and Black Consciousness movements of the 1960s and 70s, and the global antiapartheid and divestment campaigns of the 1970s and 80s—to name only the most obvious. See George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Barnard, pp. 399-400. Barnard suggests that in the US, the celebratory rainbow can also become a means of ignoring disadvantage: its celebratory figuration of cultural difference runs the risk of obscuring the starker, more intractable division of class. In South Africa, the rainbow was deployed at the moment of transition to express a vision of a single national identity built on cultural diversity and equality.

years made a transatlantic crossing, so too has ‘that ugly word *apartheid*’¹⁵ which, as James Campbell puts it, ‘received a new lease on life in American English’ even as it ‘died its lingering death in its country of origin’.¹⁶ Jacques Derrida both acknowledged and analysed the persistent American fascination with apartheid. In his open letter to the South African scholars Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, he describes the ghostly second life that ‘racism’s last word’ seems to be leading in the US as a displacement of guilt and a return of the repressed. It is the result not of identical but of strangely familiar-looking problems, which Americans cannot hope to part with, treat, and cure—‘over there, in South Africa’.¹⁷

Barnard cautions, ‘The catachrestic nature of linguistic borrowings should alert those brave souls who wish to compare South African and US culture to the difficulties of such an enterprise’.¹⁸ Furthermore, since the democratic election of 1994, there has been a rising sense among historians and social scientists that the basis for comparative work is eroding. Duck suggests that:

Comparison of the US South with South Africa not only poses the danger of resuscitating problematic spatial paradigms, but also threatens to return each field to a focus on racial segregation, at a moment when such analysis could be outdated.¹⁹

¹⁵ Barnard, p. 400.

¹⁶ Campbell, p. 26; quoted from Barnard, p. 400.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, ‘But, beyond...’ (Open letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon), trans. by Peggy Kamuf, in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 369.

¹⁸ Barnard, p. 401.

¹⁹ Duck, p. 39.

Similarly, in a 1999 review of three new comparative studies, Courtney Jung bluntly reminds US-based scholars that South Africa's transition is over.²⁰ 'Race matters' should therefore cease to be the self-evident frame of analysis for comparative historiography. 'The selection of more appropriate pairings,' Jung concludes, 'will depend more on where [South Africa] is going, than where it has been'.²¹ Jung's assertion notwithstanding, South Africa's transition is not over, and race continues to play an important role in both spaces, though I agree with Jung that it should no longer be the self-evident and totalising frame of analysis for a comparison of the US and South Africa. Rather, an examination of the trauma of the pathology of racism and the manner in which it, in Sam Durrant's words, 'introduces an internal exception into the category of the human',²² is an area ripe for comparative study. To link the racial oppression in the American South to South African apartheid is not to challenge arguments concerning the uniqueness of either event, for as Durrant suggests, 'the impact of both events exceeds the moment of their historical occurrence, acquiring the disturbed, belated chronology of trauma'.²³ So it is not a comparative study of race, *per se*, that I undertake in the following chapters, but an understanding of the ways in which literature exposes what Paul Gilroy calls the 'sublime' memory of racial terror. If we understand the sublime as an irrevocable violence done to the imagination, as postmodern philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard suggest, then the histories of slavery and

²⁰ Courtney Jung, 'Race Matters', *African Studies Review*, 42.3 (1999). Jung compares George Fredrickson's *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa*, ed. by Ran Greenstein (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); and Anthony Marx's *Making Race and Nation*.

²¹ Jung, p. 60.

²² Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 4.

²³ Durrant makes this statement in reference to the Holocaust and forms of colonialism. It is equally apposite for a consideration of slavery and apartheid in that both histories produce similar problems of memorialisation.

apartheid are sublime insofar as they do violence both to the individual and the collective imagination. As Durrant further explains,

Such events have been described as collective or cultural trauma not simply by aggregating the traumatic experiences of individual victims, but because they disrupt the “consciousness” of the entire community, destroying the possibility of a common frame of reference and calling into question our sense of being-in-common.²⁴

Durrant begins his work, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, by asking ‘whether it [is] possible to found community on a recognition of our infinite difference’.²⁵ I utilise Durrant’s work not only to join the conversation about the nature of contemporary community, but also as a point of departure as I ask a slightly different question: is it possible to think a notion of ‘community without community’²⁶ as a way to consider the manner in which the traumas associated with racism not only disrupt our sense of being-in-common but also set the stage for a type of collective mourning that threatens to turn into a wound culture? To articulate such an idea requires challenging conceptions of community that reproduce a collectivity built upon a sense of closure, continuity and unity. In other words, we must reject the kinds of assumptions that prevail in the work of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), as well as those that ‘unproblematically draw upon Anderson’s conception of community precisely because this contribution is premised upon the notion of community as collectivity that is unified, continuous and enclosed’.²⁷

²⁴ Durrant, p. 4.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 71. Also see, Vijay Devadas and Jane Mummery, ‘Community Without Community’, *Borderlands E-Journal*, 6.1 (2007).

²⁷ Devades and Mummery, para. 2.

To think community in this sense is to disentangle the discourse of community and identity from essence, and to rupture the foundational violence upon which theorists such as Anderson's notion of community have been built. This is a concept of community as an active idea, as an interruption and as such, 'calls for a continual unworking of totalising and exclusionary myths of collectivity upon which community is formed'.²⁸ The literary analysis that makes up the bulk of this study might thus be described as an examination of the manner in which the works compared in the chapters to follow deconstruct and interrupt unifying myths of Southern and South African community and by extension, our sense of being-in common, and in so doing, offer a different way of coming to terms with cultural trauma and collective memory—one that does not focus on the figure of the wound.

A singular focus on the historical archives of South Africa and the United States, and whether or not they are similar 'enough' misses the point. As Anthony Marx points out, though we should not deny the importance of early historical legacies, it is important to remember that, in the case of South Africa and the United States, 'the past did not directly prefigure later outcomes of legal racial orders. Instead, nationalists would shape historical interpretations and omissions to legitimate the present, with such uses of history and culture subject to contestation'.²⁹ That being the case, it is far more instructive, for my purposes, to focus on such contestations as they arose in the transitional moments of these two countries; that is, the transition from societies characterised by the widespread violation of basic human rights and democratic norms to ones that both acknowledge and reject that past (or at least attempt to do so).

²⁸ Devades and Mummery, para. 7.

²⁹ Marx, p. 10. In addition, see Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), p. 70.

With regard to the equal citizenship rights of African Americans in the United States, there have been two transitional moments in which the federal government attempted to reject past racist institutions and practices, and move toward a more racially just society. The first was the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. During this period, however, policies designed to establish equal citizenship for African Americans were either never implemented or quickly abandoned. The Reconstruction era is important for this study, not only from the standpoint of the African American subject, but because it was a period during which the North exercised a form of imperialist control over the South resulting in renewed efforts to subjugate blacks, as well as an identity crisis for lower-class whites. The United States, it can reasonably be argued, is still in transition from its history of slavery. As Robert Meister suggests, the transitional project ‘was suspended for nearly a century, and remains unfinished business today’.³⁰

The second transitional moment in the United States, and one that has much in common with South Africa’s transition in the last decade, is the Civil Rights era. This transition can usefully be conceived as taking place from 1954 to 1965, that is, from the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*,³¹ to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This was the period during which the federal government turned from tolerating racial discrimination and segregation to enforcing equal protection of the law for all citizens regardless of race. The civil rights era, then, can be viewed as a transition from a regime that practiced legally enforced racial subordination and that excluded many African Americans from equal political participation, to a more racially just democratic regime. Seen

³⁰ Robert Meister, ‘Forgiving and Forgetting: Lincoln and the Politics of National Recovery’, in *Human Rights in Political Transitions: Gettysburg to Bosnia*, ed. by Carla Hesse and Robert Post (New York: Zone, 1999), p. 135.

³¹ The 1954 landmark case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students—denying black children equal educational opportunities—unconstitutional.

in this light, the civil rights era has much in common with South Africa's transition in the last decade from a racist regime that practised apartheid to a democratic regime in which all are, in theory (if not in reality), equal citizens.³²

In the current post-Civil Rights and 'post-antiapartheid' era,³³ prior transatlantic correspondences between the United States and South Africa have given way to new ones. Chief among them is that, in both contexts (though more so in South Africa), the last two decades might best be characterised by their intensive retrospection, even if precipitated by disparate circumstances. In particular, South Africa's establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995 'fashioned a country keenly attuned to excavation of the past'.³⁴ The TRC set forth a series of public hearings to unearth the traumatic details of four decades of apartheid. In redirecting the national consciousness into the past, this project sought to foster cathartic collective (re)education and healing towards an equitable future. Critiques of the TRC are wide-ranging with several critics concerned with the TRC's nation-building agenda.³⁵ This line of criticism casts the TRC as creator of the 'founding myth of the new South Africa'³⁶, legitimising the new African National Congress (ANC)

³² See Andrew Valls, 'A Truth Commission for the United States?', *Intertexts*, 7.2 (2003), p. 159. Valls suggests that though the civil rights era can be seen as a kind of regime transition, it is also clear that in many ways it was, and remains, an incomplete one. He argues that the conditions necessary for a just transition, or as he puts it, transitional justice, were not met: those conditions being both knowledge as well as *acknowledgment* of past abuses.

³³ Loren Kruger's term highlights the fact that the social and economic conditions institutionalised under apartheid remain woefully intact for the majority of South Africans, even as the campaign against apartheid proper has ceased; Loren Kruger, 'Black Atlantics, White Indians, and Jews: Locations, Locutions, and Syncretic Identities in the Fiction of Achmat Dangor and Others', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100.1 (2001), p.113.

³⁴ Robolin, p. 298.

³⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, 'A Diminished Truth', *Siyaya!*, 3 (1998), pp. 38-41; Colin Bundy, 'The Beast of the Past: History and the TRC', in *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*, ed. by Wilmot James and L. van de Vijver (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), pp. 19-20; Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimising the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1-30; Deborah Posel, *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), pp. 152-53; Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), pp. 8-26.

³⁶ Mamdani, cited from Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 74.

government and ‘construct[ing] a revised national history’ based on reconciliation. Yet in so doing, so the argument goes, the TRC masked what critics argue is the defining feature of the ‘new South Africa’, the grinding poverty of the masses. Overall, the TRC’s merits and successes remain a subject of debate. Because the United States has never engaged in such a national conversation about race and history,³⁷ and because dominant constructions of American history significantly differ depending on who is doing the telling,³⁸ Southerners, in particular, have continually conducted critical reassessments of the past even if they haven’t done so in a national, public forum.

The Narrative of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The South African TRC figures heavily—both implicitly and explicitly—in much of post-apartheid South African literature. Though the TRC is not the focus of this thesis, because of its importance to recent South African fiction, it is worth a brief discussion of its successes, failures, and methodology. Probably the most controversial feature of the TRC, and the one that has received the most scholarly attention, is its amnesty provision. Perpetrators of human rights abuses had the opportunity to apply for amnesty, a condition granted if the commission was satisfied that a full disclosure of offenses had occurred, and the perpetrators had acted for political reasons. It’s not difficult to understand that such conditional amnesty has been seen by many observers and scholars as morally problematic, for it appears to sacrifice justice for the victim on the altar of reconciliation, restoration and

³⁷ The one notable effort in the US, very explicitly modelled on South Africa’s TRC, is the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2005 to inquire into the Greensboro Massacre of 1979. The scale of this effort, however, was much smaller than the national scope of the South African TRC.

³⁸ Valls suggests that, ‘African Americans and whites have markedly different understandings of the past, with the former being well aware of its impact on the present, while the latter, by and large, have factually inaccurate information about the past and present regarding issues of race, pp. 163-64.

unity. As a result, much recent South African fiction is taken up with the challenges of this compromise.

In addition, the issues leading to the establishment of the TRC—most especially the allegations of abuse in African National Congress (ANC) camps and the demand for amnesty by apartheid's security forces—were focused on a relatively narrow range of human rights abuses: torture, abductions, killings, and associated violations. In terms of conceptualising the scope of the Commission, this limited the TRC's compass to political violence and political actors, rather than opening it to the wider panorama of apartheid and apartheid functionaries. In so doing, the TRC uncovered damning findings about apartheid, including: apartheid was a crime against humanity; the apartheid state sought to 'protect the power and privilege of a white minority'; racism was the 'motivating core of the South African political order' and black citizens were demonised as the 'enemy,' thereby creating a climate that enabled gross violations of human rights.³⁹ Yet, these findings notwithstanding, apartheid became the backdrop or context rather than a central focus of its enquiry.⁴⁰ In essence, the TRC focused on a narrow band of political violations (torture, killing, abduction, and a range of violations subsumed under 'severe ill-treatment') rather than fixing the spotlight on the structural violence that was systemic to the apartheid order.⁴¹

³⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, 1998, 7 vols; <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/index.htm> (accessed 20 Feb 2010); Volume 5, p. 222.

⁴⁰ Posel, pp. 153, 162-166.

⁴¹ In defining severe ill-treatment, the TRC acknowledged that there could be a broad definition but chose instead to focus on 'violations committed as specific acts, resulting in severe physical and/or mental injury' (TRC, Volume 1, p. 64). Severe ill-treatment included violations such as rape or sexual assault, physical beating, solitary confinement or prolonged detention without trial, shootings during demonstrations, and the destruction of a person's house through arson or other attacks. The last-mentioned expressly applied to conflicts directly associated with political struggle and excluded those whose homes were destroyed during the application of the apartheid government's forced removal programme, which was designed to ensure residential segregation based on race and ethnicity. See TRC, Volume 1, p. 79-82.

This focus made the TRC's determination of 'victim' too narrow. The victim was defined as the victim of torture, beating or killing rather than the victim of one of the myriad abuses associated with the systematic racial and economic discrimination that underpinned apartheid, such as forced removals or starvation in South Africa's homelands. Victims and perpetrators of gross violations of human rights were thus drawn from the relatively small pool of political activists and security force agents. Not only did this leave thousands of apartheid functionaries unscathed, more devastatingly, the critics argue, it failed to hold accountable in any manner the majority of those who benefited from apartheid—mainly the white population. Instead of placing the complicity and culpability of beneficiaries at centre stage, white South Africans by and large were able to claim a false innocence.⁴²

Finally, those who testified were subject to both a strict time limit and a pre-determined structure for their testimony. In an effort to control the proceedings and prevent the raising of unanticipated topics, testifiers were often asked to shorten their stories, and as a result, had to leave out information—for example, detailed descriptions of the lives of their loved ones—that might have been extremely important to the testifier, but irrelevant from the perspective of the TRC.

And yet, in speaking of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Njabulo Ndebele says,

And so it is that the stories of the TRC seem poised to result in one major spin-off, among others: the restoration of narrative. In few countries in the contemporary

⁴² It is worth noting that most of the victims who appeared before the TRC were black women.

world do we have a living example of people reinventing themselves through narrative.⁴³

But in a sense probably not foreseen by Ndebele, narrative also serves as a means of reinvention for those people who inflicted the sufferings of which the victims speak. The perpetrators have their own stories, the dreadful complement to the narratives of suffering and loss, what Antjie Krog calls the ‘second narrative’: ‘After six months or so, at last the second narrative breaks into relief from its background of silence—unfocused, splintered in intention and degrees of desperation. But it is there. And it is white. And male’.⁴⁴ It is important to note that this ‘second narrative’ belongs not only to those who were directly responsible for inflicting suffering in the form of torture, killing, abduction, etc., but it also belongs to those who benefited from apartheid; those who were bystanders and did little to challenge the abuses being enacted around them. Perhaps then it is inevitable that much of the white writing coming from South Africa today is confessional in nature, even if not overtly intended as such. Again, according to Ndebele:

In fact, there may be an informal truth and reconciliation process under way among the Afrikaners. Its contours are taking shape in the form of such novels as Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples*. Karel Schoeman’s *Promised Land* anticipated it some years back. Jeanne Goosen’s *Not all of Us* gave it further impetus. [. . .] Their distinguishing feature is their focus on ordinary social details which split up into major, disturbing statements. The ordinary Afrikaner family, lost in the illusion of the

⁴³ 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 Coetze (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 27.

⁴⁴ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2002), p. 56.

historic heroism of the group, has to find its moral identity within a national community in which it is freed from the burden of being special.⁴⁵

Within this second narrative—or perhaps it is a separate narrative of its own—is the voice of those who didn't benefit from apartheid to the degree that they should have, or to the degree that the myths of Afrikaner nationalism and white superiority would have predicted they would. These are the lower-class whites who were not only bystanders doing little to challenge the abuses being enacted around them, but at times were also violent perpetrators of that abuse. And yet, they were/are also direct manifestations of debased mythologies of white supremacy and are their unintended/unforeseen consequence. Alleging that whites in South Africa (and the American South) are victims, or are marginalised in any sense, may seem to run the risk of claiming victim status for a dominant group and recentering debates about identity politics and whiteness. However, by representing lower-class whites as marginalised characters, two of the authors to be examined in a later chapter—Dorothy Allison and Marlene van Niekerk—seek to interrogate and challenge the exclusionary logic of U.S. Southern and South African nationalisms, and the myths of civilisational superiority, moral rectitude and racial purity that such nationalist discourses perpetuated. In so doing, they expand Krog's second narrative to include not only the voice of white, male perpetrators, but also that of lower-class white (men), women and children. This thesis focuses, in part, on the nature of this second narrative; a narrative located not only in recent works from South Africa, but in white writing from the American South as well.

⁴⁵ Ndebele, p. 24. Note, Goosen's *Not All of Us* (1992) was re-titled *We're Not All Like That* in 2007.

Given the inability or unwillingness of the United States to confront its racist past via a truth commission or similar entity, and the limitations of the South African TRC process, there remains the need for continued discourse in the form of storytelling. Fiction, with its unique possibilities for exploring ambiguities and elusive feelings like shame and guilt, may be the one realm where the potentially brutal or divisive effects of shame can be ethically imagined.⁴⁶ In examining and comparing works of fiction, I will consider how the rhetoric, imagery and narrative structure of literary texts from South Africa and the American South contribute to both the formation of public testimonies of racial violence and trauma and to the critique of such public testimonies.⁴⁷

Trauma and the Talking Cure

Beginning with a consideration of contemporary trauma theory, this thesis will focus on the treatment of myth, memory and the body in articulating trauma in literary works from South Africa and the American South. It will further examine how Jean-Luc Nancy's thoughts on community reorganise the field of trauma studies, particularly as it applies to communities instantiated through the racist practices of Southern slavery and South African apartheid. To what extent are existing conceptions of trauma useful for analysing the traumatic disruptions peculiar to Southern and South African histories and the persistent anxieties, identity crises, and representational dilemmas they produce? How can trauma be understood and dealt with if it is inherent in the schemes of representation that have formed a social group and that remain the predominant examples from which this group

⁴⁶ Caitlin Charos, 'States of Shame: South African Writing after Apartheid', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 10.3 (2009), p. 284.

⁴⁷ See André Brink, 'Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-Apartheid Narrative', in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, p. 30.

can draw to think its identity? Focusing on the exploration of trauma, subjectivity formation, and narrative this research will examine how these novels shed light on the relationship between trauma, collective memory and the production of identities linked to trauma and the dominant narratives of the past. I will also attempt to determine to what degree each novelist attempts to assign a limit to the work of mourning. Do these writers follow the example of psychoanalysis and seek to transform melancholia into mourning, or do they allow the endlessness of grief to overwhelm the literary work? Or is there perhaps another possibility for the writer who bears witness to trauma; one in which traditional models of mourning and melancholia are insufficient as modes of responding to histories of oppression and inhumanity?

Those cultural and literary theorists whom one might loosely categorise as practitioners of ‘trauma theory’—including most notably, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra—share several assumptions. Derived to a large extent from Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of memory and trauma, they tend to emphasise the temporal aspects of psychic trauma, or the traumatic encounter as ‘a break in the minds’ experience of time’.⁴⁸ In addition to the assumption that trauma is an individual and private phenomenon, they suggest that trauma manifests itself primarily as a loss of language, coupled paradoxically with the compulsion to talk about that loss. This abreactive model of trauma, which asserts the position that traumatic experience produces a ‘temporal gap’ and a dissolution of the self, also emphasises the necessity of recreating or abreacting through narrative recall of the experience. In other words, as Shane Graham suggests, ‘the

⁴⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 61.

corollary of this point is that the “cure” for traumatic memory disorders is some variant of the talking cure’.⁴⁹

Therefore, the trauma theory articulated by Kali Tal, and critics such as Cathy Caruth, with its view that ‘trauma stands outside representation altogether’ imagines an intrinsic epistemological fissure between traumatic experience and representation.⁵⁰ Best articulated by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* when she says that ‘trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on’,⁵¹ this notion of trauma perceives subjective responses to trauma as fundamentally pathological and as noted previously, privileges the act of speaking or narration as the primary avenue to recovery.

Yet, few would disagree that ‘individuals suffer traumatic responses in the context of a culture that ascribes different value to the experience and a person’s feelings that surround that experience’.⁵² In other words, individuals do not respond to trauma as if they existed in a vacuum devoid of cultural and individual tendencies and behaviours. We exist in societies, communities and cultures that influence the way we think and behave. This is important for a number of reasons, not least of which is the degree to which the cultural values and narrative forms rooted in a particular place and time allow or disallow certain emotions to be expressed. Psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer explains the ways culture and community influence comprehension of trauma:

⁴⁹ Shane Graham, “‘This Text Deletes Itself’: Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story*”, *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1-2 (2008), p. 127.

⁵⁰ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 17.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 4.

⁵² Michelle Balaev, ‘Trends in Literary Trauma Theory’, *Mosaic*, 41.2 (2008), p. 155.

Registrations, rehearsal, and recall [of traumatic events] are governed by social contexts and cultural models for memories, narratives, and life stories. Such cultural models influence what is viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded at the time of registration, and, most important for long-term memories [. . .] *what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged.*⁵³

Thus, the ‘speakability’ of traumatic experience is not only determined by emotional or neurobiological triggers, but is strongly influenced by cultural models, social standards and even narrative conventions available to the writer/speaker at the time of composition. As I shall examine in further detail, the unspeakability of trauma—understood as both an ‘epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact’⁵⁴ as well as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies—is a central concern for many of the works examined in follow-on chapters. The texts to be discussed force us to consider whether silence—as a response to acts of violence and trauma—suggests passivity or agency. Is a determination to remain silent an act of courage, or is a refusal to speak a decision made out of fear, shame and helplessness?

The Melancholy of Race: Cultural Trauma, Racial Memory and Community

Caruth’s formulations of trauma and memory have also become an important source for the theorisation of literary trauma studies, especially as a source to support the notion of trans-historical trauma. This form of trauma theory makes several important claims about trauma,

⁵³ Laurence J. Kirmayer, ‘Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation’, in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 191; the emphasis is mine.

⁵⁴ Balaev, p. 157.

stating that on the one hand, traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, and on the other, it is a literal and contagious event. Caruth argues that ‘the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will’.⁵⁵ In other words, Caruth understands the potential of an experience to infect another subject through the act of narration, or based upon a shared ancestry or ethnic origins. She suggests that traumatic experience is contagious by stating that trauma ‘is never simply one’s own [. . .] [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas’.⁵⁶ Whilst Caruth focuses on cross-cultural trauma, Marianne Hirsch posits a contagion theory that suggests that traumatic experience is trans-historically passed across generational gaps through verbal, visual, or written acts of remembering.⁵⁷ This leads to the conclusion by critics such as Kirby Farrell that since traumatic experience is intergenerationally transmitted based on shared social characteristics, then everyone can experience trauma through vicarious means based on one’s ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, or economic background, thereby producing a ‘post-traumatic culture’.⁵⁸ Hence, this concept of trauma creates a causal relationship between the individual and groups, as well as between traumatic experience and pathological responses. It further leads to the claim by critics such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub that trauma narratives can recreate and abreact the experience for those who were not

⁵⁵ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁷ See Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), pp. 103-28; as well as Hirsch, ‘Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections of Trauma and Transmission’, in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, Community*, ed. by Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 2002), pp. 71-91. Hirsch uses the term ‘postmemory’ to describe the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.

⁵⁸ Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Inquiry and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 3.

there—the reader, listener, or witness can experience the historical experience firsthand.⁵⁹ This notion of transgenerational trauma forms the basis for the formation of identity based on a theory of cultural trauma—something I will further discuss in the next paragraph—but in two of the works to be examined in this thesis, the transmission of trauma is a much more visceral process. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2003) depict the manner in which damaged and disrupted mother-child relationships form the basis for transgenerational trauma, or more specifically, they portray the ways in which motherhood (and the mother-child relationship) becomes a traumatic primal scene (seduction) between mother and child that in its later (re)translation results in trauma for both. Evoking the French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche's work on a trauma-centred revised seduction theory, Morrison's and Dangor's texts force us to think about how the development of the human psyche might be based on the seduction of the child by the mother—and the ways in which transgenerational trauma may begin with that first seduction. In that sense, transgenerational trauma is much more than a passing on of written and verbal stories; it is much more than a group experiencing trauma based on shared social characteristics. In Morrison's and Dangor's texts, because of the compromised nature of motherhood in the segregated South and apartheid South Africa, and the pervasive trauma of sexual assault on women in these two places, the very message passed between mother and child is compromised and distorted.

How, then, do we define the parameters of cultural trauma? In his work on slavery and the formation of African American identity, Ron Eyerman explores notions of transgenerational trauma by examining the formation of an African American identity

⁵⁹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

through a theory of cultural trauma. He states, ‘the “trauma” in question is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people’.⁶⁰ Eyerman suggests that there is a difference, then, between trauma as it affects individuals and trauma as a cultural process. That is to say, there is a difference between a pathological paradigm of trauma that remains outside the range of human experience, and the cultural trauma of racism—a trauma well within the range of everyday human experience.

To that end, I suggest that the cultural trauma of racism is unique amongst traumas because of the paradox contained within: it represents both an exception and a normative mode of experience. If, as Durrant proposes, racism has pathological consequences because it introduces an internal exception into the category of the human, what is the result when the violence and dehumanisation—the state of exception—that inevitably coincides with histories of racism is no longer the exception, but becomes the normative mode of experience? Durrant suggests that the Caribbean philosopher and writer, Edouard Glissant, may provide one answer when he seeks to establish the basis for a new cross-cultural humanism in his collection entitled *Poetics of Relation*. In the opening essay, ‘The Open Boat,’ Glissant speaks of the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World as an ‘abyss’ that marks the difference of Caribbean cultural community. Though specifically focused on the Caribbean, Glissant’s words are equally apposite to an engagement with South Africa and the American South for what they say about exception and community:

Though the experience made you, original victim of the sea’s abysses, an exception,
it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among

⁶⁰ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 1.

others. People do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.⁶¹

Glissant asserts the potential commonality of the Caribbean experience as a foundation for cross-cultural community. Hence, he is suggesting that a community is borne out of a state of exception based on a negation of humanity. How, then, are we to attempt a working through of the trauma that has created such a community? One of the problems with current thought on cultural trauma is the way in which it generalises the category of trauma in what Mark Seltzer calls the ‘pathological public sphere’.⁶² Akin to Farrell’s post-traumatic culture, what this amounts to for Seltzer is an understanding of trauma that is ‘*inseparable from the breakdown between the psychic and social registers*—the breakdown between inner and outer and ‘subject’ and ‘world’—that defines this pathological public sphere. For Seltzer, the generalisation of the category of trauma signals the collapse of the priority of the subject, the failure of the ‘correct distance of the subject with respect to identification and representation’.⁶³ It would appear that Glissant is failing to maintain that distance when he suggests that an identity is formed around an exception and that the best element of exchange is represented by membership in a community founded on a traumatic experience.

Historian Dominick LaCapra attempts to avoid the generality of trauma by establishing a precise or ‘correct distance’ between what he calls structural and historical trauma, or between a historical *absence* found in one’s ancestral lineage and personal *loss*

⁶¹ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 8; cited from Durrant, pp. 11-12.

⁶² Mark Seltzer, ‘Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere’, *October*, 80 (1997), p. 11.

⁶³ Seltzer, p. 15.

actually experienced by an individual. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra defines structural trauma as transhistorical, connected to an ‘absence [that] applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to metaphysical grounds’, while historical trauma concerns an experience of loss that is ‘situated on a historical level and is the consequence of particular events’.⁶⁴ He further elucidates this distinction between loss and absence when he suggests that people face ‘particular losses in distinct ways’, as opposed to a historical absence of experience that was never there to begin with and therefore cannot be experienced as a lack or loss.⁶⁵ LaCapra questions and warns against the tendency ‘to reduce, or confusingly transfer the qualities of, one dimension of trauma to the other—to generalise structural trauma so that it absorbs or subordinates the significance of historical trauma, thereby rendering all references to the latter merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive, and perhaps equivocal’.⁶⁶

These notions of trauma, absence and loss are further complicated when the traumas in question involve race. Durrant distinguishes between ‘cultural memory’ and ‘racial memory’ in terms that reflect LaCapra’s thoughts on absence and loss, and Freud’s on mourning and melancholia. For Durrant, cultural memory constitutes a healthy mode of mourning, which has as its aim the recovery of, for example, an African American subject. It comprises the verbal—both written and oral, official and unofficial—accounts of a community’s history. As opposed to cultural memory, racial memory is a form of melancholia, a collective memory of negation that threatens to overwhelm the individual

⁶⁴ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 50, 64.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶⁶ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 82.

with the consciousness of a ‘disproportionate’ loss.⁶⁷ Racial memory remains nonverbalised yet somehow passes itself on from generation to generation, as if it were secretly encrypted in the cultural text. Durrant suggests that ‘because the “weight of the whole race” cannot be accommodated within consciousness, it passes itself on from generation to generation as symptom or affect’.⁶⁸ It would seem that the development of cultural (collective) memory, constituting as is suggested, a healthy mode of mourning, is encouraged in the hope of not only mourning a loss, but in also recovering the subject. Racial memory, on the other hand, representing as it does an absence, or a negation, is overwhelming and prone to melancholia. Yet, we recall that for Eyerman, it is precisely the collective memory—or cultural trauma—of slavery that defines an individual as a ‘race member’ and is, therefore, a unifying force in the formation of ethnic identity.⁶⁹ So we are left to consider just how we might unravel the relationship between racial trauma, collective memory and the production of identities linked to trauma as well as the dominant narratives of the past. How do we define a collective subject of trauma? Is the cultural trauma and collective memory associated with traumas such as slavery and apartheid a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people as Eyerman suggests? If so, is it possible to consider such racialised traumas in a collective/cultural sense without always including racial memory? Are collective memory and cultural trauma the basis for identity formation, or are they a catalyst for a loss of identity? Furthermore, how might we think through and

⁶⁷ Durrant suggests that the postcolonial novelist attempts to provide a space in which one might do justice to the sense of ‘disproportion’—to construct, as it were, a ‘home’ for disproportion—engendered by racial oppression. In doing so, the novelist attempts to assign a limit to the work of mourning. In other words, immoderate grief (melancholy) ‘needs to be recognized as a precisely proportionate response to history, a way of bearing witness to losses that exceed the proportions of the individual subject’; Durrant, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁸ Durrant is examining Toni Morrison’s text, *Beloved*, when he makes this distinction between cultural and racial memory and the inability to consciously accommodate ‘the weight of the whole race’. See Durrant, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Eyerman is quoting from Maya Angelou, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, New York: Bantam Books, 1976); Eyerman, p. 3.

move beyond the problems with a collective trauma defining a sense of identity based on race or the cultural memory of racial trauma? To begin, it is important to try and understand what is lost versus what is absent. One implies the possibility of recovery; the other suggests other, nonredemptive, melancholic options.⁷⁰ For Eyerman, the formulation of cultural trauma within the context of African-American descendants of slaves is akin to a *loss* of identity:

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic *loss* of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion.⁷¹

Eyerman also suggests that like collective memory, slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a ‘primal scene’ which could, potentially, unite all African Americans in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa.⁷² In that sense, slavery is both a catalyst for a dramatic loss of identity, and at the same time, a unifying force in the formation of ethnic identity. This duality is not easily reconcilable because culture and race do not simply and conveniently occupy separate spaces. The formation of cultural memory in the American South and South Africa has always included racial memory in its construction. By way of an example, again from Durrant: Jean-François Lyotard suggests that the Holocaust functions as a belated blow to European consciousness because the existence of the Jew as a human being had to be

⁷⁰ LaCapra suggests that the affirmation of absence as absence rather than as loss or lack open us different possibilities and requires different modes of coming to terms with problems. Historically losses or lacks can be dealt with in ways that may significantly improve conditions without promising secular salvation or a socio-political return to a putatively lost (or lacking) unity or community. ‘Paradise absent is different from paradise lost’; LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, pp. 56-57.

⁷¹ Eyerman, p. 2; emphasis added.

⁷² Ibid., p. 1.

denied in order for the European to retain a sense of their own subjectivity. Insofar as this denial founds the European subject, it constitutes the prehistory of the European subject. This denial is not a simple forgetting that occurred at a particular point in history but a foreclosure of the very possibility of the other's humanity. Hence, to recover a history of the Holocaust as an event is to ignore the fact that this forgetting does not take place in historical time. In other words, one is not able to remember the forgetting of Jewish humanity.⁷³

In much the same manner, to recover a history of slavery or a history of apartheid as events is to ignore the fact that the forgetting of the black subject as a human being also does not take place in dominant historical time. One can only trace the effects of this forgetting; the existence of 'blacks' as less than human, or other, that hovers outside time as what Freud termed 'unconscious affect' (Durrant's racial memory). In other words, narrative histories that seek to recover a black subject must ignore the fact that the term 'black man' is in fact a racist construction, the figure of an exclusion. So if cultural (collective) memory has as its aim the recovery of, say, an African American subject, the racist construction, 'black man', must be ignored.⁷⁴ Yet how is that possible?

I suggest that when collective memory (based as it is on cultural trauma) is figured in the formation of ethnic identity, this *absence* of humanity becomes conflated with a *loss* of identity. In other words, the conversion of the forgetting (absence) of black humanity into a

⁷³ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); cited from Durrant, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁴ Judith Butler suggests that 'that there is all kinds of interesting work to be done on melancholia and "race" and in particular with the place of "race" within diasporic culture in which as it were the origins of racialization are foreclosed [there is] the impossibility of return to any pure notion of race, the impossibility of an historical return to the origins of racialization in say the US and slavery or in emigrations from Africa or the Afro-Caribbean, that kind of impossibility of return and yet a mindfulness of history and a desire for history that's never quite satisfiable'. See Vikki Bell and Judith Butler, 'On Speech, Race and Melancholia', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16.2 (1999), p. 169.

loss of identity—or the reduction of the structural trauma of racism to the event of slavery and/or apartheid—runs the risk of creating a scenario wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from which later traumas might derive. To put it more succinctly, myth becomes the basis for trauma.⁷⁵ That is not to suggest that all myth is bad myth. However, we must remain diligently aware of the stories we tell to ourselves and to others. In telling *their* stories, for example, the writers to be discussed in the following chapters demonstrate the ways in which the embracing of myths based on notions of a ‘fall from a putative state of grace, at-homeness, unity, or community’⁷⁶ do not necessarily lead one down a road to redemption.

The Exposure of Community

The French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, suggests that a specific feature of the modern era is a longing for an ‘original community’. It is a desire for an immediate being-together, out of the idea that we once lived in a harmonious and intimate community, but that this harmony has declined throughout history. The ‘infrangible’ bonds of this original mythic community have vanished, and there has arisen a potent nostalgia for this lost entity.⁷⁷ Nancy suggests that the longing for an original community is not a reference to a real period in our history; rather it is a mythical thought, an imaginary picture of our past. As such, this nostalgic imagination is innocent, but when it becomes the starting point for a politics of community, the innocence disappears. We should become suspicious, Nancy says, of the retrospective consciousness of the lost community and its identity:

⁷⁵ As in Freud’s primal crime or in the case of original sin attendant upon the Fall from Eden. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 82.

⁷⁶ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 77.

⁷⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 9.

(whether this consciousness conceives of itself as effectively retrospective or whether, disregarding the realities of the past, it constructs images of this past for the sake of an ideal or prospective vision). We should be suspicious of this consciousness first of all because it seems to have accompanied the Western world from its very beginnings: at every moment in history, the Occident has rendered itself to the nostalgia for a more archaic community that has disappeared, and to deplored a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality.⁷⁸

Nancy argues that this lost community in fact never existed, and that this idealisation of community is based on nostalgia and myth. The writers to be examined in the chapters to follow examine the role of myth in the lives of their characters as they recognise the need for, and yet question the function of founding traumas that typically play a tendentious ideological role, for example, in terms of the concept of a chosen people or a belief in one's privileged status as victim. In *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1996) and *Triomf* (1994), for example, Dorothy Allison and Marlene van Niekerk place poor whites at the centre of a Southern and South African community from which they have long been banished. By putting the poor white—or more specifically, 'white trash'—community under erasure, and writing against the notion that 'trash' is an essential state of being, they depict the manner in which their characters might begin to form a 'community of others' whose being-in-common is not mapped according to any identitarian principles of sameness, but rather according to their differences or singularities.

Articulating or defining what it means to be a collective subject of trauma is not a straightforward endeavour, however. For we must ask ourselves on what basis can

⁷⁸Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 10.

community be erected? How is it sustained? Nancy puts forth an understanding of community that helps us think through and beyond the problems with collective trauma defining a sense of identity based on race or the cultural memory of racial trauma. For Nancy, community is a given and we cannot not co-appear. Operating somewhere between the presence of traditional unitary community and the absence of community, Nancy recognises the necessity of putting community under erasure: ‘to think a community that is not an essence, not an identifiable totality which receives its meaning and determination from a transcendental signified, be it race, birth, gender, etc.’.⁷⁹

Although Nancy is not considering race or racialised formations of trauma specifically, his reflections on community have important implications for understanding the collective trauma associated with the racial formations of slavery, apartheid and their legacies in the dominant narratives of South Africa and the American South. More specifically, Nancy’s thoughts on community might help us to view trauma as less about the ‘logic of the wound’⁸⁰ and more about the being of community as an exposure of singularities.⁸¹ For Nancy, there can be no wound because there is no subject to be opened, there are only singularities exposed in their openness: ‘there is no laceration of the singular being: there is no open cut in which the inside would get lost in the outside (which would

⁷⁹ Marie-Eve Morin, ‘Putting Community Under Erasure: Derrida and Nancy on the Plurality of Singularities’, *Culture Machine*, 8 (2006); [<http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/37/45>], accessed 5 October 2012.

⁸⁰ Mark Seltzer discusses the fascination with the wound of trauma in contemporary art as a cultural phenomenon that he calls ‘wound culture’: ‘The convening of the public around scenes of violence—the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact—has come to make up a *wound culture*, the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound’. Seltzer, p. 3.

⁸¹ Nancy always distinguishes singularity from individuality. A singularity is not closed upon itself, absolved from any contact with others. A being is singular not because it is enclosed within a limit that would separate it from other beings, but because it is concerned with its limit. See Morin.

presuppose an initial ‘inside,’ and interiority).⁸² Hence, for Nancy, singularity does not precede community. Rather, singularities appear simultaneously and form a community in the very event of this appearance. ‘And so, Being “itself” comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, [. . .] as *community*’.⁸³ Nancy’s thoughts on singularity help us to move beyond an essentialist understanding of race and a concomitant generalisation of collective racial trauma that incorporates a pathological focus on the wound. For Nancy, singularity involves always being exposed to others and being able to distinguish oneself from others. In other words, the relation between singularities is their incommensurability. They can never be reduced to each other but their mutual differences are not substantial characteristics that can lead to a specific, demarcated whole of singularities either. We are different from each other, but not because of a substance or an archetype. Characteristics such as ethnicity or culture are contingent rather than exclusivities that permit or disallow someone from becoming part of a specific community.⁸⁴ For Nancy, this being-with, or community, involves a finite sharing and is the only viable modality of community.⁸⁵ Hence, if the contextual particularity of trauma as it exists (and has existed) in the American South and South Africa can never be completely shared, ‘trauma is nonetheless an exposure of finitude that *is* shared, insofar as finitude is *being*, shared-out’.⁸⁶ In that sense, Nancy helps us to respect the singularity of racial trauma—or the singularised subject of trauma—whilst

⁸² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 30. Also see Marija Cetinic, ‘Sympathetic Conditions: Toward a New Ontology of Trauma’, *Discourse*, 32.3 (2010), p. 289.

⁸³ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Ignaas Devisch, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Question of Community* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁸⁵ Nancy says: ‘a like-being resembles me in that I myself “resemble” him: we “resemble together”, if you will. That is to say, there is no original or origin of identity. What holds the place of an “origin” is the sharing of singularities. This means that this “origin”—the origin of community or the originary community—is nothing other than the limit: the origin is the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed. We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside that we are *for ourselves*. The like is not the same (*le semblable n'est pas le pareil*). I do not rediscover *myself*, nor do I recognize *myself* in the other: I experience the other’s alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that “in me” sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it.’ See Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*. p. 33.

⁸⁶ Cetinic, p. 293.

also constructing the affective conditions under which trauma may become collective or cultural.

Marija Cetinic compellingly argues that this concept of singularity enables us to leave the category of the ‘wound’ behind altogether, and further allows us to move away from generalising the category of trauma in Seltzer’s ‘pathological public sphere’. For Seltzer, the notion of the public sphere has become inseparable from the collective gathering around sites of wounding, trauma, and pathology: sociality and the wound have become inseparable. Hence, ‘vague and shifting lines between the singularity or privacy of the subject, on the one side, and the collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing, on the other’,⁸⁷ result in a traumatic sociality premised on the wound. For our purposes, the wound need not be physical (though it may), but may represent psychic trauma—the ‘wound’ of racism—and yet in either case, a public sphere focused on the wound (or a ‘wound culture’) is defined by a fascination with the torn and exposed individual as public spectacle, and trauma as compulsive return (to the ‘scene of the crime’). If Nancy’s thoughts on singularity and community help us to think a mode of traumatic exposure that does not rely upon this logic of the wound, then it is his thoughts on the interruption of community that further allow us to think through the ways in which myths of racial formations of trauma come to define the nation or region.

For Nancy, the most important characteristic of community is its interruption or unworking. Nancy relates such an unworking, or undoing, with the interruption of myth. He further theorises myth as a founding narrative: ‘a founding fiction, or a foundation by

⁸⁷ Seltzer, p. 4.

fiction' whose principal function lies in founding a community.⁸⁸ As I shall detail in the next chapter, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the death of Charles Bon exposes the myths around which the dominant narratives of the American South are formed, and in *David's Story* Dulcie is presented as a challenge and disruption not only to the writing of David Dirkse's story, but by extension, to the story South Africa. In that sense, both characters represent the interruption of community, but they do so in markedly different ways. Bon exposes the myths of racial formation that define the American South, but even so, the dominant narrative remains intact. Dulcie, on the other hand, interrupts the story of the South African past, but in so doing, the dominant narrative crumbles. For Nancy, such an interruption un-works a community, that is, it lets a space open in the identification of the community with itself. However, this is not the same as suggesting that the absence of myth corresponds to an absence of community. Rather, the very rejection of myth becomes an act of community; this un-working is the active incompleteness of community. The challenge here is that Nancy appears to be suggesting that myth not only founds a community, but tends to make of it a collective individual. The novels to be examined in the follow-on chapters deconstruct such conceptions of community and myth to depict the manner in which communities are formed and unformed by the very act of testifying (in a myriad of ways) to acts of racial trauma, and in that sense, they provide a caution to the dangers of reducing community to ontology—or to the ontology of event.⁸⁹ For if the interruption of myth lets a space open in the identification of the community with itself, then it is the deciding subject who chooses how that space is to be filled —or even if it is to be filled at all.

⁸⁸ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, pp. 53, 50.

⁸⁹ See Oleg Domanov, 'Jean-Luc Nancy: An Attempt to Reduce Community to Ontology', in *Returning (to) Communities: Theory, Culture and Political Practice of the Communal*, ed. by Stefan Herbrechter and Michael Higgins (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 111.

Myth is created, then, on the back of a ‘founding trauma’—the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both.⁹⁰ Akin to Eyerman’s primal scene, slavery and apartheid can be understood as founding traumas; as such, they are typical of myths of origin and ‘may perhaps be located in the more or less mythologized history of every people’.⁹¹ That is not to say that the institutions of slavery and apartheid are myths, for of course, they are not. The collective memory of these institutions, however, may take on a mythic dimension. Eva Hoffman writes:

This kind of memory [. . .] is, if not exactly false, then tendentiously falsifying. Unlike genuine historical consciousness, which strives to understand multiple aspects of the past, collective memory “reduces events to mythic archetypes.” It uses the resulting conceptions to support a group’s interests, mobilize its loyalties, or express supposedly eternal truths of collective identity.⁹²

This is important because although the events of slavery and apartheid can be determined, the precondition, racism, cannot. This being the case, we are left to wonder how the trauma of the event can be resolved. How can a loss of identity so closely associated with an absence of humanity be mourned? One way might be through a rethinking of community; one that is not concerned with race, class, gender or sexuality, but rather is concerned with the relations that are formed across these categories (being-with) and which at the same time recognises that this community-without-identity—or community without community—is also ‘without either representation or possible description’; it is ‘an absolutely

⁹⁰ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 81.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Eva Hoffman, ‘The Uses of Hell: Review of *The Holocaust in American Life*’, by Peter Novick, in *New York Review of Books*, March 9, 2000, p. 19. Hoffman is referencing Maurice Halbwachs and his work on collective memory here.

unrepresentable community'.⁹³ Hence, I consider how communities are formed—and disrupted—around both singular and collective notions of trauma. The works that I will examine challenge a purely psychological theory of trauma by depicting characters who attempt to reconcile the duality of experiencing events as individuals and as members of a community or group. In particular, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000) not only depict the tension between the narrative and anti-narrative dimensions of trauma, but they also highlight the ways in which trauma can be created in the very act of storytelling. In addition, Faulkner and Wicomb both compellingly explore the challenges inherent in reconciling notions of collective traumas and singular pasts, or theories of trauma and community. Nancy's concept of singularity and community enables us to begin to think of a mode of traumatic exposure that helps to reconcile the ways in which trauma is located between the singular and the collective. It also might help us to think through the problems with defining a sense of identity based on race (and 'racial memory') or the cultural memory of racial trauma, or indeed with the way in which regional or national myths of racial formations of trauma define the nation/region. Discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, Nancy envisions the interactions between singular beings as shared expositions of alterity and the limit of being together. In that sense, community realises itself in the sharing of its limits—in its shared, constant exposure to finitude through 'birth, death, and alterity'—and trauma exposes the conditions of this delimitation; this situation of 'being-many-together' (just as for Durrant, trauma calls into question our sense of being-in-common).⁹⁴ Nancy's concept of community might help us to understand how collective trauma need not be based around a pre-given or essential identity, but is defined

⁹³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 24-25; cited from Devades and Mummary, para. 5. Also see Durrant, p. 111.

⁹⁴ Nancy recognises the singularity of the individual as also always placed in plurality and reciprocally, that every plurality is also always singular.

in and through negotiations between singular experiences of trauma. So if the contextual particularity of trauma can never be completely shared, if our pasts are truly singular in that respect, then trauma is nonetheless an exposure of finitude ‘and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being: its death, but also its birth’.⁹⁵

It is important to note that the texts to be examined in this thesis both support and complicate Nancy’s notion of community (or we might say that Nancy’s notion of community complicates an understanding of collective memory or trauma) via the manner in which they depict singular and collective experiences of racialised—and class-based—trauma. In particular, a common theme in the works to follow is that a push for reconciliation (both of a personal and collective nature), a term that suggests a lost unity, should not seek to create a unified, harmonious community that speaks with one voice. Rather, we must allow space to form the fundaments of a fractured and fragmented community that speaks with many voices—to recognise how the other’s traumatic memory is not the same as my own experience of that same trauma/memory. In other words, we must learn to value the fragment and we embrace what Nancy calls a ‘resistance to immanence’⁹⁶ if we are to better understand and work through the singular and collective nature of racialised trauma and memory.

In addition, I focus on the manner in which any theoretical reflection on the ways of narrating trauma—including debates on the psychic dynamics at work—cannot exclude both the body and place as central figures of this telling. In other words, I research a mode of telling that acknowledges an indissoluble bond between memory, space, and the body;

⁹⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 15. Also see Cetinic, p. 293.

⁹⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 35.

between trauma, place and corporeality. By including a theory of place in the application of literary trauma, we are able to challenge a purely pathologic paradigm as an accurate description of fictional representations of trauma, by taking into account that the time and place of trauma are always imagined retrospectively, and form an integral part of the telling of the experience. In a similar manner, writing trauma also means speaking and writing the body, and returning to the body as a medium of self-expression. In this way, trauma is both a personal and a cultural experience.

The goal of this study, then, is not to establish direct textual contacts, but rather to examine convergences, similar features and strategies that have developed as responses to analogous socio-political and historical circumstances in the American South and South Africa. I'm referring here to a space of comparison that speaks to what Natalie Melas describes as a particular form of incommensurability. Incommensurable in the sense that there is a 'basis for comparison' between South Africa and the American South, presumably the space they have in common, but no 'ground of equivalence' when it comes to the production of their respective racially oppressive institutions. Melas defines 'incommensurability' as, literally, 'that which cannot be measured by comparison'.⁹⁷ Though I do choose to compare three pairs of texts, each pair representing one work from South Africa and one from the American South, in keeping with Melas, I aim to not only determine individual units (texts) suitable to evaluation, but in addition, to undertake a comparison so as to investigate those forms that do not necessarily unify, but also discriminate. I agree with Melas when she says that close reading offers an important approach to cross-cultural engagement, because it points toward an open model of interlocution rather than mastery.

⁹⁷ Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 31.

Gayatri Spivak elaborates this point in *Death of a Discipline*: Opposing the ‘disciplinary politics of distant reading and the scopic ambitions of mapping the world’s literature and bringing it under Euro-US rational control’, she advocates a notion of reading over distance, *teleopoesis*, in which the aim is not to master or transcode a text as representative of a culture, but rather ‘to affect the distant in a *poiesis*—an imaginative making—without guarantees’.⁹⁸

Furthermore, if, as Caruth argues, ‘history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas’,⁹⁹ then Western traumatic histories must be seen to be tied up with histories of colonial trauma for trauma studies to be ethically effective. Attempts to give suffering engendered by colonial oppression its rightful place in the field have begun to be made in various disciplines in recent years. Mental health professionals, for example, are becoming increasingly aware of the need to acknowledge traumatic experiences in non-Western settings and to take account of cultural differences in the treatment of trauma. These concerns are reflected in the titles of two recent collections of essays: *Trauma and Dissociation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Not Just a North American Phenomenon* (2006) and *Honoring Differences: Cultural Issues in the Treatment of Trauma and Loss* (1999).¹⁰⁰ Postcolonial critics and theorists like Kamran Aghaie, Jill Bennett, Victoria Burrows, Sam Durrant, Leela Gandhi, Linda Hutcheon, Rosanne Kennedy, Ranjana Khanna, David Lloyd, and Rebecca Saunders have lately suggested theorising colonisation in terms of the infliction of a collective trauma and reconceptualising postcolonialism as a post-traumatic cultural formation.

⁹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 31; Melas, p. 38.

⁹⁹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁰ The former volume was edited by George F. Rhoades, Jr. and Vedat Sar (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2006); the latter by Kathleen Nader, Nancy Dubrow, and Beth Hudnall Stamm (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1999).

A recurring theme in this thesis, then, concerns the usefulness of trauma theory as we know it for understanding traumas such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, and political violence—phenomena in which psychic violence and alienation from history *are the norm rather than a state of exception*. The feminist psychotherapist, Laura S. Brown, has argued that traumatic experiences of people of color, women, gays and lesbians, lower-class people, and people with disabilities often fly under the trauma-theoretical radar because of the fact that current definitions of trauma have been constructed from the experiences of dominant groups in Western society. Brown stresses the need to expand our understanding of trauma from sudden, unexpected catastrophic events that happen to people in socially dominant positions to ‘insidious trauma’, by which she means ‘the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit’. Routinely ignored or dismissed in trauma research, the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for.

As explained in some detail previously, the study of trauma has tended to focus on individual psychology. Racial trauma, however, is a collective experience, which means that its specificity cannot be recognised unless the object of trauma research shifts from the individual to large social entities, such as communities or nations. Yet it is hardly self-evident how this transition might be effected. While some theorists assume an unproblematic translation from individual to collective trauma—Dominick LaCapra, Ron Eyerman, Kai Erikson and Linda Hutcheon—others warn that a simple metaphorical extension may be

reductive and politically irresponsible.¹⁰¹ However, refusing to move from the individual psyche to the social situation is bound to have damaging consequences. A narrow focus on individual psychology ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse. And yet, we must also be cautious that in moving from the individual to the collective we don't adopt the dubious idea that everyone is a victim, that all history is traumatic, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or 'wound culture'.¹⁰² The texts to be examined in the follow-on chapters remind us that recovery from trauma is a much more complex process than simply one in which the individual witness gains linguistic control over his or her pain. Whilst at the same time, they serve as cautionary tales against a movement of identity formation in which trauma is generalised, used in invidious and ideological ways and passed from one generation to the next.

* * *

In order to set the stage for the comparative textual analyses of the following chapters, this initial chapter is dedicated primarily to identifying several key contextual issues. Foremost among these are assessing the state of criticism on American and South African literary relations (as sparse as it is). Subsequent chapters pair and compare texts by authors from each region. Via these comparisons, I examine the narratives, archetypes and metaphors of myth, memory and the body that writers from South Africa and the American

¹⁰¹ For the former, see LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Kai Erikson, 'Notes on Trauma and Community', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 183-99; Linda Hutcheon, 'Postcolonial Witnessing—and Beyond: Rethinking Literary History Today', *Neohelicon*, 30.1 (2003), pp. 13-30. For the latter, see David Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2.2 (2000), pp. 212-28; Rebecca Saunders and Kamram Aghaie, 'Introduction: Mourning and Memory', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25.1 (2005), pp. 16-29.

¹⁰² Seltzer, pp. 3-26.

South have used to contest histories of racial oppression and segregation. In so doing, this thesis further seeks to identify significant transnational interactions, or what Elleke Boehmer calls ‘interdiscursivities’, between the aesthetic forms, politics and histories of literary texts from South Africa and the United States.¹⁰³ Despite the differences and dissonances—the incommensurabilities—amongst these fictions, they unite and, to some extent, engage with each other in their respective attempts to provide us with new ways of thinking about the relationship between literature and trauma. I focus on writers who assume responsibility for testifying to traumas that are pervasively cultural and, at the same time, experienced and interpreted as personal. This may include, for example, the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence, such as found in Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*, or the unexplained death of a loved one, as found in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*. It might even include the crushing poverty and stigma of being poor and white depicted in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and Marlène van Niekerk’s *Triomf*. With the exception of *Absalom, Absalom!*, this dissertation focuses on late twentieth and early twenty-first century works. This choice reflects my long standing interest in literature from the American South, and my more recent interest in the ways it overlaps, speaks to, and corresponds with post-apartheid South African literature. In addition, the choice serves to focus the scope of my research on the role literature plays in two areas transitioning from histories of racial oppression to more free and democratic societies. Though the American South transitioned from a slavery-based economy more than a hundred years ago, and put an end to de jure racial

¹⁰³ Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 8.

segregation more than fifty years ago¹⁰⁴, it is a region still in a process of coming to terms with its past. Although South Africa's transition from the horrors of apartheid is a much more recent event, occurring as it did a little less than 20 years ago, many of the challenges still facing the American South, the same challenges explored by many Southern writers, are also depicted in post-apartheid South African literature.

Chapter 1 examines the tension between the narrative and anti-narrative dimensions of trauma in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*, via the manner in which the texts encourage a rethinking of traditional notions of working through trauma. More specifically, these works depict a complex view of memory as an active and revisionary process that challenges the predominate model that suggests a traumatic experience remains frozen and separated from 'normal' memories. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story*, the construction of the past includes new details with each telling, or is constructed from different perspectives, demonstrating that memories of a traumatic experience are revised and actively rearranged according to the needs of the individual at a particular moment in time. I further examine the way in which the trauma of particular racial formations appears to become constitutive of a collective identity; and yet at the same time, these texts depict the manner in which singular representations of the trauma of racialisation work to contest the production of an essential identity that defines the collective subject of trauma as a passive victim. More than simply an anti-essentialist understanding of race, however, this approach seeks to understand the relationship between trauma, collective memory and the production of identities linked to trauma (both for a community and for an individual).

¹⁰⁴ I am referring to the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution, adopted in 1865, that officially abolished and continues to prohibit slavery and involuntary servitude (except as punishment for a crime), and the previously discussed 1954 landmark case, *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

In chapter 2 I discuss Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* for what light representations of home as a site of psychic trauma can shed on dominant spatial regimes of apartheid and slavery, and the racialised forms of sexual violence that underpinned those spatial regimes. I examine these texts for the manner in which they expand and develop the notion of what it means to be both a subject of collective trauma as well as a collective subject of trauma by depicting the inherently ambivalent and traumatic experience of motherhood for a slave in the American South and for a coloured South African woman during the struggle against apartheid. At the core of both works lies a perceptive insight about the workings of trauma that intuitively echoes, transforms, and re-locates Freud's theory of traumatic latency and seduction. I further employ French psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche's work on a trauma-centred revised seduction theory to examine the complexity of the mother-child relationship in these texts as well as the very singular traumas of rape and incest as they become implicated in a collective trauma surrounding mothering and motherhood. Both *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* depict the manner in which community is enacted through the experience of freedom through departure—from home and from motherhood—though Morrison and Dangor represent this freedom in different ways. One illustrates the embracing of a more traditional notion of community and communion, whilst the other exposes the limits of community, and in doing so reminds us that 'only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated'.¹⁰⁵

Finally, via a comparison of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, I examine how violent foundation myths inextricably tied up with religion are played out in significant ways in South Africa and the American South. Both

¹⁰⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxvii.

Allison and van Niekerk deconstruct whiteness to depict the lives of ‘poor white trash’—a complex cultural category used by various groups in contradictory ways to mark out and identify certain whites, their practices, and their attitudes. I further consider the complex connection between the absence of socio-economic and political power that defined lower-class whites in the American South and South Africa, and the shame associated with that absence. This shame plays out as a form of collective mourning that threatens to destroy the family as well as any sense of community to which these lower-class characters might subscribe. Yet, these texts also depict moments of hope for their characters, moments in which community is enacted (and acknowledged) through the very act of touching another human being.

The themes that I discuss in each chapter are not limited to the individual works being compared precisely because they arise out of and reflect similar historical and social circumstances. Consequently, different but equally valid pairings of the same texts are conceivable. One might compare *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Bitter Fruit* on the basis of their representations of psychic trauma provoked by sexual violence against women. A comparison of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Triomf* would certainly yield interesting insights into the myths surrounding the American Dream and Afrikaner nationalist mythology respectively. And, of course, there are numerous significant parallels in the complex and contradictory notions of whiteness depicted by William Faulkner, Toni Morrison and Marlene van Niekerk. For reasons that I discuss further in each chapter, however, I find the current pairings best suited to the focus of this study.

As a result of historical pressures, tasks of self-definition and redefinition have been particularly urgent in both the American South and South Africa. C. Vann Woodward’s thesis

that (contrary to the belief of many Southerners) the South's history was not unique but, rather, representative of that of many nations—and of the Third World in particular—provides the backdrop for my identification of parallels in the literary representations of history in the Southern US and South Africa. The renowned Southern historian averred that, in contrast to the US as a whole, with its myths of innocence, prosperity , and success, 'The South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America—though it is shared by nearly all the peoples of Europe and Asia—the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction'.¹⁰⁶ The experience of conquest and subordination is, of course, shared not just with Europe and Asia, but also with South Africa. South Africans—black South Africans in particular—have been acutely aware of this aspect of the South's history, and, in particular, of its parallels with their own experiences. The South, as recent scholarship attests, can no longer be torn away from its transnational roots and connections. It has to be seen in terms that dissolve those boundaries that keep it hermetically sealed. Those terms range from ones that place it, following the work of scholars like Paul Gilroy, in the context of the black diaspora, to those that put the South in the context of the entire American continent, as, say, does the work of Deborah Cohn, Susan Castillo, and Earl Fitz. Andrew Hook unearths the Celtic roots of Southern literature and culture, and Helen Taylor analyses a series of dialogues between Southern tropes and works of their European audiences.¹⁰⁷ The coordinates we use to map the South have

¹⁰⁶ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), p. 190.

¹⁰⁷ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Deborah N. Cohn, *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* (Nashville and London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999); Susan P. Castillo, *Colonial Encounters in New World Writing, 1500-1786* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Earl Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991); Andrew Hook, *From Goose Creek to Ganderclough: Studies in Scottish-American Literary and Cultural History* (East Linton, Scotland: Tuckwell, 1999); Helen Taylor, *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture through a Transatlantic Lens* (Princeton: Rutgers University Press, 2001); *Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature*

altered because our charting of its cultural geography has tended to become transnational. We are now beginning to view South African literature through a similar transnational lens.¹⁰⁸

It is my hope that this thesis will be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue, the focus of which is the role works of fiction have played, and continue to play, in telling the stories of the American South and South Africa and their shared backlog of prejudice and discrimination.

of the United States and Spanish America, ed. by Belle Gale Chevigny, and Gari Laguardia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁰⁸ For one example, see *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, ed. by Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner, and Sarah Nuttall (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

Chapter One

Writing Community in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*

What has been lost is the continuity of the past [. . .]
What you then are left with is still the past, but a
fragmented past, which has lost its certainty of
evaluation.

--Hannah Arendt

The title above incorporates three terms that don't intuitively coalesce: collective traumas, singular pasts, and storytelling. In so doing, this chapter attempts to engage both trauma and reading (or telling stories) as a way to consider how we think through the collective trauma of particular formations of racialisation, and the dominant historical narratives that try to contain these memories of racial trauma. In *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) Derek Attridge compellingly argues that the singularity of literary reception is not a property but an event: 'The event of singularizing which takes place in reception: it does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it'.¹⁰⁹ As an event, singularity is 'constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization'.¹¹⁰ This description of singularity is important here because it helps to shed light on the different strategies and voices involved in the collective understanding of apartheid or slavery as specific formations of racialised trauma. Ron Eyerman suggests that, 'There may be several or many possible responses to cultural trauma that emerge in a specific historical context, but all of them in some way or

¹⁰⁹ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 63.

another involve identity and memory'.¹¹¹ So in that sense, we are able to talk about the singularity of cultural trauma—or cultural trauma as an event of singularity—in that it also does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it. And yet, what are the risks of viewing racial trauma through such a singular lens? How can racial trauma be understood and dealt with if it is inherent in the schemes of representation that have formed a social group and that remain the predominant examples from which this group can draw to think its identity? In other words, if trauma exposes the subject as a singularity, how do we then consider the conditions under which trauma might constitute a community, and how can we do so while also ‘respecting the singularity of trauma—while respecting its capacity to singularize’?¹¹² If we are to avoid generalising and reducing the cultural trauma of racism to some sort of pathological event, then a focus on the interruption of community and a disruption of the trauma narrative may help us to better understand how certain myths have come to define the nation or region.

The event of singularity to which Attridge refers allows for a comparative reading of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* with an aim to considering trauma, community, and singularity in ways to which we might otherwise not have access. My comparative reading of these two texts is concerned with the way in which the trauma of particular racial formations appears to become constitutive of a collective identity; and yet at the same time, I am also concerned with the ways in which singular representations of the trauma of racialisation work to contest the production of an essential identity that defines the collective subject of trauma as a passive victim. More than simply

¹¹¹ Ron Eyerman, ‘Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity’, in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2004), p. 63.

¹¹² Cetinic, p. 286.

an anti-essentialist understanding of race, however, this approach seeks to understand the relationship between trauma, collective memory and the production of identities linked to trauma (both for a community and for an individual), and the dominant narratives of the past.¹¹³

Trauma theorist, Jill Bennett, recognises the importance of community in her work when she suggests that, ‘any formal analysis [of art] proceeds in conjunction with a reading of global and micropolitics: that is, a sense of our connectedness to global events and the precise nature of our relationship to others’.¹¹⁴ Bennett’s thoughts on trauma are particularly apposite for a comparative reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David’s Story* in the manner in which she works toward an understanding of trauma as ‘never unproblematically “subjective”; neither “inside” nor “outside”—as always lived and negotiated at an intersection’. She addresses trauma as ‘a presence, a *force*’ that cannot be contained within subjective boundaries because it is not simply ‘an interior condition but a transformative process’.¹¹⁵ Bennett suggests that we should not seek an understanding of what art ‘means’; rather, we should focus on its capacity to create and sustain sensation:

¹¹³ For an interesting perspective on the anti-essentialist (pre-trauma theory) understanding of race, see Diana Fuss, “Race Under Erasure? Poststructuralist Afro-American Literary Theory”, in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 73–96, as well as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ‘Editor’s Introduction: Writing “Race” and the Difference It Makes’, in “Race,” *Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 1–20.

¹¹⁴ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 18. Reading both Nancy and Bennett calls to mind the work of Peter Hallward and his claim that the post-colonial is best understood as an ultimately *singular* or non-relational category. In *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific*, Hallward makes a distinction between ‘singular’ and ‘specific’: ‘the words singular and specific designate two abstract poles of distinction, i.e. two fundamentally divergent conceptions of individuation and differentiation. Roughly speaking, a singular mode of individuation proceeds internally, through a process that creates its own medium of existence or expansion, whereas a specific mode operates, through the active negotiation of relations and the deliberate taking of sides, choices and risks, in a domain and under constraints that are external to these takings. *The specific is relational, the singular is non-relational*’. See Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. xii. For Hallward, a singularity is something that generates the medium of its own existence, to the eventual exclusion of other existences so would appear to lack the ‘being of community’ found in Nancy.

¹¹⁵ Bennett, p. 12. Cited from Cetinic, pp. 290.

'the work does not turn on its capacity to signify or to represent, or to embody the trace of the individual subject or event. It is rather the sensation arising in space that is the operative element; its capacity to sustain sensation [. . .] rather than to communicate meaning'.¹¹⁶ If the reading of a novel is both a private experience that makes a singular appeal to each of its readers, and the evocation of the idea of some sort of community of readers, and if trauma exposes the situation of 'being-many-together', then reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* side-by-side helps to deconstruct essentialist and exclusionary conceptions of community previously discussed and further works to change our understanding of slavery, apartheid and their legacies.

At first glance, it would appear that the communities about which these works are written have little, if anything, in common. *Absalom, Absalom!* details the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, a white man born into poverty in western Virginia, who comes to Mississippi with the goal of becoming a rich and powerful family patriarch; by contrast, *David's Story* unfolds at the moment of Nelson Mandela's release in South Africa, and explores the underground world of activists, spies, and saboteurs in the liberation movement—a world seldom revealed to outsiders. Nevertheless, in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story*, Faulkner and Wicomb have written two works that deeply resonate with one another via the manner in which they render the complexly gendered and racialised contours of American and South African culture. In particular, both novels reflect how 'control over narrative—its production, re-presentation, or interpretation—has remained

¹¹⁶ Bennett, p. 18. Cited from Cetinic, p. 291.

crucial in the social and political contests of racially polarized South Africa and the United States'.¹¹⁷

I have chosen to compare these novels not only because they exemplify the difficulty inherent in narrating trauma, but also because of the manner in which they shed light on the specific trauma of racial violence and segregation. More specifically, they explore the constitutive role of that traumatic experience in the production of a collective cultural identity, and further highlight the problems with a process of collective identity construction based around a trauma. These works depict the manner in which the process of testifying to the traumatic past is always a paradoxical endeavour. As Roger Luckhurst suggests, 'Trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact trauma is anti-narrative, but it also generates the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate the trauma'.¹¹⁸ It is these retrospective narratives around which *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* are formed. These works don't necessarily answer Cathy Caruth's question: 'How is it possible [...] to gain access to a traumatic history?'¹¹⁹—but they do provide the reader with insights into the complexity of traumatic recall and the difficulty in *attempting* to answer the question. Reading the novels together serves to create a new community—to broaden the sense of 'being with'—and offers us an opportunity to both examine the singularity of trauma as a condition of community, as well as to think about that community—the community of South Africa and the American South, if not even the world. Faulkner and Wicomb demonstrate how if trauma is a crisis in representation, then this crisis need not necessarily foreclose a space for acting on the systems that traumatise, indeed it might 'generate narrative possibility just as much as

¹¹⁷ Robolin, p. 303.

¹¹⁸ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 79.

¹¹⁹ Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Trauma and Culture II', *American Imago*, 48.4 (1991), p. 417.

impossibility, a compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge'.¹²⁰ In other words, one can view this paradoxical trauma narrative from a different perspective and suggest that in these texts trauma not only brings narrative to a temporary halt, but trauma's stalling actively provokes the production of narrative.¹²¹

I am particularly interested in this tension between the narrative and anti-narrative dimensions of trauma; hence the remainder of the chapter sets out to investigate this paradox examining how myths can become founding traumas that form the basis of collective memory and cultural trauma. If myth presents the community to the community itself; if it is the identificatory mechanism of a community, then the interruption of myth serves to make it impossible for a community to gather around the narration of a common origin. The quest to somehow access that history—that common origin—becomes an elusive quest to regain a sense of wholeness, or a notion of a fully unified community that never existed to begin with. The result is misplaced nostalgia and/or a commitment to utopian politics. I close the chapter by posing the question, 'in what manner is it possible to work through trauma?' Do the two works examined in this chapter suggest that in the context of the American South and South Africa trauma is an impasse of endless melancholy and interminable aporia in which any process of working though the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted? Or in their singularity—in the '*demand*' that these specific collocation of words, allusions, and cultural references make on [us] in the event of [our] reading, here and now, as members of the cultures to whom these codes are

¹²⁰ See Luckhurst, p. 83.

¹²¹ Ibid.

familiar'¹²²—do these two novels offer a different way of coming to terms with cultural trauma and collective memory?

In his novel, Faulkner calls our attention to racism as a constant in the region's history as well as in its present experience. Similarly, Wicomb directs our attention to the challenges facing a transitioning South Africa via her focus on the collective knowledge, myths and narratives used by various groups to create a history all of their own. The power of Wicomb's novel lies in its ability to call out and question the myths of perpetrators and victims alike—black, white, and coloured. In both cases—a South Africa characterised by apartheid and resistance, and an American South built on slavery and segregation—history is synonymous with trauma. It is against this backdrop of traumatic history that Faulkner and Wicomb write. If, as Luckhurst suggests, 'the relationship between trauma as a devastating disruption and the subsequent attempts to translate or assimilate this disturbance is a fundamental tension between interruption and flow, blockage and movement',¹²³ then we might be better able to understand the particular need of Southerners and South Africans alike to compulsively return to certain fixations, obsessions, and blockages in an attempt to try and ease that tension.

Both writers employ complex meta-narrative structures: *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* are as much about the process of telling the story as they are about the story itself. Yet storytelling is figured differently in South Africa and the American South, although the difference is possibly only one of a matter of degree. In the former, storytelling—or the public narration of stories—was seen as a means to unite the population of the nation into a non-violent and newly healed community that would lay its trust in the new state. In the

¹²² Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 67.

¹²³ Luckhurst, p. 79.

American South—where, it should be noted, the oral tradition has always been extremely important and prevalent¹²⁴—storytelling was not invested with the same collective (national) healing properties, or the same national cathartic potential. With the creation of the TRC in South Africa, social memory was depicted as a unifying force, and the gathering of stories about human rights abuses was meant to tie together the social and the political, officially acknowledging the suffering of the population and allowing a healing space for public discussion of that suffering. In the United States, and in particular, the South, there never was a similar effort to produce a safe and healthy locale for public storytelling. Nor for that matter was there a push equivalent to the TRC in South Africa to compile individual stories into one national narrative. Yet by reading Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* after *David's Story*, I argue that Faulkner offers important insights into the limitations as well as the possibilities of storytelling as an appropriate therapeutic framework through which to make sense of the trauma of racialisation and racial violence. In doing so, both texts raise questions about the ethical problems with storytelling and testimony as modes of public representation, and whether the discursive process of making a private trauma public can work to re-traumatise the subject of trauma rather than helping to heal them.¹²⁵ These questions further highlight the complex relationship between the traumatic memory of racial formations of slavery and apartheid, and the production of collective identity. In particular, what role do public testimony and storytelling play in the construction of an institutionalised social memory meant to act as a unifying force in the aftermath of trauma?

¹²⁴ For example, see Waldo W. Braden, *The Oral Tradition in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

¹²⁵ See Aryn Bartley, 'The Violence of the Present: *David's Story* and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 46.1 (2009). Bartley interrogates the assumption that the process of constructing an institutionalised memory by way of public storytelling is an inherently nonviolent process.

What are the risks of compiling individual stories into one narrative: ‘a homogenous and disembodied narrative of collectivity’?¹²⁶

Faulkner once declared that there is ‘no such thing as a regional writer, the writer simply uses the terms he is familiar with best’.¹²⁷ Faulkner’s assertion to the contrary notwithstanding, he avails himself of the ‘terms’ he knows best precisely in order to address the difficulties assailing the American South. Similarly, in her work, Wicomb considers what she herself, has described as ‘the equivocal, the ambiguous, and the ironic which is always embedded in power’¹²⁸—though she does so in a specifically late twentieth-century South African context. To return to Faulkner’s vocabulary, the terms employed by both writers—specific as they are to the racial formations of the American South and South Africa—‘evince a commitment to aesthetics, and appreciation for the puissance of narration, and a sensitivity to the political implications of both’.¹²⁹ *Absalom, Absalom!* is generally read as a novel about Southern history as much as it is about personal experience. Faulkner’s depiction of the Sutpen and Compson families is in keeping with that of the Civil War novel of the Southern Renaissance, in which the fate of the family was seen as ‘emblematic of the decline of the South since the war’.¹³⁰ Moreover, the event around which Faulkner’s novel revolves, the fratricide that Henry Sutpen commits in order to prevent his (possibly) miscegenated half-brother from marrying their sister, is inextricably bound up with issues relating to white Southern society’s desire for racial purity and segregation. The violent

¹²⁶ Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph, ‘Re-placing Pasts, Forgetting Presents: Narrative, Place and Memory in the Time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, *Research in African Literatures*, 32.3 (2001), p. 199.

¹²⁷ William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, ed. by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 95.

¹²⁸ Zoë Wicomb, ‘Culture Beyond Color? A South African Dilemma’, *Transition*, 60 (1993), p. 32.

¹²⁹ Robolin, p. 299.

¹³⁰ John Pilkington, ‘The Memory of the War’, in *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Blyden Jackson, Rayburn S. Moore, et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 358. Probably the most well-known Civil War novel of the Southern Renaissance is Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, published in 1936.

overturning of the French colonial government in Haiti by blacks and mulattoes in the early nineteenth century, as well as domestic tensions arising from the incorporation of the Louisiana Territory into the increasingly segregationist U.S. only added an additional political charge to the segregationist agenda. The postbellum U.S. viewed the South as a region that was morally ‘contaminated’ both by the fact of slavery and by contact with the slaves themselves.¹³¹ The political dispossession to which Southerners were subjected paralleled those that the Southerners themselves had used to disempower blacks in their own territory.¹³² In similar fashion, South African coloureds attempted to differentiate themselves from the Africans arriving from the Western Cape by the end of the nineteenth century though they, themselves, had been previously stigmatised for these same racial ‘impurities’ by both the British and the Afrikaners. As Quentin sets about trying to construct Sutpen’s story in 1910, the prospect of political equality for blacks was looming, and social equality and assimilation were viewed with trepidation by many as soon-to-follow.

Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* tests the values and norms of postcolonial writing by probing the official history not of the colonial masters but of a ‘triumphant’ liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC). The ‘troubling of representational certainties’ in the novel can be viewed as a direct product of the ambiguities and conflicts of the historical time and place.¹³³ In the year 1991, what the novel calls ‘days of treachery and flux and things being all mixed up,’¹³⁴ apartheid is crumbling, and many unspeakable deeds are being done as individuals jockey for political power. As such, in one sense, *David’s Story*

¹³¹ Barbara Ladd, “‘The Direction of the Howling’: Nationalism and the Color Line in *Absalom, Absalom!*”, in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*, ed. by Fred Hobson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), see especially pp. 221-228, 230-231.

¹³² Ladd, p. 227.

¹³³ Derek Attridge, ‘Zoë Wicomb’s Home Truths: Place, Genealogy and Identity in *David’s Story*’ *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 41.2 (2005), p. 161.

¹³⁴ Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2000), p. 13; hereafter cited within the text as *DS*, page number.

might be seen to be a novel about celebration: apartheid coming to an end; Mandela out of prison; the long term political operatives and militants coming home. On the other hand, there is secrecy and a pressing need for accounting: David's work for freedom; the ANC's integrity as a movement; the integrity of protest and resistance movements in the time of struggle and in the time of ascending to power. The uncertainties of the period of transition from apartheid to democracy produce David's desire to make sense of his own part in the struggle. Just as Faulkner's Charles Bon searches for a validation of his mixed ancestry, so Wicomb's unnamed female narrator/amanuensis explores ideas of racial identity and purity via David's quest to uncover his coloured history. Derek Attridge points out that this exploration of genealogy has become a common feature of post-apartheid South African novels, a feature which, in his view, reflects 'a need to complicate the myths of purity, linearity, and separation on which apartheid was founded'.¹³⁵ Officially established as a distinct racial category by the Nationalist government's Population Registration Act of 1950, coloureds were designated to be those South Africans who could be genealogically traced back to either a) the native Khoi and San peoples, b) slaves brought to South Africa from Madagascar, Mozambique, India, Indonesia and Malaysia, or c) people of mixed racial origin.¹³⁶ Where the first of the three categories offered a sense of possessing 'purity' of origin, the latter two carried within them the stigma of subjugation and delinquency according to colonial perception and morality: slavery and miscegenation. Homi Bhabha posited the South African coloured's 'borderline existence' as representing a 'hybridity, a difference "within" a subject that inhabits the rim of an inbetween reality'¹³⁷—a claim that

¹³⁵ For example, Etienne van Heerden's *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati*; Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*; Elleke Boehmer's *Bloodlines*, all published in the year 2000. See Attridge's essay, 'Zoë Wicomb's Home Truths', p. 159.

¹³⁶ Dorothy Driver, 'Afterword', in *David's Story*, p. 220.

¹³⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 19.

attempts to undermine the discriminating split of colonisation and which remains false, according to Wicomb, as a description of the actual lived experience of the coloured people. As previously noted, in a move that bore a close resemblance to the practice of U.S. Southern segregation and its continual reproduction, South African coloureds sought to differentiate themselves from the Africans who began to arrive in the western Cape by claiming themselves superior ‘on the basis of partial descent from European settlers and generations of incorporation into colonial society’.¹³⁸ In so doing, the coloureds internalised the very source of shame from which they were trying to escape. Perhaps M.J. Daymond put it best when she said, ‘it is in this heterogeneous group of people, established as a racialized category in the interests of white supremacy, that issues of identity will be most telling in a democratizing South Africa’.¹³⁹

The Trauma Narrative

The four narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*,¹⁴⁰ and David and his amanuensis in *David’s Story* are all attempting, first and foremost, to tell a story. Yet it is not as simple as that either. In accessing their individual memories, they begin to build a collective story—a collective narrative—in which they struggle to determine ‘what happened’ at Sutpen’s Hundred and in the ANC training camps. In the course of their storytelling, these narrators are not only attempting to convey someone else’s story; they are also trying to reassign themselves agency via their collective memories. As Susan Brison suggests:

¹³⁸ Located under ‘Coloureds’ in the *Historical Dictionary of South Africa*, ed. by Christopher Saunders and Nicholas Southey (London: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), p. 65.

¹³⁹ M.J. Daymond, ‘Bodies of Writing; Recovering the Past in Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* and Elleke Boehmer’s *Bloodlines*’, *Journal of Post-Colonial Writing*, 24 (1-2) (2002), p. 26.

¹⁴⁰ There are five narrators if you include the anonymous narrator.

Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self.¹⁴¹

In that sense, then, it becomes less important to discover exactly ‘what really happened’ than it is to understand that certain inventions are resorted to at a given moment in an individual’s life, or at a specific historical juncture. In other words, the question is not primarily what ‘sense’, metaphorical, political or otherwise, the stories may have, taken individually or as a collective, but what sense, if any, the telling of these stories by a person at a specific point in time could possibly make.

Because *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David’s Story* are as much about the process of telling a story as they are anything else, it is also important to note that for Faulkner and Wicomb, a given act of storytelling is not, in itself, either true or false, but is a *process* that inevitably includes elements of truth and fiction. In his text, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, Mark Sanders suggests that, ‘truth, for common sense, is that which distinguishes literature from history and from other forms of scholarly and juridico-legal discourse adopting similar methods of verification and criteria for what counts as fact’.¹⁴² Yet Cathy Caruth argues that the unspeakability of trauma constitutes a ‘pathology [...] of history itself’ and a ‘crisis of truth’, because in trauma ‘the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an

¹⁴¹ Susan J. Brison, ‘Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self’, in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. by Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1999), p. 40.

¹⁴² Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 149.

absolute numbing to it'.¹⁴³ We are able to witness this crisis of truth via the manner in which the characters/narrators contradict one another, and even invent 'facts' when they either don't have information at their disposal, or are unable to confront the truth because it is too painful to do so. As a truth-seeking body, the South African TRC lurks as an unspoken subtext of *David's Story*. The narrator describes a page of David's scribbling: 'Truth, I gather, is the word that cannot be written. He has changed it into the palindrome of Cape Flats speech. [...] "TRURT . . . TRURT . . . the trurt in black and white . . . colouring the truth to say that . . . which cannot be said the thing of no name . . . "' (*DS*, 136). *David's Story* warns against expecting too much of the TRC process of storytelling. David's amanuensis says that 'truth, far from being ready-made, takes time to be born, slowly takes shape in the very act of repetition' (*DS*, 103).¹⁴⁴ Similarly, David's sudden realisation that he had misremembered a crucial event from his past serves as a caution about the vagaries of memory. He now recognises the truth after 'years of false memory,' but asks, 'If I once believed the first version to be true, who knows whether this one is not another invention?' (*DS*, 141-42).

David is getting a glimpse into the uncertainty and confusion that is left over when the polarised absolutes of apartheid give way to ambiguity and relativism. *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* raise important questions about who has the power and who has the ability to interpret the 'truth' of trauma, just as they question how, and in what context, an individual's trauma can be translated to others. Can or should the right to speak of trauma be limited to its primary victims? Who can claim 'secondary' status without risking appropriation?

¹⁴³ Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.

¹⁴⁴ Antjie Krog writes in her memoir of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull*: 'The word "Truth" makes me uncomfortable. The word "Truth" still trips the tongue. [...] Even when I type it, it ends up as either *truth* or *trth*'; Krog, p. 36.

While highlighting the soul-destroying legacy that slavery, segregation and apartheid leave behind, these texts are deeply engaged with questioning memory, and thus with the authority to which personal experience lays claim. More specifically, they highlight the slipperiness and protean quality of collective memory, especially as it is used as the basis for group identity. This memory is not located inside the heads of individual actors, but rather ‘within the discourse of people talking together about the past’.¹⁴⁵ Thus collective, or narrative, memory is a social and malleable act¹⁴⁶ that evolves from addressing and responding to others. It is also an act that is both enabled by, and that enables, myth.

This is not to suggest that collective memory is necessarily bad, but as I shall detail further, the characters in these two novels experience trauma, in part because they feel let down by the very myths upon which they have created an identity. In particular, David is let down by a collective memory built around the mythic Griqua leader, Andrew le Fleur, when he realises that le Fleur’s edicts lead to a conception of ethnic purity that were unsettlingly similar to the evolving doctrine of apartheid. And just about all the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* are let down by the myths of racial purity and white supremacy around which the South was constructed. The stories they tell in trying to fill in the holes of Sutpen’s story only serve to reinforce the same myths upon which they have built a tenuous identity. Whether it is Shreve and Quentin seeking to unravel the mystery of Charles Bon and the Sutpens, or David’s amanuensis seeking to define the elusive Dulcie, the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David’s Story* attempt to create some sort of narrative truth out of the trauma that surrounds them. The challenge lies in trying to bridge the discontinuities

¹⁴⁵ Allan Radley, ‘Artefacts, Memory and a Sense of the Past’, in *Collective Remembering*, ed. by David Middleton and Derek Edwards (London: Sage, 1990), p. 46.

¹⁴⁶ See Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, ‘The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma’, in *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, p. 163; and Sanders, p. 171.

between trauma and collective memory. This is not to suggest that all trauma is collective. Yet the racialised traumas depicted in these texts, though experienced by individuals, also contain a collective component. If we can expand Nancy's thoughts on community to suggest that trauma exposes the situation of 'being-many-together', then these stories remind us that being together often involves a constructed collective memory centred on myth. This social response to trauma is at the centre of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story*. As such, both Wicomb and Faulkner draw attention to South African and Southern myths upon which identities are created—though the manner in which they go about this is not identical. Although they both work against the impulse to construct a grand concluding narrative of apartheid (in both the American and South African contexts), Faulkner does so by first having Quentin and Shreve create such a concluding narrative, and then asking us to question its integrity, whilst Wicomb demonstrates the dangers of even attempting such a narrative in the first place. In both cases, however, they allow the reader to become the ultimate judge and jury.

The attempt to rebuild the ethical orders of South Africa and the American South has resulted in an obsession with returning to, and trying to make sense of, the contentious and traumatic pasts to which they lay claim. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, the ultimately discoverable fact about Southern history is its paralysing capacity for trapping people within ritual-like recitations of the past. It is important, however, to attempt to determine the significance of particular acts of repetition. If, as Sam Durrant suggests, some rituals that might appear to be pathological instances of a repetition compulsion are actually modes of collective mourning, are we able to determine which is which?¹⁴⁷ Unlike South Africa, the American South never went through the public ritual of working through the past. Without a

¹⁴⁷ Durrant, pp. 10-11.

vehicle like a truth commission, Americans were never provided with a mechanism to engage in a *collective* ritual process of mourning losses. Politically things changed, but they did not do so ritually. The literature of South Africa often responds to this ritual working through of the past enabled by the TRC, whilst much literature from the American South attempts to create such a ritual, and then also respond to it.

In an interview with Stephen Meyer and Thomas Olver, Wicomb maintains that the difficulties of ethically representing multiple stories dictated the ostensibly postmodern, bivocal, and recursive structure of *David's Story*: 'For me,' she responds, 'it was simply a struggle, not only with the aesthetics of combining two stories, but also the ethics of representing the ambiguities of the situations. I dealt with the problem as best I could through a fragmented, indeterminate narrative'.¹⁴⁸ Wicomb, like Faulkner, acknowledges the superficiality of 'linear telling as a mode of conveying psychological damage'.¹⁴⁹ One way of reading Wicomb's novel is as a story about the process of producing a text. Specifically, it questions the practice of writing someone else's story and foregrounds the practical and ethical problems inherent in collaborative autobiography. At one point the narrator asserts that, 'people cannot be relied on to tell their own stories (*DS*, 103), yet it quickly becomes clear that in constructing David's story, she has too little to go on and resorts to invention. One can also infer from the preface that she has in the end decided for herself what to omit or include, or how to arrange her material—in accordance with her own aesthetic project.

It is important to understand that, as essential as narrative technique is to their work, Faulkner and Wicomb address concerns directly relevant to the places and spaces—

¹⁴⁸ Zoë Wicomb, 'Zoë Wicomb Interviewed on Writing and Nation'; Interview by Stephen Meyer and Thomas Olver, *Journal of Literary Studies*, 18.1-2 (2002), p. 185.

¹⁴⁹ Shane Graham, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 152.

the ‘Souths’—in which they situate their novels. It is not insignificant that the contexts about which they write have struggled (and continue to struggle) with very troubled pasts. This fact alone makes their historical narratives more difficult to develop than if they were without such histories. Or, as Durrant suggests, ‘the idea of narrative as a form of communal address takes on a particular significance for the writer who attempts to bear witness to histories of exclusion’.¹⁵⁰ To return to Faulkner’s vocabulary, the ‘terms’ these writers know best then are terms that include shame, silence, guilt, pain, fear, mourning, alienation, and retribution. In other words, bearing witness to a traumatic past is *always* fraught with paradoxes—just how does one testify to something that is both inassimilable and beyond representation?

As previously mentioned, the manner in which Faulkner and Wicomb have chosen to address this crisis of representation is through the use of multiple narrators in a fragmented, non-linear narrative structure. In processes of national or collective healing and catharsis—of rebuilding and recovering—‘owning’, or controlling (official) memory and, by extension, the story, is of paramount importance. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David’s Story*, stories and collective memories are what give the community its identity, meaning and direction. Gayatri Spivak’s term ‘storying’ emphasises the productive nature of history and seems particularly apposite for reading these two works. She argues that storying is the politically generative and generated marshalling of facts made from conventional standards of truth-establishing. Hence, storying becomes an active engagement with ‘history’, the product of that narration.¹⁵¹ In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David’s Story*, the process of mediation, of filtering and selecting data in the quest to put the pieces of the story together,

¹⁵⁰ Durrant, p. 13.

¹⁵¹ Gayatri Spivak, ‘Bonding in Difference: Interview with Alfred Arteaga’, in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 26. Cited from Robolin, p. 303.

is, in large part, determined by the individual informant and his or her socio-historical context. The manner in which the narratives unfold has much to tell us about the individual narrator/story-teller and the places they inhabit. As we shall see, the details that each source remembers, perceives, and even fabricates are conditioned by personal factors, cultural taboos, and the political climate.

Much has been written on the various characters and their interpretations of Bon's murder in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Olga Vickery was one of the first critics to detail how each character structures his or her telling of the Sutpen family history utilising the conventions of different narrative genres and how each account reflects a different personal bias. She characterises Miss Rosa's tale—her 'demonizing'—as a gothic mystery, Mr. Compson's as a Greek tragedy, and Quentin and Shreve's as a poetic drama of love.¹⁵² The conclusions reached by each of the characters tell us as much about each of them as Southern subjects as it does about what might have happened to the Sutpens. As Richard Gray observes, 'It is almost impossible to separate the meaning of the story from its medium of communication, the various narrative and linguistic frames within which it is set. [...] The different perspectives offered by the narrators furnish a means of definition and ultimately the standard of judgment also'.¹⁵³ The fact of Bon's murder is agreed on (for the most part), but its explanation and significance vary depending on the narrator. The characters know what happened but not why: they know who committed the crime, but they have no definitive motive. In this manner, Bon is presented not only as a challenge and disruption to the writing of Sutpen's story, but by extension, to the community of which he is and is not a member, and hence, to the story of the American South.

¹⁵² Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 87. Also see, Cohn, *History and Memory in the Two Souths*, p. 53.

¹⁵³ Richard Gray, *The Literature of Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 243.

The perspectivist approach also illustrates how a character-narrator's degree of involvement in the action further influences his or her reconstruction of what happened, as can be seen in Miss Rosa's account, which opens the novel. Of the novel's four direct narrators, Rosa is the only one to have actually played a role in the story being reconstructed: she is Sutpen's sister-in-law and fiancée, and she is the guardian of his daughter. She would appear to be in the best position to relate Sutpen's story, yet as a result of her proximity to the events, she suffers from what Joseph Reed refers to as the 'participant's handicap as narrator';¹⁵⁴ what Deborah Cohn identifies as the 'participant's handicap as narrator of *historical discourse*',¹⁵⁵ and what I would further specify as the participant's handicap as narrator of *traumatic historical discourse*. Dori Laub discusses the idea of the 'historical insider' and the difficulty such an individual has in removing him/herself sufficiently from an event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness. Though Laub is discussing the brutality of the Holocaust, his identification of the complexities of '*being inside the event*,' that is, being 'sufficiently detached from the inside so as to provide an independent frame of reference through which [an] event could be observed'¹⁵⁶ is relevant to what the novel suggests about the inaccessibility of historical Truth. Rosa experiences events viscerally, later remembering them through a memory that is 'not mind, not thought,' but the brain 'recall[ing] just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream'.¹⁵⁷ Consequently, she is unable to distance herself and organise her experiences, or recount them objectively. Yet, if Rosa is 'too inside' the event to be objective

¹⁵⁴ Joseph Reed, Jr., *Faulkner's Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 161; quoted from Cohn, p. 54.

¹⁵⁵ Cohn, p. 54, emphasis added.

¹⁵⁶ Dori Laub, 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 66.

¹⁵⁷ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 143; hereafter cited within the text as AA, page number.

and reliable, then it begs the question just how far one needs to be removed to be a lucid and unaffected witness. As I shall discuss in the next section, Shreve is about as much of an outsider as it is possible to be; he is not Southern, not even American, and he has never experienced the South firsthand. And yet, he is no more reliable for his distance from the Sutpen story than is Rosa for her proximity to it.

Though Wicomb is quick to remind us that *David's Story* is, in fact, a work of fiction, it is also clear that she intends to demonstrate how ‘antiquated’ conceptions of nation based on perceptions of pureness resonate with some of what she calls ‘the new South Africa-speak,’ and with new notions of ‘colouredness’ and essentialism:

What is this business about finding out who we are? Why have we turned this into a problem? When is it not a problem then? When you've got “pure blood”? Isn't it replicating the old identities of apartheid?¹⁵⁸

Though titled *David's Story*, the novel is as much about the re-invention of the Griqua leader, Andrew le Fleur, as it is about David Dirkse—or, more specifically, about David's relationship with le Fleur. The novel traces how le Fleur constructs an illusory reality, what Wicomb calls his ‘ludicrous notion of pureness’,¹⁵⁹ into a plan of action. By revealing the mechanisms by which political philosophies such as le Fleur's ‘crazy ideology’ create worlds from words and misrepresent the forces operating in history, Wicomb reminds us of the power—and double-edged nature—of language: its ability to shape for good or ill. David's research yields evidence that the very notion of a Griqua ‘identity’ is a delusion. Andrew Abraham Stockenstrom le Fleur turns out to be, in David's eyes at least, ‘a sellout’ (*DS*, 150).

¹⁵⁸ Zoë Wicomb, ‘Zoë Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemse’, *Research in African Literatures*, 33.1 (2002), pp. 146-47.

¹⁵⁹ Wicomb, ‘Zoë Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemse’, p. 145.

He is angry and disillusioned when he realises that the Griqua leader has conducted some very creative editing of the historical record by expunging from the collective memory ‘the ships from Madagascar or Malaysia [. . .] the high cheekbones, the oriental eyes [that] were as likely to come from the native Khoisan’ and his own European blood [that] is ‘by now so thin, so negligible there really was no need to take it into account’ (*DS*, 88). To David’s mind, le Fleur’s conception of ethnic purity was nothing more than a preface to the evolving doctrine of apartheid, an embracing of a ‘mythical excess of belonging [. . .] denying history and fabricating a totalizing colouredness’.¹⁶⁰ Yet even though it can be argued that David is politically astute and can see the flaws in le Fleur, he is, in Wicomb’s words, ‘still very drawn to some of those notions that he knows are retrogressive’.¹⁶¹ In other words, David continues to look to the past to discover his identity in the present. In much the same way, Quentin is both drawn to, and repulsed by the Southern heritage that has come to define him. He struggles to accept what he has come to believe (via his own invention) about the role played by race and miscegenation in Charles Bon’s murder, so that his final panted, ‘I dont hate [the South]. *I dont hate it. I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*’ (*AA*, 378), compellingly performs the conflicted relationship he has with his history. Both Quentin and David remain possessed and haunted by the past, ‘whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions’.¹⁶² They both enact a compulsively repetitive turn to the impasse that is, for Quentin, Southern tradition, and for David, apartheid ideology. Themes of this type of social repetition call to mind Mark Seltzer’s wound culture; one defined by a compulsive need to

¹⁶⁰ Zoë Wicomb, ‘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 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 105.

¹⁶¹ Wicomb, ‘Zoë Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemse’, p. 146.

¹⁶² Dominick LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, *Critical Inquiry*, 25.4 (1999), p. 699.

return to scenes of trauma. This pathology pervades both Faulkner's and Wicomb's works, and are themes I will return to later in the chapter.

By foregrounding David's attempts to tell both his and his comrade, Dulcie's, stories, Wicomb has written a text that reveals how 'truth', rather than waiting to be discovered or uncovered, is produced as 'rumours [...] [take] root' (*DS*, 180). Wicomb's self-consciously postmodern narrative, notes Dorothy Driver, 'does not try to simply "give voice" to those who were marginalised, oppressed, and disinherited [...] Instead, *David's Story* dramatises the literary, political, philosophical, and ethical issues at stake in any attempt at retrieval of history and voice'.¹⁶³ Wicomb resists pure accounts of history that represent the past as a coherent narrative allowing for uncritical oppositional identifications or binaries—innocent colonised vs. abusive coloniser, for example, or even man as victimiser, woman as victimised—that set the stage for what Fanon perceived as a post-colonial politics founded on the scissions of a moral consciousness.¹⁶⁴ It is, in particular, when trying to speak of Dulcie that David's faith in a stable, consistent memory is shaken and he becomes suspicious of the way 'promiscuous memory, spiralling into the past, mates with new disclosures to produce further moments of terrible surprise' (*DS*, 194-95). In much the same manner that Bon is a disruption to the story of the American South, memories of Dulcie appear to be the most difficult for David to order and reconcile, and in that way Dulcie is presented, not only as a challenge and disruption to the writing of David's story, but by extension, to the story of the South African past. With no known facts to go on, and David's reluctance to fill in the gaps, the amanuensis is forced to invent and fabricate a picture of Dulcie—'a protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming

¹⁶³Driver, p. 216.

¹⁶⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 194

itself' (*DS*, 35). Any such narrative will have to forego an easy sense of beginning, middle, and end; the narrator pleads, '[L]et us not claim a beginning for this mixed-up tale. Beginnings are too redolent of origins, of the sweaty and negligible act of physical union which will not be tolerated on these pages' (*DS*, 8-9). This story's endings are no more straightforward; again the narrator remarks, 'Dulcie and the events surrounding her cannot be cast as story. [. . .] There is no progression in time, no beginning and no end. Only a middle that is infinitely repeated, that remains in an eternal, inescapable present' (*DS*, 150). LaCapra discusses these forms of narrative which do not unproblematically instantiate the conventional beginning-middle-end plot, 'which seeks resonant closure or uplift and tends to conflate absence with loss or lack' as modes of narration which raise the 'question of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence'.¹⁶⁵ Citing novelists like Flaubert, Joyce, Musil, Woolf, and Beckett, LaCapra points out that these writers—and I would add Wicomb to the list—not only,

explore alternative narrative modalities that do not rely on a conventional plot structure, but are part of a dialectic that does not reach closure but instead enacts an unfinished, unfinalizable interplay of forces involving a series of substitutions without origin or ultimate referent, an interplay that may enable more desirable configurations that cannot be equated with salvation or redemption.¹⁶⁶

The result for Wicomb and *David's Story* is a narrative that becomes as unstable, unreliable, and confusing as a conclusive genealogy of the coloured history that David tries to assemble.

¹⁶⁵ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

Although stories and collective memories are what give the community its identity, meaning, and direction in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story*, those stories are presented via a troubling of chronology and a persistent reference to invention. Faulkner and Wicomb call our attention to the fact that the world we seek to understand—and the world the questioner in each of these works seeks to understand—is very much a contested realm. They also make it clear that it is not the ‘witness’ alone who confirms or refutes the ‘facts’ of a given event, but also the questioner who is eliciting a story. The story develops—or, is invented—from this communal aspect. Nevertheless, as Stéphane Robolin points out, ‘If representation, or story-making, is an active construction of a world according to the values and precepts of the ideologies that underwrite it, it follows that the political field is shaped in such a way as to discursively establish the (new) base on which subsequent representations are premised’.¹⁶⁷ In other words, that which was—or that which might have been—has determined that which is. Hence the social and political work of stories—what they yield, what they legitimate or rule out—takes on an increasingly important role as a means of inventing the future.

The Space of the Imagination

If, as Caruth suggests, the unspeakability of trauma constitutes a ‘crisis of truth’, and as Dominick LaCapra warns, ‘narrativization is closest to fictionalization in the sense of a dubious departure from, or distortion of, historical reality when it conveys relatively unproblematic closure’,¹⁶⁸ we must be attentive to that which is contained in silence as well

¹⁶⁷ See Robolin, p. 303. Though Robolin compares Wicomb and Morrison, I suggest that Faulkner also attends to the social and political work of stories, and the ideologies upon which they are written.

¹⁶⁸ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, pp. 15-16.

as resisting the temptation of a nice, neat ending.¹⁶⁹ Since trauma precludes closure and continues to haunt the survivor's present, the event cannot be rendered into a linear account of the past; as a consequence, stories about trauma are prone to fragmentation, displacement, and distortion. In that sense, one must forego a natural desire for 'wholeness' and recognise that the trauma narrative must be constructed around its own blind spots and silences. One of those blind spots is memory. As a foundation on which a story is built, memory is unstable and shifting, capable of being hijacked and appropriated. As André Brink suggests, 'memory alone cannot be the answer. Hence my argument in favour of an imagined rewriting of history or, more precisely, of the role of the imagination in the dialectic between past and present, individual and society'.¹⁷⁰

Yet we must also be attentive to the fact that such imaginative recreations—or the myths that often form the basis for collective memory and cultural trauma—are also deeply political acts that resist state power by documenting and publicising its abuses. The problematization of history in *David's Story* demonstrates how political ideology as well as personal and social factors are responsible for the creation and withholding of evidence. By alluding to torture and murder at the Quatro ANC camp, Wicomb makes it clear that a simplistically heroic account of apartheid's defeat is a charade. The details of torture and murder associated with ANC soldiers were, in fact, the subject of much controversy, particularly in late 1998, just prior to the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's initial report. The leadership of the ruling ANC and its then powerful head, President Thabo Mbeki—fearing irreparable damage to the credibility of the emerging

¹⁶⁹ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 16. Frank Kermode uses the term, 'a sense of an ending' in the same manner that LaCapra uses 'unproblematic closure'. See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹⁷⁰ Brink, p. 37.

government—moved to strike from the public record the disturbing details of the ANC camps. This suppressive gesture (which was ultimately overturned) reveals the ironies and ambiguities facing the ‘new’ South Africa.¹⁷¹

Dulcie best exemplifies the creation and withholding of evidence as it relates both to *David’s Story*, and to a transitioning South Africa. Wicomb inscribes Dulcie as a disruptive figure in the text, eluding definition and meaning. We do not ever fully understand exactly who Dulcie is and what she has gone through as a member of MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC). When David refuses to provide ‘necessary details’ about Dulcie ‘from which to patch together a character’ (*DS*, 78), the narrator chooses to fictionalise stories of Dulcie based on her own interest in Dulcie’s life as a guerrilla, a subject David dismisses as ‘irrelevant’ (*DS*, 78). Disturbingly, these concerns compel the narrator to invent repeated scenes of Dulcie’s torture. Whether or not this nightly torture is the ‘truth’ of Dulcie’s experience remains uncertain throughout the text, for as Wicomb’s narrator points out, ‘Dulcie has, after all, always hovered somewhere between fact and fiction’ (*DS*, 198). If not David, who has provided the information about the nightly visits? Is the narrator fabricating a terrible story to answer some need of her own? The only source for her story, David, is far from reliable, and he himself confesses that ‘even if a story were to be figured out by someone, it would be a story that cannot be told, that cannot be translated into words, into language we use for everyday matters’ (*DS*, 151). Dulcie is so consumed in shadow that the very attempt to figure her is shown to impose violence on her body. David’s first attempts to write Dulcie produce no more than a ‘mess of scribbles and [.] peculiar figures’ (*DS*, 135); later, he presents the narrator with a ‘page without words’ that

¹⁷¹ See Michael Ignatieff, ‘Introduction’, in *Truth & Lies: Stories From the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*, by Jillian Edelstein (New York: New, 2001); also see Robolin, p. 313.

she describes as ‘the dismembered shapes of a body: an asexual torso, like a dressmaker’s dummy; arms bent the wrong way at the elbows; legs; swollen feet; hands like claws. [.] I have no doubt that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on the page’ (*DS*, 205). The reader is left wondering why the narrator constructs such a horrific image of Dulcie and why any attempt to figure her is so inherently violent. In many ways, this violent figuration of Dulcie’s body serves to remind us of why Jean-Luc Nancy prefers, instead of speaking of the other, to speak of the body:

Bodies are places of existence, and nothing exists without a place, a *there*, a “here,” [.] The body-place isn’t full or empty, since it doesn’t have an outside or an inside, any more than it has parts, a totality, functions, or finality. [.] Yet it is a skin, variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated, exogastrulated, orificed, evasive, invaded, stretched, relaxed, excited, distressed, tied, untied. In these and thousands of other ways, the body *makes room* for existence.¹⁷²

For Nancy a body is not impenetrable (it can be dissected and tortured), but what remains impenetrable are its limits. This is precisely what remains (and perhaps what has only ever been present) of Dulcie, her limits and her exposition. The body, in Nancy’s view, is not the realm of regained communion with oneself or someone else. Its status is highly ambivalent. Rather than seeing the body as a font of sense, Nancy regards it as an obstacle to meaning, or an interruption of sense:

We are touching on a certain interruption of sense, and this interruption of sense has to do with the body, it is body. And it’s no accident that the body has to do with sense, in the other sense of sense, sense in the sense of sensing, in the sense of

¹⁷² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. by Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 15.

touching. Touching on the interruption of sense is what, for my part, interests me in the matter of the body.¹⁷³

According to Anja Streiter, this is not altogether negative, however, as ‘it is the limit, the excess, and the openness where we can experience what is common to us: our being singular and our being mortal’.¹⁷⁴ Dulcie beautifully represents this interruption of sense as we are only able to experience her as a limit or an excess. Despite the narrator’s attempts to breach, tear apart, and lacerate her, because Dulcie is, to use Nancy’s words, ‘neither inside nor outside’, but is essentially exposed, turned inside out, she remains to haunt us. This being-at-the-limit is all we really possess of Dulcie (and I would add, of Bon), and as such, she is a singularity, a body, necessarily exposed at her limits to other singularities. Via the figure of Dulcie, Wicomb puts forth a logic of the wound that is far from pathological and anything but a spectacle. Rather, a wounded Dulcie comes to represent more than the singularity of the subject, on the one hand, or a collective form of representation, on the other. She becomes neither and both—singular subject and collective entity, and her identity is more than the trauma to which she was been exposed.

If Dulcie cannot speak, and David cannot speak for her, perhaps the narrator has, in fact, fabricated a story, one that has Dulcie representing the difficulties in narrating the historical memory of coloured South Africans and, in particular, the ‘burdens women face while in pursuit of certain nationalist agendas’.¹⁷⁵ Much critical work has focused on Dulcie, and in particular, what her silence contains. I’d like to focus, instead, on David’s amanuensis and the imaginative space she creates in her construction of Dulcie. Just as we must ask

¹⁷³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 125.

¹⁷⁴ Anja Streiter, ‘The Community According to Jean-Luc Nancy and Claire Denis’, *Film-Philosophy*, 12.1 (2008), p. 52.

¹⁷⁵ Robolin, p.308.

ourselves who and what the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* are with respect to the Charles Bon they construct, so we must ask ourselves who and what the narrator in *David's Story* is with respect to the Dulcie she constructs. What sense can we make of her telling this particular story at this particular time and place? Why this particular invention (if that is what it is)? Why does the narrator decide that Dulcie has been/is being tortured? I suggest that the narrator's account of Dulcie is a dramatisation of the South African's—in particular, the South African woman's—sense of her own construction by apartheid history. If Dulcie's silence can be attributed to her loyalty (however misguided it may be) to the Movement, it may represent, as Desiree Lewis suggests, the exigency of apartheid that imposed various silences on black women, namely, 'a tacit acceptance of the need to confirm an organic national or racial solidarity in the face of white racism. From this perspective, airing stories about subjects like sexual violence [...] seems to betray the spirit of communal or racial unity'.¹⁷⁶ Or perhaps, as Mark Sanders claims in *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, women's reluctance in testimony to name names and disclose details of sexual abuses within the liberation movement was a move of empowerment: 'not being explicit when the secret is an open secret can be read as a critical gesture'. He suggests that in a situation where women 'can disclose that secret' or 'they can disclose *that* there is a secret, hinting at its outer edges', the latter may be the more empowering move because the irresolution of this disclosure provokes continuing 'interpretive labour' and reserves for the victims the possibility of bringing charges at a later date.¹⁷⁷ In light of the extremely high incidence of

¹⁷⁶ Desiree Lewis, 'Gender Myths and Citizenship in Two Autobiographies by South African Women', *Agenda*, 40 (1999), pp. 42-43. Similarly, when unable to find women willing to testify to sexual abuse in the ANC camps, Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes surmise: 'They are afraid that their evidence could be used to equate *individual* human rights violations by ANC cadres with the *systemic* violations of apartheid'. See Goldblatt and Meintjes, 'South African Women Demand the Truth', in *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa*, ed. by Meredith Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 48; emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁷ Sanders, p. 82.

gender-based violence in post-apartheid South Africa, Sanders' argument might be overly optimistic. Nevertheless, the national discourse of sexual violence during the South African transition was not only shaped by the TRC, but as the TRC itself admits, remains one of the 'silences' in the story of the past that it relates.¹⁷⁸ Does the narrator wish to expose the extent to which sexual violence was utilised as a tool of apartheid—and of the ANC—whether Dulcie wishes to have such violence exposed or not?

I suggest that the narrator is attempting to navigate between conventional oppositions. The Dulcie that David describes is a powerful force in the Movement,¹⁷⁹ yet she is foreign to the narrator's understanding of 'woman'. At their last meeting, David bemoans the fact that the narrator has turned his story into 'a story of women', demanding: 'Who would want to read a story like that? It's not a proper history at all' (*DS*, 199). Throughout the narrative, he is fundamentally unable to recognise the specifically gendered experiences of women in the Movement, just as he anticipates the attitude of the modern liberal who questions not only the use of female guerillas, but violence as a whole. At one point, David lashes out at his amanuensis when she proposes telling Dulcie's story in the middle voice: 'I may have overestimated the importance of using someone who is not in the Movement, not of our world; I have certainly underestimated the extent to which your head is filled with middle-class, liberal bullshit' (*DS*, 197).¹⁸⁰ He similarly responds to the narrator's question about why Dulcie does not speak by answering that she has not developed the right tongue:

¹⁷⁸ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report*, 4.10, par. 44.

¹⁷⁹ Meg Samuelson suggests that one could read the exchange set up within the novel between David and the narrator as one between a radical, militaristic discourse that has in part emerged from the Black Consciousness Movement and a liberal humanist discourse associated with certain strands of feminism; Meg Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South Africa Transition* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), p. 132.

¹⁸⁰ Writing in the middle voice, suggests Dominick LaCapra, entails engaging with an 'anxiety-ridden area of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear cut positions'. See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 20.

'Just as freedom is not the anaemic thing for us as it is for nice, clean liberals, so violence too is not a streaming sheet of blood or gore' (*DS*, 204). And, Wicomb's portrayal of Dulcie asserts, as she herself puts it, 'that abominable things happen in the name of freedom,' and yet, on the other hand, the 'cast[ing] of [Dulcie] in mythological terms' is a strategy to 'open up the idea of truth, to wrest it from the pieties of liberal humanism and to assert a measure of unknowability about the past'.¹⁸¹ It is no accident that it is the 'outsider' who is left to do most of the imaginative reconstruction, and Wicomb foregrounds the difficulty inherent in such an endeavour.

The narrator is drawn to Dulcie out of a fascination fuelled by her inability 'to imagine a woman who takes that kind of thing seriously – protocol and hierarchy, the saluting and standing to attention, the barking of orders, the uniform' (*DS*, 79):

Such a woman does presumably not rifle in her handbag for a lipstick, does not pause briefly before a passing mirror to tug at her skirt or pat her hair into shape. Or perhaps she does just that, taking pleasure in her double life as she dabs perfume on her pulse points before target practice. (*DS*, 79)

The narrator can't comprehend a woman like Dulcie, hence she appears to doubt that there may be 'women in the world who do both', who are able to combine military skill and valour with feminine grace and domestic ability (*DS*, 32).¹⁸² Dulcie cannot be slotted into a simplistic division between victim and perpetrator and this makes the narrator's task much more difficult. The first reference to her shows her washing blood from her hands *and* rubbing balm into the wounds incurred during torture (*DS*, 18). The narrator might very well

¹⁸¹ Wicomb, 'Zoë Wicomb Interviewed on Writing and Nation', p. 194.

¹⁸² Jacklyn Cock suggests that the 'role of women in militarization has been largely obscured by two competing perspectives – those of sexism and feminism'. Jacklyn Cock, 'Women and the Military: Implications for Demilitarization in the 1990s in South Africa', *Gender and Society*, 8.2 (1994), p. 153.

be struggling with the gendered divisions of spheres partially disrupted by the liberation struggle. During the South African transition, we find at work the postcolonial phenomena identified by Elleke Boehmer: 'Postcolonial nations tend historically to re-enshrine male privileges even as nationalist men sought to regain control over women who had become empowered during the struggle for independence'.¹⁸³ At a time when MK guerillas were 'pushed back into the roles of the protected and defended',¹⁸⁴ Dulcie would not have wanted to speak rape in such a milieu, so we must consider why the narrator chooses (if, in fact, that is what she does) this particular story instead of another. The narrator sees only rape. The rape of Dulcie becomes a metaphor for all the rape of apartheid—the rape of the physical body; the rape of the land; the rape of individual and collective identity; the rape of a past and a future. The narrator is unable to tell a different story, because for her, there is no other story to tell. She reconstructs Dulcie in the same terms, according to the same economy of exclusion that was enacted under decades of apartheid. Like Dulcie, the narrator is a victim of history, and is incapable of reading her own kinship with Dulcie, and, therefore, fails to imagine a different story for such a female fighter.

We know the narrator is female, and that she is not part of MK. Theoretically, she should be able to provide a perspective on David's story that David cannot. Like Miss Rosa, David is a historical insider and is therefore potentially 'too inside' the trauma of the past to achieve the distance necessary to be a reliable, objective narrator. Yet as an outsider, the amanuensis is equally unreliable. This is, admittedly, in large part due to David and the diversions, dead ends, gaps, and inconsistencies in his accounts which require her to interpret and imagine. But I would also suggest she is far from an empathetic witness where

¹⁸³ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 33.

¹⁸⁴ Cock, p. 162.

David is concerned, and furthermore she begins to blur the line between David's story and *her* story. The novel ends with the narrator's gestures joining her to those of Dulcie, the one whose name and story were obliterated. A bullet explodes into the back of her computer, 'Its memory leaks a silver puddle onto the desk, and the shrapnel of sorry words scuttle out, leaving behind whole syllables that tangle promiscuously with strange stems, strange prefixes, producing impossible hybrids that scramble *my* story (*DS*, 212-13; emphasis is mine). Of course, one may interpret 'my story' to simply mean the story she is attempting to write, rather than a story about her. Yet, at times, she comes dangerously close to the figure of Dulcie. She notes how Dulcie's 'hands are beautiful', her fingers 'long and slender' (*DS*, 18). After observing her wash 'the sticky red from her hands' (*DS*, 18) and observing her Lady Macbeth-like obsession with ablution, our gaze follows the imaginary trace of the kisses on each fingertip made by 'a nice man of whom no questions will be asked and who will ask no questions about her left thumb with its neat crisscross-patterned tattoo' (*DS*, 18). Is this Dulcie represented in the imagination of David, or is the narrator creating a picture of Dulcie that fulfills some sort of pain-desire need of her own? Dulcie's back has been marked by the residual scars of torture in the form of a geometrical pattern, 'a square [...] marked with four cent-sized circles forming the corners of a smaller inner square, meticulously staked out with blue ballpoint pen before the insertion of a red-hot poker between the bones' (*DS*, 19). Again we read Dulcie's desire for communion and understanding:

One day a nice man of her own age will idly circle the dark cents with his own thumb and sigh, and with her bear it in silence [...] Perhaps a man called David, who will say nothing and who will frown when she speaks of a woman in *Beloved* whose back is scarred and who nevertheless is able to turn it into a tree. (*DS*, 19)

With this reference to Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*—likening the torture-scarred back of Dulcie to the tree-shaped scars whipped onto Sethe's back after her failed attempt to flee slavery—Wicomb establishes a correspondence between American slavery and South African apartheid that links the indelibility of their physical and psychic wounds. David insists that he is not, and has not been romantically involved with Dulcie, yet the above passages suggest something else. Again, we are left wondering who Dulcie is speaking through and if, in fact, the amanuensis is slowly becoming 'too inside' Dulcie's story, if not too distant from David's.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner repeatedly warns us that the story is 'invented' (AA, 335) by the tellers of the tale, and 'true enough' to boot, but that the telling of the story is a matter of 'hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived' (AA, 316). This narrative strategy of concealing information and imaginatively creating 'facts' to compensate for a gap in verifiable knowledge has a social correlative. Charles Bon's putative black blood is the sense-making information absent from Miss Rosa's and Mr. Compson's ventures at explaining his relations with the Sutpen family. We, as readers, do not know exactly why Henry Sutpen killed Bon. All we can be sure of is that, for all of the speakers except Miss Rosa, Henry was driven by some necessity for preserving his family's (and the nation's) purity. Barbara Ladd suggests that,

[. . .] what we are more than likely meant to know is that the story of the murder constructed by each speaker is remarkably representative of that speaker's sense of his own defeat within a specific historical context. In other words, whether the "purity" that Henry is seen as protecting is constructed in terms that are

nationalistic, familial, or racial depends upon who the speaker is, or rather *when* he is.¹⁸⁵

The *when* for Quentin and Shreve is the South of 1909; the fight for racial equality was becoming more organised, and the fear of such equality more prevalent. As a result, hysteria surrounding the colour line—and specifically, movement across racial lines—began to increase, a hysteria that would reach its zenith in 1920s America.

The importance of the *who* and *when* of witnessing cannot be underestimated. What is the emotional investment, if any, of the witness to the story that is being told? Cleanth Brooks suggests that one of the most important devices used in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the placing of Shreve in it as a kind of sounding board and mouthpiece. Brooks suggests that Shreve acts as the proper surrogate for the reader—especially in the concluding sections of the novel. ‘By using Shreve, Faulkner has, in effect, acknowledged the attitude of the modern, “liberal”, twentieth-century reader, who is basically rational, sceptical, without any special concern for history, and pretty well emancipated from the ties of family or race’.¹⁸⁶ Yet Shreve has not received a great deal of critical attention, at least not as compared to the other narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*. When Faulkner puts Shreve in control of telling the Sutpen mystery he shows how much his story is itself about storytelling, especially as storytelling relates to trauma. Though we have hardly distinguished his voice from Quentin’s, in fact Shreve narrates a very important part of the second half of the novel—a

¹⁸⁵ Ladd, p. 232.

¹⁸⁶ Cleanth Brooks, ‘History and the Sense of the Tragic’, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, in *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*, ed. by Fred Hobson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 35. Brooks goes on to say, ‘In fact, Shreve sounds very much like certain literary critics who have written on Faulkner. It was a stroke of genius on Faulkner’s part to put such a mentality squarely inside the novel, for this is a way of facing criticism from that quarter and putting it into its proper perspective’.

large part of chapter VI, almost all of chapter VIII, and the beginning and the end of Chapter IX.

Shreve is an outsider, a Canadian, ‘the child of blizzards and of cold [...]’ (AA, 346), whilst Quentin is ‘the Southerner, the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat’ (AA, 346). Much as they are for David’s amanuensis, imagination and fantasy are the instruments of Shreve’s discourse. He portrays characters and narrates episodes with a profusion of detail unknown to previous narrators, and introduces other characters and episodes that have not appeared before. As John Bassett affirms:

Shreve, after all, is the only true inventor in the book [...] By the end Shreve, the most detached interpreter of the Deep South, is creating narratives that are as determined by the metaphors and narrative forms passed on to him at third hand and by the personality of the youth who conveys them as they are by anything else. Shreve is the one to make the most logical sense out of the fragments. But he is the interpreter who invents the most; his fiction is furthest from documented fact.¹⁸⁷

Invention is an element of both Shreve’s characterising and of his characterisation, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan indicates: ‘On the one hand, the subjectivity of the non-narrating characters becomes a construction by others. You are what others say about you. On the other hand, the narrators’ access to their own subjectivity is achieved through their narration about others. You are what you say about others’.¹⁸⁸ Faulkner himself had suggested to a Virginia audience in 1957 that ‘Shreve was the commentator that held the

¹⁸⁷ John E. Bassett, *Vision and Revisions: Essays on Faulkner* (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill, 1989), p. 139.

¹⁸⁸ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *A Glance Beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), p. 44.

[story] to something of reality'.¹⁸⁹ Yet at the same time, Faulkner continually warns us that Shreve is an unreliable narrator, whilst compelling us to believe his story. Via the overnarrator's commentary, we are alerted to the fact that Shreve has no direct knowledge of a lot of information, that he has invented some facts, and that truth may not be the guiding principle of his narrative: 'that River [. . .], though some of these beings, like Shreve, have never seen it' (AA, 213), and then in Chapter VIII: 'names, blooms which Shreve possibly had never heard and never seen although the air had blown over him first which became tempered to nourish them' (AA, 243). The narrator further points out Shreve and Quentin's creation and Shreve's lack of knowledge when he says:

The two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath. (AA, 250)

And:

[The two joined in] some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other—faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived—in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false. (AA, 261)

¹⁸⁹ Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, p. 75.

Finally, the narrator points to the inventiveness of Shreve's creation of the drawing room in Bon's house and Bon's mother with references to the 'four of them who sat in that drawing room of baroque and fusty magnificence which Shreve had invented and which was probably true enough' and 'the slight dowdy woman [...] whom Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented and which was likewise probably true enough' (AA, 276). The expression 'probably true enough' is interesting for it reminds the reader that the story is not necessarily true but merely plausible, whilst also making the reader wonder 'true enough with respect to what'?

Sutpen's story is lost in a labyrinth of narrative voices, temporal changes, and information gaps, and Shreve offers the most logical and complete version of the story. In other words, the story is fragmented until Shreve puts it together. His narrative works out most of the previous gaps and offers the reader very plausible and fully described situations and characters, almost unknown from other narrators. In contrast to the unsolved conflict between Bon and Henry of the other versions, Shreve prepares the story from the beginning to be coherent with an efficiency that makes it very attractive to the reader. He gives the story a beginning, middle and an end. Hence, Shreve's filling of the gaps brings the reader to trust the Canadian narrator, to give him authority to the extent that his description of the story is generally not questioned. In this way, the reader becomes complicit in the story's unfolding.

François Pitavy suggests that the points of view of Shreve and Quentin can, in the end, be superimposed: 'Both narrators finally see the story of Sutpen from the same

perspective, but at differing distances'.¹⁹⁰ The text would seem to support his assumption when the anonymous narrator remarks in chapter 8:

It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them. (AA, 303)

Pitavy further suggest that Shreve comes to identify with Charles Bon in chapter 8 as he recreates the sufferings of the young Creole. I would argue, instead, that he creates and tells Bon's story not so much to identify with Bon, but in order to try and identify with Quentin and the South. But what is certain is that in Shreve's version of events, Bon is searching for recognition from his father as a means to define his identity. Why Shreve decides on this particular scenario is in all likelihood a result of his contact with Quentin and with the South—a society which above all 'defines itself by and through the all-pervading presence of a past. For the quest of the father can also be seen in terms of the need to give oneself a history, to recognize oneself as its effect, and thus to learn to know oneself'.¹⁹¹ Similarly, in Wicomb's work, David also looks to the past and the Griqua leader, Andrew le Fleur, in a search for self-awareness and an identity that will allow him to figure out his place in the present. Shreve does not only tell Bon's story, but Quentin's, and through Quentin, the story of the American South. Similarly, David's amanuensis attempts to tell not only Dulcie's story, but David's, and through David, the story of South Africa.

This relationship between Shreve and Quentin mimics the push and pull of testimony (just as does the relationship between David and his amanuensis). Shreve leads Quentin,

¹⁹⁰ François Pitavy, 'The Narrative voice and Function of Shreve: Remarks on the Production of Meaning in *Absalom, Absalom!*', in *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Casebook*, ed. by Elisabeth Muhlenfeld (New York and London: Garland, 1984), p. 194.

¹⁹¹ Pitavy, p. 191.

through his insistent questions, to become embroiled in the narrative to the point where the investigation of Sutpen and his own quest for identity as a Southerner become a process which he can no longer choose not to pursue to the end. And Shreve takes over a large portion of the narrative when Quentin struggles. Shreve and Quentin are always perceived in relation to one another, and importantly, Shreve appropriates Quentin's agency and subjectivity, and shows us the risks inherent in narrating someone else's trauma. Surely Quentin is capable of telling his own story. He is a product of the South, so has his own personal experience from which to draw. Shreve cannot add new facts to the story, as Quentin is his only source. Yet Shreve takes over a large portion of the narrative because Quentin is unable to do so in view of how painful such a process has become for him. It is important to note that neither Shreve nor David's amanuensis are simply acting as mediums through which testimony can be heard. In both cases, they are soliciting testimony and then 'filling in the gaps'. They may very well be creating trauma where there was none, changing the nature of the trauma enacted, or even negating an event that was actually experienced. It is impossible for the reader to tell.

Several critics have argued that Shreve's distance from the South allows him to see that which others born and raised in the region might not. He is, in other words, able to do what Quentin cannot. Yet in telling his story, Shreve employs the metaphors and stereotypes that had come to (and still) define the South. Hence, despite the distance with which he approaches his story, he appears unable to see any more clearly than the Southerners about whom he speaks. In Shreve's discourse, the picture of the South is shaped on the basis of myth and prejudice. Thadious Davis suggests: 'Even Shreve's mental capacity to make enlightened conjectures is stimulated as well as circumscribed by the

Negro's actual presence in the South. Shreve comes to the legend with an image of the South's depravity and he concludes with a confirmation of it'.¹⁹² Shreve is bewildered by a South he doesn't understand (in much the same way that David's amanuensis is bewildered by a Dulcie she cannot understand) as is evident when he speaks to Quentin: '*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*' (AA, 174). He is bewildered by this place that is so foreign to him:

Jesus, if I was going to have to spend nine months in this climate, I would sure hate to have come from the South. Maybe I wouldn't come from the South anyway, even if I could stay there. Wait. Listen. I'm not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I don't know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got. [.] We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas? (AA, 361)

He also turns the South into a sort of performance when he says: 'Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it? It's better than the theatre, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it. No wonder you

¹⁹² Thadious M. Davis, *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 217.

have to come away now and then, isn't it' (AA, 217). Shreve's language is highly sarcastic and grandiloquent, especially in the first and last parts of his discourse. He exaggerates the characters, making them stereotyped or tragic individuals to articulate a very complex narrative that is something of a parody. In Pitavy's words: 'the Canadian is the detached, even scornful, observer of a story which would appear to be a spectacular show (not serious entertainment), an elaborate joke, or a tall tale in the tradition of the Southwestern humorists'.¹⁹³ Yet, as the novel progresses, Quentin and Shreve become a sort of hybrid character and Shreve appears to lose the distance he originally brought to the narrative. In other words, Sutpen creates them as much as they create him by their discourse: 'Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. [. . .] maybe it took [. . .] Thomas Sutpen to make all of us' (AA, 261-62). They begin to think and speak as one and the same person:

It might have been either of them [speaking] and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal. (AA, 303)

They form a composite narrative as the anonymous narrator points out:

[. . .] it might have been either of them and was in a sense both. (AA, 303)

[. . .] it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking. (AA, 316)

[. . .] it did not matter (and possibly neither of them conscious of the distinction) which one had been doing the talking. (AA, 334)

¹⁹³ Pitavy, p. 196.

It is not until the very end of the novel that we realise that Shreve is, in fact, able to distance himself from Quentin and from the South and from the narrative he has helped create.

The imperative to convey the survivor's subjective experience of trauma also contains an internal paradox: to narrate a story requires an agent, but in testimonial (trauma) literature the narrative describes the destruction of the author's agency. Shreve appropriates Quentin's agency and in doing so, he exiles Quentin to the margins of his own tale. In a similar fashion, David's story slowly becomes his amanuensis' story as she also exiles David to the margins of his own tale. There is a crucial difference, however, in the manner in which the two stories unfold, especially in relation to the silence surrounding Bon and Dulcie. I have chosen not to discuss either Bon or Dulcie at great length in this chapter, in part, because I feel that much critical attention has already been focused on these characters, and in part because I chose to focus my attention on the testimonial nature of the works. Neither Bon nor Dulcie is given a voice to testify, so must do so through silence, or through the testimony of others. That silence, however, contains a certain agency for Dulcie, but not so for Bon. Though not able to speak for herself, Dulcie refuses to be removed from the centre of her own story and made into an interchangeable metaphor for all victims of South African apartheid. At the end of the novel, David's amanuensis washes her hands of the story she has been writing, yet Dulcie continues to haunt her thoughts. At one point she 'sees' Dulcie in her garden and asks herself, 'Is this no longer my property? [. . .] I have never thought of Dulcie as a visitor in my garden' (*DS*, 212). Though 'covered with goggas crawling and buzzing all over her' (*DS*, 212), Dulcie appears to be at peace as 'she yawns and stretches in the warm sun' (*DS*, 211). Now that David is dead, she remains to haunt the amanuensis and the story. In this sense, it might be tempting to suggest that

Wicomb's is a work of failed or inconsolable mourning—or melancholy—though I would suggest that it is not—or at least not entirely. David is unable to engage the trauma of his past to achieve a reinvestment in life that would allow him to begin again, and the narrator ends up giving up on the story she's trying to write. In the end, David realised that the notion of a Griqua 'identity' was nothing more than a delusion. Similarly, his amanuensis gives up on her story in part because she is unable to 'identify' Dulcie. She is unable to reconcile the image of Dulcie the freedom fighter with her notion of a South African woman. Wicomb appears to be both highlighting and questioning the ways in which the trauma of apartheid becomes constitutive of a collective identity—even if that identity is only an illusion. She further examines the manner in which very singular representations of the trauma of racialisation work to contest the production of an essential identity that defines the collective subject of trauma as a passive victim. Dulcie exemplifies this beautifully as she is impossible to identify. We might say that she belongs to a community of South African women, or a community of ANC freedom fighters, or even the larger community comprised of all South Africans, but she is far from passive despite the trauma to which she has been subjected (or to which we think she has been subjected). Her story cannot be told, and she, herself, becomes the embodiment of myth. The 'freedom' the narrator would like to afford Dulcie by giving her a voice yet 'announce[s] itself as a variant of the old: the silence, the torture, the ambiguity; and that in such recursions [...] lies the thought of madness madness . . .' (*DS*, 184). Yet, this failure to assimilate the past into a historical narrative, this stalling, also makes way for narrative possibility.

If we can find a way to embrace the 'eternal, inescapable present' (*DS*, 150), and understand that in some cases we may have to accept that mourning in the traditional

sense may not be possible, then perhaps there is hope to begin again. Dulcie becomes the fragments of a South Africa containing many narratives, and she refuses to become someone's story to tell. What remains impenetrable about Dulcie is her limits, her exposition, her offering. She must exist in this fragmented state to show up periodically in the garden, and we must learn to accept her as she is.

Unlike Dulcie, Bon is created via the act of storytelling, and in process becomes a metaphor for the victims of the South's zealous need for purity. Quentin and Shreve assimilate him into a historical narrative of their creation, but this appropriation fails to lead to successful mourning or a working through of the traumatic past. As Barbara Ladd succinctly suggests:

Instead of progress, redemption from the sins of the fathers, and transcendence of history, we are left with degeneration, damnation, and submergence into history.

The fact is that Quentin fails. [. . .] Quentin's is a failure of imagination, an inability to rewrite the old stories. Quentin solves no mystery of Charles Bon; he solves no murder. Bon remains invisible; the murder remains unexplained; and Quentin remains as much a victim of the past as his many fathers.¹⁹⁴

To return to Durrant's words, Quentin, with Shreve's help, engages in a pathological instance of a repetition compulsion resulting in a melancholic state from which there is no hope of moving on. Bon is dead and Faulkner opens up no space for further narrative possibility—or does he? In a stunning reversal, Shreve intuits the inevitability of racial mixing, and regains the objectivity and distance he originally brought to his story:

“And so do you know what I think? [. . .]”

¹⁹⁴ Ladd, p. 246.

"No," Quentin said.

"Do you want to know what I think?"

"No," Quentin said.

"Then I'll tell you. I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won't quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won't show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?"

"I don't hate it," Quentin said. (AA, 378)

Shreve's utterance at the end of the novel must cause the reader to re-think whether Shreve genuinely believes the story he has helped create about Bon, or whether he has been acting a part in what he considers the theatre of the South. I suggest that Shreve has been drawn into Quentin's story, but in the end knows that with his supposition as to the motive for Bon's murder, he is parodying the South. When, in the last words he speaks in the text, he asks Quentin, 'Now I want you to tell me [...] Why do you hate the South?' it is clear that he already knows the answer. It is difficult to ascertain whether Quentin finally recognises Shreve's prophesy, or even believes it, but certainly, for the reader, by the time we realize what is going on, we—like Shreve—are saddled with the 'burden of Southern history'.

The attempt to identity and tell David's and Sutpen's stories represents an interruption of community or, in Nancy's terms, an interruption of myth. The stories

constructed by the characters of *Absalom, Absalom!* deconstruct the myths of racial purity and white supremacy around which the South was constructed, and by extension, upon which they have built a tenuous identity. David not only comes to the realisation that his ‘Griqua-ness’ is founded on the embracing of a ‘mythical excess of belonging,’ but that he is unable to tell his story because he cannot tell Dulcie’s. He confesses that ‘even if a full story were to be figured out by someone, it would be a story that cannot be told, that cannot be translated into words, into language we use for everyday matters’ (*DS*, 151). Dulcie can only be ‘outlined’ and ‘traced into his story as a recurring imprint’ (*DS*, 150). Suggesting that the attempt to tell these stories of trauma represents an interruption of community and of myth is not the same as saying that the myth is absent. Rather, what is absent is its power to found a community. The loss of community, however, may be a resource for a community of another kind, a ‘community of the absence of community,’ or a community without community, so to speak. In other words, the community does not disappear even after myth’s interruption, but becomes something else that is based on its own unworking or unfounding.

Quentin, Shreve, David and the amanuensis embody the complicities, entanglements, and contaminations always inherent in trauma testimony.¹⁹⁵ As mediums through which the testimony can be heard, Shreve and the amanuensis initially draw the reader’s attention to the fragmentation of subjectivity experienced by the trauma survivors, but then attempt to neatly compose an ending to the trauma. Shreve succeeds in creating an ending to the story, David’s narrator does not. In both instances, however, Faulkner and

¹⁹⁵ For elaboration of the terms ‘entanglement’, ‘complicity’ and ‘contamination’, see Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009); Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 12. Also see Meg Samuelson, ‘Walking Through the Door and Inhabiting the House: South African Literary Culture and Criticism After the Transition’, *English Studies in Africa*, 51.1 (2008), p. 132.

Wicomb are cautioning us not to be tempted by such closure. As readers, we have to decide if we can accept the possibility that we are left without a story. A refusal of Shreve's story leaves the reader with no story at all. Similarly, with David's death and his amanuensis 'wash[ing] [her] hands of this story' (*DS*, 213), the reader is left without David's or Dulcie's story. What we are left with, however, is the attempt; the narrative possibility. At one point David's amanuensis says, 'My task is to invent a structure [...] so that we don't lose you altogether. It's impossible, this writing a story through someone else' (*DS*, 199). Perhaps it's not impossible if we are able to accept fragmentation, contradiction, non-linearity and paradox; if, as Luckhurst suggests, 'we accept that there is no story, in this sphere, that will not carry shards that pierce through any claim to closure'.¹⁹⁶ If we desire a unified and coherent story above all else, then we risk accepting/creating one that keeps us trapped in a repeating past.

Wicomb's development of David's amanuensis and Faulkner's use of Quentin, Shreve, Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson are important for several reasons: first, they create a powerful vehicle for re-enacting the experience of trauma, characterised as it is by displacement and alienation; second, they raise questions about agency and subjectivity, victimisation and perpetration; finally, they highlight the possibility that exists in the space of the imagination—the possibility to be found in storying. Reading these texts together not only highlights the similarities to be found in storying as it relates to the histories of trauma for the American South and South Africa, but also the differences. Written more than sixty years apart, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* deal with the complexities and paradoxes of trauma in a similar manner. *David's Story*, however, responds to a process that the South never undertook. Flawed as it might have been, South Africa's TRC initiated a very public

¹⁹⁶ Luckhurst, pp. 96-97.

quest for truth, acknowledgment and reconciliation. In essence the TRC sought to facilitate a public ritual of mourning and working through. Wicomb's novel proposes that such a collective ritual may not be possible, and that the future of South Africa may depend on the acceptance of such a state of ambivalence. Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* alongside *David's Story* reminds us that the South's recall of its past practices was never publicly put under a spotlight *in the South*. Shreve does this for Quentin as they create the story of Bon's murder, but the result, whilst also serving to highlight the complexities and paradoxes of cultural trauma, suggests that Faulkner's South was not yet ready for truth, acknowledgment and reconciliation. In such a case, the past, inaccessible as it may be, tips into a vision of history as 'catastrophic self-dispossession'.¹⁹⁷ In such a space, the self is little more than an empty corridor inhabited by ghosts one can neither comprehend nor exorcise.

Both of these novels raise important questions about who has the power and who has the ability to interpret trauma. How can an individual's trauma be translated to others, and in what context? Via a process of storying, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* translate the traumas of the past to the present. The real dramatic centre of interest for the characters in these two works is then, do these stories—these imaginative constructs—provide any means at all for beginning to understand and reconcile the failures of that past?

The Burden of History: Responsibility, Complicity and Working Through

By identifying precursors of current circumstances in episodes in the past, Faulkner and Wicomb acknowledge the burden of their history, its legacy to the present. If Charles Bon

¹⁹⁷ Greg Forter, 'Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form', *Narrative*, 15.3 (2007), p. 278.

and Dulcie represent prisms through which the ills of their regions are refracted,¹⁹⁸ then Shreve and David's amanuensis represent the manner in which those refractions are collected and re-focused in the present. Of the many voices at play in both novels, perhaps Faulkner's Judith comes closest to the heart of the matter when she says:

[Y]ou are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them [. . .] all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying. (AA, 127)

Judith is engaging with a kind of historical inevitability—'human experience as a feverish debate in which each participant, eagerly or otherwise, struggles to be heard'.¹⁹⁹ This struggle is particularly difficult because the terms in which a person speaks are always mediated by others. In other words, the moment a story is told, it ceases to belong solely to the storyteller. This sense of historical inevitability and repetition pervades much of the literature from the American South, and South Africa, and *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* are no exception.

It is impossible to overlook the centrality of the South's history to Faulkner's work and, especially, to *Absalom, Absalom!*. Sutpen's design reflects the values of an organisation based on racial inequality that did not change substantially over time. In many ways the New South was not dramatically different from the Old South. Quentin's and Shreve's recourse to the miscegenation motif to solve the mystery of Bon's murder is a reminder that

¹⁹⁸ An interesting note: white light may be separated into its spectral colors by dispersion in a prism.

¹⁹⁹ Richard Gray, *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), p. 4.

racism is still a widespread problem in the turn-of-the-century South—and in the 1930s, when the novel was written, as well. And the past, Faulkner believed, is never dead.²⁰⁰

Absalom, Absalom! and *David's Story* brilliantly create a feeling of *nachträglichkeit*, of being caught out by a time signature that consistently exposes the reader too early to traumatic markers that can only be comprehended too late. Both works strategically plant details whose most basic significance is withheld, only to be partially (if at all) revealed at a later time. In this way, readers become implicated and complicit in the story being told. Similarly, the characters in these works experience a belated trauma, in part, because of the realisation that they have been duped by the myth—by the beliefs and stories they have created or inherited and used to build a community. These include myths of white supremacy and essentialism, as well as myths of Black Nationalism, and do not, in the end, lead to personal peace and salvation.

Faulkner and Wicomb have created forms of narrative 'which do not unproblematically instantiate the conventional beginning-middle-end plot, which seeks resonant closure or uplift and tends to conflate absence with loss or lack'.²⁰¹ We are exposed to other modes of narration which question the nature of loss and absence, anxiety and trauma, just as they enable configurations that cannot be equated with salvation or redemption. Both of these texts set up as many mysteries as they solve, and constantly thwart any attempts by the reader to uncover the novels' 'meaning'. Not one of the narrators can be trusted, and both Faulkner and Wicomb perform a type of 'textual

²⁰⁰ Faulkner famously said, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past,' in *Requiem for a Nun*, Act I, Scene III.

²⁰¹ LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 54.

violence'²⁰² on the formal unities of their texts by a troubling of representational certainties.

The trauma narrative's paradoxical qualities are enacted via these narrative techniques.

The narratives found in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story* don't so much offer us a way to work through the trauma of history, as they enable us to work through our *relation* to that traumatic history.²⁰³ The individual has to come to terms with the world—whether external elements are real or imagined, they must be confronted. Rather than focusing all of our attention on trying to understand 'what happened', we might instead accept that though something has in fact happened, we can never be sure of it or gain access to it. As André Brink suggests, 'the best we can do is to fabricate metaphors—that is, tell stories—in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented'.²⁰⁴ These stories allow a better understanding of the ways in which singular traumas—that is, traumas experienced by individuals—can become collective (cultural) traumas the origins of which may be mythical and inassimilable. Although it is risky to try and singularise a particularly South African trauma, or to think of a specifically Southern experience of trauma as an event of singularity in and of itself, it might also be helpful to try and do just that. A comparative reading of these two novels—one that allegorises Southern history and the rise and fall of the plantation culture, and one that demonstrates the ways in which South Africa may be freed from apartheid, but not from the weight of its painful past—allows us a certain being-with, or 'being of community' in which our singularities are exposed.

I would suggest that in their textual conflictedness, both of these works open up a space for acting on, and working through, the systems that traumatised. If finding the Truth

²⁰² Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?*, p. 123.

²⁰³ Durrant suggests that the postcolonial narrative enables us to work through our relation to history; p. 11.

²⁰⁴ Brink, p. 42.

helps us ‘metabolize trauma’²⁰⁵ and resist its replication—and I would suggest that both Faulkner and Wicomb are suspicious of such an endeavour—then it is a different and more difficult truth that is being striven for than one which will provide closure and reconciliation. After all, Shreve calculates that Sutpen’s sole surviving descendent, the racially mixed Jim Bond who is doubly marginalised by race and mental capacity, will prevail. His illegitimate offspring will conquer the world, forever rendering impossible Sutpen’s desire to establish a ‘pure’ genealogy, and at the same time failing to pass on his name. And Dulcie remains to haunt us with questions about representation, history, revolution, and truth. She holds onto idealism despite what she has been through; she has been serious as a revolutionary; she would do it all again (*DS*, 180).

Via a fragmented approach to storytelling, both Faulkner and Wicomb do two things: first, they cast doubt on historical narrative’s presumed truth-value by bringing to light truths that are hidden, just as they suggest that either there is no single truth to be discovered in the past or that it is forever inaccessible, distorted by the passage of time and subjective factors; and second, through this ambivalent relationship to the truth, they are paradoxically able to narrate trauma by enacting the displacements and ruptures that prevent its telling. In other words, they find ways to articulate that apparently paradoxical thing, the trauma narrative. They believe in a truth that has room for ambiguity and contradiction, and one that cannot be fully and satisfactorily represented, but can only be approximated and reconstructed through language. ‘It is in the multiplicity of partial versions and experiences, composed and recomposed within sight of each other, that truth

²⁰⁵ Forter, p. 280.

"as a thing of this world," in Foucault's phrase, will emerge. In this mobile current individuals and communities will make and remake their meanings'.²⁰⁶

'We live, and judge, in history',²⁰⁷ and this history is a realm of truth *and* lies.²⁰⁸ I would agree with Mark Sanders when he suggests that though we still have a responsibility to distinguish between truth and lying, or between truth and fabrication, it may be useful to preserve a sense of what Nietzsche called truth and lying in an 'extra-moral sense'; for, 'then we might become more aware of the arbitrariness of that which we hold to be true, stand guard against lies masquerading as truth, and against those lies making history'.²⁰⁹ If we are able to accept that we may never get at the truth of the past, then we may be able to accept that there are not only two options for dealing with trauma: mourning or melancholia. Perhaps we must learn to live between the two possibilities, and accept that there is a third state which, rather than bringing narrative to a halt, opens the door for its production.

²⁰⁶ Ingrid de Kok, 'Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition', in *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa*, p. 61.

²⁰⁷ Sanders, p. 167.

²⁰⁸ As Michael Ignatieff implies, when he writes that '[o]ne could say that the whole process [the TRC] had one irrefutable result. It narrowed the range of impermissible lies that one can tell in public', p. 20.

²⁰⁹ Sanders, pp. 167-68.

Chapter Two

Enacting Community through Departure in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*

In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions.²¹⁰

--Homi Bhabha

'No matter what you did,' muses the unhappy Jadine in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, 'the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts would impugn your character'.²¹¹ The 'diaspora mothers' are everywhere for Jadine—they visit her in a dream, they are the imaginary women in the trees, the African woman in a Parisian bakery, and Thérèse on the Isle de Chevaliers. For Karin Badt, these figures remind Jadine 'of that which she has chosen to forget: her African-American roots'.²¹² As the 'symbolic hub about which [the characters'] stories revolve',²¹³ these 'diaspora mothers' show up in Morrison's other novels as an incessant literary return to the mother that is both psychological—a desire to recover the repressed—and political in nature. If a return to the mother is also an expression of a political desire to recover the past, then the two texts to be examined in this chapter exemplify the impossibility of such a quest. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* expand and develop the notion of what it means to be a collective subject of trauma by depicting the inherently ambivalent and traumatic experience of motherhood for

²¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', *Social Text*, 31.2 (1992), p. 141.

²¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 288.

²¹² Karin Luisa Badt, 'The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A Mater of "Ancient Properties"', *African American Review*, 29.4 (1995), p. 567.

²¹³ Ibid.

a slave in the American South and for a coloured South African woman during the struggle against apartheid. I adopt Toni Morrison's term 'diaspora mothers' to refer not only to the female protagonists in these two texts, but as a reference to the processes by which the very singular traumas of rape and incest become implicated in a collective trauma surrounding mothering and motherhood. Furthermore, examining a notion of diasporic mothers provides us with a way to consider the manner in which we are implicated in each other's traumas even as we may be unable to fully claim our own traumatic experiences.

Although Morrison is from Ohio and the bulk of *Beloved* takes place across the river Eliza Harris crossed so memorably in Uncle Tom's Cabin, I suggest that the novel is Southern in that it is in profound conversation not only with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but also Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*, amongst others. Sethe, Denver, Paul D and every other character in *Beloved* live simultaneously in their present and in their history—a history lived in the South. Hence the chapters of the novel alternate between the two stories: that of the growing contest between Sethe and Beloved; and that of Sethe's life on a Southern plantation, her escape, and the traumatic events that followed her crossing of the Ohio River and her appearance at the home of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Furthermore, as I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter, Morrison is careful to indicate that the murder of Sethe's daughter by her own hands is, of course, a pivotal event in the lives of everyone, yet it is not the climax, or the worst thing to have happened to Sethe and her loved ones. The climax of the narrative is, in fact, the night of the escape from Sweet Home, when several of the escapees were hanged and mutilated. So although Morrison does not subscribe to the label, 'Southern writer', and would likely not classify *Beloved* as a Southern text, I include it in this study because at its core, it is very much a Southern story.

The women in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*—in particular, Sethe and Lydia—are far from passive victims of a collective racialised trauma. Although they were powerless to prevent the sexual assault that directly led to the birth of Lydia’s child, and that indirectly led to the death of Sethe’s, they are, nevertheless, able to regain a certain degree of control over their own lives. They do so by becoming deciding subjects who must enact a departure from motherhood in order to leave behind the traumas to which they have been subjected. Their very personal and singular traumas are enacted against a background of collective racial violence and oppression that works to define them—as women, as women of colour, and as mothers—and against which they struggle. In the end, both must redefine what motherhood looks like and how it is experienced. Sethe does this with the help of her community, whilst Lydia must strike out alone in her attempt to alleviate the burden of the mother.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth comments on a letter that Freud wrote to his son in 1938 while he was waiting to leave Vienna. Freud writes that ‘Two prospects keep me going in these grim times: to rejoin you all and—to die in freedom’. In her comments on this letter, Caruth emphasises that the last four words—‘to die in freedom’—were written in English. It is here, Caruth suggests,

[. . .] in the movement from German to English, in the rewriting of the departure within the languages of Freud’s text, that we participate most fully in Freud’s central insight, in *Moses and Monotheism*, that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 23-24.

If a traumatic history/collective memory becomes the means by which an identity is formed, how are we take leave of that history? Would we even want to? Caruth concludes: ‘In this departure, in the leave-taking of our hearing, we are first fully addressed by Freud’s text, in ways we perhaps cannot yet fully understand’.²¹⁵ Hence for Caruth, the notion of trauma as unclaimed experience recognises the subject by its ties to what cannot be experienced or subjectivized fully. Or as Petar Ramadanovic suggests, ‘The subject in or of trauma is [. . .] for Caruth, culturally and politically a diasporic subject, *en route* toward subjectivity’.²¹⁶ Caruth’s understanding of trauma as ‘deeply tied to our own historical realities’ offers us not only a way to think through our involvement in each other’s histories, but it also provides us an opportunity to consider just who/what ‘us’ entails—to consider how we define community, or how we characterise the collective subject of trauma. Not only might we embrace Nancy’s notion of ‘community without unity’,²¹⁷ but unworking the idea of community and identity may provide an entry point for the ‘sharing out of a space . . . a being-together without assemblage’.²¹⁸

Rather than considering a diasporic subject only in the traditional sense of having been spread or dispersed from a homeland, Caruth asks us to consider the ways in which such subjects are created by inassimilable and ‘unclaimable’ traumatic experiences. That is not to say that it is desirable, or even possible, for the subject of trauma to try and claim a coherent subjectivity; rather, it is the recognition that one is a subject of trauma and is *en route* toward claiming that experience that matters.²¹⁹ Morrison’s ‘diaspora mothers’ do not

²¹⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 24.

²¹⁶ Petar Ramadanovic, ‘When “To Die in Freedom” is Written in English’, *Diacritics*, 28.4 (1998), p. 55.

²¹⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*.

²¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Confronted Community’, trans. by Amanda Macdonald, *Postcolonial Studies*, 6.1 (2003), p. 32.

²¹⁹ I refer here to a subjectivity specific to trauma, as it can certainly be argued that no one can claim a coherent subjectivity.

necessarily represent a stable notion of the self to which there is a desire to return, as much as they represent a way to think about the trauma of motherhood—or the maternal—in a Southern and South African context. This community of ‘diaspora mothers’ moves beyond notions of origins or homelands, or a desire to recover the past, and instead represents those bound by inextricable ties to what cannot be experienced fully—in this case, the trauma of motherhood. Perhaps, then, in this sense diaspora represents those women who have been dispersed from an essential place of motherhood by the brutality of rape and sexual violence enacted during the height of slavery and apartheid. Rather than seeking a return to a homeland, these mothers are traumatic subjects in the sense that they are unable to claim or fully realise their own traumatic experiences of what it means to be a mother. Such diaspora mothers might then create diaspora children who, in a quest for an authentic identity, seek a return to the mother. What is made clear in the two texts to be studied in this chapter, however, is that such a return to the maternal (for mother and for child) is an impossible enterprise.

Beloved and *Bitter Fruit* engage in the challenging task of providing a literary and imaginative model for a complex psychic phenomenon—traumatic neurosis—by locating it in a specific cultural and historical context: for Morrison, the institution of slavery and its aftermath, and for Dangor, the transition from apartheid to democracy. In *South African Literature after the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss*, Shane Graham suggests that there is an assumption of complex interconnections between the body, memory, and social space, with memory acting as the connecting tissue between the body and the social places it has occupied. Furthermore, this connection provides at least the perception of a stable basis for

identity and a sense of community.²²⁰ Yet the whole history of colonisation, modernisation, apartheid and slavery/segregation has served to rupture the connections between people and places in both South Africa and the American South. I would further suggest that slavery, colonialism and apartheid have also served to rupture the connection between the individual and the occupied space of his/her own body. There is, then, a complex relationship between psychic and social spaces at play in these works, especially the social space of 'home'. That being the case, what light can representations of home as a site of psychic trauma shed on dominant spatial regimes of apartheid and slavery, and the racialised forms of sexual violence that underpinned those spatial regimes?

Both writers set their novels in post-dispensation moments of their respective national histories—the United States about a decade after the end of the Civil War (though long before the Civil Rights and Black Power eras), and South Africa soon after the fall of the apartheid regime. Both of these works feature communities whose members have established somewhat independent (black American and South African coloured) settlements to escape the dominant white societies that alienate them. Encouraging readers first to grasp the systemic racism and injustices that defined slavery and apartheid, *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* then focus in on the complexities and ironies that serve to identify already beleaguered communities.

The characters in these works are searching for an acknowledgement and understanding of their suffering by those with whom they share their lives. In particular, Sethe and Lydia, the female protagonists of *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* respectively, struggle to

²²⁰ Shane Graham, *South African Literature after the Truth Commission*, p. 2.

'beat back the past'²²¹ in order to more fully live in the present. Both women are struggling to come to terms with events that happened almost two decades ago. Sethe's narrative attempts to make sense of her life as a slave at Sweet Home where she was sexually assaulted by two white men, just as she tries to process the death of her daughter by her own hands. For Lydia, her rape by a white policeman during the height of the apartheid years in South Africa is thrust to the front of her mind when her husband has a chance encounter with her rapist in a shopping mall. Lydia's and Sethe's memories are painful to recall, of that there is no doubt. But we quickly realise that much of their pain is also derived from the even more traumatic process of relating those memories to others; indeed, much of their anguish comes from the reactions and responses of those closest to them.

Both novels delineate a mother-child relationship (or relationships) damaged by both racial and gender positioning at a particular moment in history. At the core of both works lies a perceptive insight about the workings of trauma that intuitively echoes, transforms, and re-locates Freud's theory of traumatic latency and seduction. French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche places trauma at the centre of a revised seduction theory designed to be more attentive to radical alterity—and to the other.²²² It is to Laplanche's elaboration of Freud's seduction theory – a theory which examines the origins of the human psyche in the 'implantation of the message of the other' – that I will return later in the chapter to explore the mother-child relationship in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*. Freud describes trauma as the paradoxical presence/absence of unassimilable, fragmented traumatic memories, which he

²²¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004), p. 86; hereafter cited within the text as *B*, page number.

²²² Here Laplanche is not speaking in Lacanian terms—that is with a capital O. He is speaking of the concrete other; each other person, adult person, who cares for a child.

defines through a suggestive metaphor, that of a quasi-palpable ‘foreign body’.²²³ This chapter explores the manifestation of this ‘foreign body’ as it takes a specifically maternal form and as it relates to concepts of home. What does it mean when this corporeal presence takes the form of a child of rape, or the ghost of a murdered child—one’s own child? What does it mean when this corporeal presence is the very home in which one lives, be it a house, a community, or a nation? Although it is not identically situated in Morrison’s and Dangor’s texts, this unassimilable excess of psychic energy which is codified as a foreign body sustains the narrative and its development in both novels. Whilst Freud recognises the physical and sensory component of traumatic memories, Morrison and Dangor situate this insight in African American and South African racialised experience respectively, where the foreign body of traumatic memories is always simultaneously also the victimised black/coloured body defined by slavery and racist ideology.

If the literature of trauma tells the story of the known and the unknown, the remembered and the forgotten, this is frequently a double telling. For a number of writers—Morrison and Dangor included—bearing witness to traumatic experience means articulating the complicated process from traumatic memory to conscious memory by attending not only to verbal signs but also to that non-verbal, sensorial, and perceptual experience that remains locked within the body. In that sense, and in an effort to include within

²²³ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. by Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1958), p. 120. Freud argues that ‘unconscious memory traces’ of the past ‘cannot establish contact with other intellectual processes’; they are unconscious, inaccessible to consciousness. It may happen that certain parts of the repressed material have escaped this process, have remained accessible to memory and occasionally reappear in consciousness, but even then they are isolated, a foreign body without any connection with the rest of the mind’. Freud also turns to the trope of the ‘foreign body’ in his earlier *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). He says, ‘We must presume rather that the psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work’. See Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1957), p. 6. For a compelling examination of the relationship between trauma and the body, see Laura Di Prete, “*Foreign Bodies*”: Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

representation the non-verbal dimension of the traumatic experience, the body is frequently portrayed as a fluid, transforming entity—an entity of blurred boundaries. I am particularly interested in how this metamorphic entity is represented in the form of the maternal body, especially the maternal body that has been subjected to rape and the more general sexual violence that was common in apartheid (and post-apartheid) South Africa and in the segregated American South. I also intend to explore the non-verbal dimension of the mother-child relationship, in particular, the development in the child of what Laplanche calls a ‘temporal’ or ‘traumatic dialectic’ that originates from the mother.

Motherhood in the pre-abolition American South and apartheid South Africa would have been an inherently ambivalent experience—especially for African-American and black/coloured South African women. Barbara Christian identifies the historical figure of the slave mother represented in contemporary women's fiction as the key element in recent efforts to reclaim the subjectivity and memory of black slaves, and she points out that ‘motherhood is the context for the slave woman's most deeply felt conflicts'.²²⁴ It seems that ambivalence has always been a part of African-American life and its politics of resistance and the process of motherhood would not have been an exception: it is certainly in evidence in W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness as a form of socialised ambivalence. Du Bois's double-consciousness provides a methodological paradigm through which to explore ways of articulating the many forms of often painful resistance by and through which African-Americans and others have voiced a coming to self-definition, self-determination and self-consciousness. Simply stated, for Du Bois, double-consciousness describes the condition of African-Americans striving to be at home in the United States.

²²⁴ Barbara Christian, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*, ed. by Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi and Arlene R. Keizer (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 94.

The double-consciousness at play in these works is both reminiscent of Du Bois's famous utterance just as it is also 'a mechanism for elucidating the relationship between personal experience, history, and society'.²²⁵ Christina Zwarg notes the dearth of psychoanalytical readings of African-American texts in her article on Du Bois and trauma. She suggests a connection between Du Bois's approach to double-consciousness and the work of Laplanche in the manner in which each introduces the problem of translation into discussions of trauma: 'For Laplanche, the unconscious is not a biological imperative, the product of an instinctual frustration, so much as it is a cultural legacy or translation problem, the product of the introduction of sexuality from outside the body in the form of a message, an "enigmatic signifier", one opening another type of frustration and generating the unconscious as its unwieldy reservoir'.²²⁶ It is the uneven relationship of child to caretaker—the gap in age between child and adult—that enables Laplanche to bring together trauma, translation, and the sublime: 'it is the double register of this traumatic relay, the fact that the child cannot withstand the overwhelming burden of a message it cannot understand that instigates the sublime reservoir of the unconscious, the shadow text of our conscious lives'.²²⁷ For Laplanche, maturity develops through a constant decoding of the uneven memory fields that form through this type of enigmatic encounter. Similarly, Du Bois's double-consciousness also framed the psychological issue of trauma as a 'communication situation', or in other words, as a social situation, one that is deeply cultural and relational in its conception.²²⁸ 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always

²²⁵ Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 102.

²²⁶ Jean Laplanche, 'The Theory of Seduction and the Problem of the Other', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 78 (1997), p. 653. Also see Christina Zwarg, 'Du Bois on Trauma: Psychoanalysis and the Would-Be Black Savant', *Cultural Critique*, 51 (2002), p. 7.

²²⁷ Zwarg, p. 8.

²²⁸ Jean Laplanche, *Seduction, Translations, Drives*, trans. by Martin Stanton, ed. by John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992), pp. 9-10. Also see Zwarg, p.11.

looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'.²²⁹ The mother-child relationships in these texts expose Paul Gilroy's 'sublime' memory of racial terror via the manner in which they do violence both to the individual and to the collective imagination. For those who would be mothers during the height of the slavery years in the American South and equally, during apartheid in South Africa, this double-consciousness involved an even more problematic psychological register—one I will explore more fully later in the chapter.

Beloved and *Bitter Fruit* are complex novels, and for reasons of space I am confining my discussions to four aspects in common: the haunted, violent nature of home; rape of the maternal body; the incestuous relationship between mother and child; and the process of enacting community through departure. If double-consciousness describes the condition of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, it also describes the condition of those who strive to be at home—whatever and wherever home might be—in places where home is almost always compromised. So it is to questions of home that we first turn in an effort to better understand the ways in which home itself is often portrayed as a fluid and metamorphic entity and all too often a site of violence for women.

Haunted Houses, Haunted Homes

During the height of the slavery and apartheid years (and for many years after), stories of African and African American suffering under apartheid and slavery policies were excluded from the public sphere, and relegated to the private spaces of home, church and immediate

²²⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Souls of Black Folk' [1903], in *The Souls of Black Folk, Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 11.

community. The dwellings and places the characters in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* move through and escape to become at times ‘fixed containers of memory and desire, and at times spaces where boundaries between selves are softened, making possible the gatherings and joining necessary for emancipatory struggles’.²³⁰ These texts are very much about people in their places: the neighbourhood, the women in their respective homes, the community or town, the men shifting between homes and women. Through a complex interweaving of social spaces, these authors show how homes and communities serve as places to gather strength and rest, just as they are also places of struggle and despair. Because slavery, colonisation, racism and apartheid penetrated every moment in U.S. and South African history, there is a sense in which all homes are haunted by violence and trauma and are ‘gloomy reminders of lives left behind’.²³¹ Or to echo Baby Suggs in *Beloved*: ‘Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief’ (*B*, 6).

One of the particular concerns of this chapter is how the characters in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* frame and define home. The question is important for several reasons, not least of which is what the institutions of slavery and apartheid did to an individual’s sense of space and place, and for how home functions as a place of refuge as well as a place of pain. Questions of home—as a psychic space as well as a physical place—pervade *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*. In her article on South African literary culture and criticism after the transition, Meg Samuelson insightfully suggests that tied up with the trope of ‘home’ and habitation are ‘questions of intimacy and violence, belonging and exclusion’.²³² Questions of who gets to inhabit the house, and how, remain very vexed and pertinent to how a nation defines

²³⁰ See Nancy Jesser, ‘Violence, Home, and Community in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, *African American Review*, 33.2 (1999), p. 325.

²³¹ Achmat Dangor, *Bitter Fruit* (London: Atlantic, 2004), p. 76; hereafter cited within the text as *BF*, page number.

²³² Meg Samuelson, ‘Walking Through the Door and Inhabiting the House’, p. 130.

itself and what it becomes. Far from being a place of respite and peace, in both *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*, ‘home’ is haunted by structures of anxiety or outright violence. That being the case, what does it mean when it is impossible to feel ‘at home’ in one’s own home? The intimate, personal narratives of Morrison’s and Dangor’s works speak urgently of the ways in which, far from being a comfort zone, being at home may in fact entail the greatest risks. I think Samuelson puts it quite succinctly when she says, ‘Far from being outside the world, “home” is instead structured out of worldly entanglements, complicities and contaminations’.²³³ Being-at-home in the post-Civil War South and in the newly democratic South Africa was inherently liminal—a process that located one on a perpetual threshold. Both *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* foreground haunting returns from the past even as they present a project of re-making home in the wake of slavery and apartheid’s assault on home-spaces. If, as Samuelson argues, ‘women’s bodies have been cast as the contested terrain on which new (national) homes are constructed’,²³⁴ what happens to the private home space (and to the body) in the effort?

Beloved, the ghost made flesh, is the spirit of multiply dispossessed identities including Sethe’s dead baby, Sethe herself, and the nameless sixty million who died in the Middle Passage. In that sense, she represents the return of traumatic repressed memories that transcend Sethe’s murder of her daughter to embrace the collective trauma of slavery. The space where these memories forcefully re-emerge is also a space where the repressed is actively at work. 124 Bluestone Road is where the ghost makes itself known to Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver, and appears to be ‘Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead’ (*B*, 4). As such, the house embodies a ‘liminal space between life

²³³ Meg Samuelson, ‘Walking Through the Door and Inhabiting the House’, p. 132.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

and death, the present and the past'.²³⁵ Consequently, the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone appear to be located on a perpetual threshold—involved in a perpetual state of waiting. The presence of the ghost in the house at the beginning of the novel might be seen as a manifestation of the phenomenon of traumatic latency as compulsive return. I would suggest, however, that what Morrison does so astutely, is take the very notion of traumatic latency and expand upon it by creating a character who does, in fact, represent a compulsive return, whilst also representing a trauma that is always already present—always being incorporated and assimilated.²³⁶ *Beloved* is the traumatic past in bodily form in the sense that Morrison links her not only to the murdered baby, but also to the other experiences of trauma that Sethe, as well as the other community members, lived through during slavery and the Middle Passage. The largely internal, private experience of recovery thus shifts from a process experienced within an individual body to a struggle undertaken by the larger community. Yet it is the individual trauma that I'd like to focus on, and to which I'll return later in the chapter—specifically, the relationship between Beloved and Sethe once Beloved returns. Whilst it is true that Beloved, the ghost of the baby girl at first and then the adult woman who appears from nowhere, inhabits and occupies the house literally as a 'foreign body' that obstructs and disrupts the lives of its inhabitants, one must not forget that this foreign body was once a part of Sethe—her 'best self'—literally joined to her before Beloved's life was violently ended.

Home for Sethe, Baby Suggs and Denver is a space that transcends its physical boundaries to become a psychic space and an almost human body. Laura Di Prete compellingly describes 124 Bluestone Road as paradoxically 'an emptiness filled with

²³⁵ Di Prete, p. 86.

²³⁶ And I would add that Beloved embodies the notion that traumatic history is lived in its return; in the place of understanding there is its repetition.

'excessive presence' that not only creates a space that threatens to disrupt the boundaries separating an outside from an inside, but also invades the psyche, and occupies it as a haunting presence.²³⁷ It is 'packed to its rafters with [...] dead Negro's grief' (*B*, 6), 'full of strong feelings' (*B*, 47), 'heavy' (*B*, 65), 'full of touches from the other side' (*B*, 116). Through this language of presence, fullness, and heaviness, Morrison turns the house into an intrusive, massive body, endowed with almost human qualities that crowd in on Sethe (*B*, 47). It is not only Sethe who feels this presence; her daughter Denver also regards the house 'as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled, and fell into fits' (*B*, 35), a body that performs and expresses emotions and perceptions.

Much like 124 Bluestone Road, Lydia's sister Gracie's township house is imbued with human-like characteristics as it sucks not only the very air that is breathed, but the energy and spirit of its inhabitants:

What a hot night, she thought, then corrected herself: it was not the night, it was the room, this house, this township-house that kept them here, trapped by the nostalgia of people like Alec. Walls built of ash brick were economical, cheap—but they *breathe*, they told us when we bought these places. What they didn't tell us was that they breathe the wrong way, they suck air out of the house, then clog up like the lining of some diseased lung that can't suck any air back in. (*BF*, 81)

Gracie's home is not a place of refuge for her, but a place in which she feels trapped and suffocated. Equating the walls to a diseased lung, she likens the house to a dying body with little hope for the future. Much like a sickened and deteriorating body, her home contains

²³⁷ Di Prete, p. 87.

certain odours, in this case, the smells of her and Alec's lives together: 'The history of their sojourn here, preserved within these walls. An archive you browsed with your nose' (*BF*, 82). Gracie's thoughts point to an archiving that is unconscious and not always voluntary or welcome—again, it presents as a sort of haunting. Like many in the township, Gracie feels trapped by the 'cheap dream' she allowed herself to buy into: 'they knew that we'd make this slum liveable. And now we can't sell, we can't get out of here. Ja, they call us apartheid's astronauts, trapped in this damn twilight world' (*BF*, 82). A very apt description, for it is in a twilight world that the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road also reside. It is not only the physical space of the house that confines Gracie, but the 'home' of the township and the 'twilight world' of life after apartheid.

This twilight world is a reference not only to life in South Africa after apartheid, but to the notion of some kind of a 'coloured' community to which Gracie, Silas and their families subscribe, but can't seem to actually define. At one point Gracie laments, 'Here we are, in our twilight zone between black and white, trying to be both and ending up as neither' (*BF*, 82). Thus, *Bitter Fruit* highlights the manner in which when apartheid ended, many were left struggling to figure out where they fit in the new order. The feeling of not being white enough before apartheid and not being black enough after is articulated several times in the novel. Silas, who fought against apartheid, resents the idea that all of a sudden he is not black enough, and he dreams of moving to Mauritius where he imagines that he would be able to live 'at home among his bastard kind' (*BF*, 148). Much like *David's Story*, the novel explicitly refutes the idea that 'coloured' can be understood as a pure racial category upon which to form a community. Silas even reflects on his ultimate incompatibility with Lydia: 'we were not necessarily the same, just because we were both

coloured; . . . we were not necessarily compatible, just because we both came from some kind of bastard strain. We were different' (*BF*, 107). Nancy would argue that such difference is inevitable, that a community is not created or sustained on the basis of some transcendental coloured identity. Dangor would seem to agree as he questions the legitimacy of any 'racialised' cultural identity based on a notion of purity, or on the notion that South Africa's different 'racial' groups are distinct, separate communities. The future of a coloured community (real or not) is brought into focus when Vinu expresses anger at her and Michael's mixed heritage and subsequent lack of belonging: 'Why don't they marry their own kind? . . . That way, they won't have to *discover*, years after they've brought children into the world, that they're culturally incompatible, and the children won't have to suffer' (*BF*, 164). It's a fascinating statement and reflection on the meaning of community, for one wonders at the cultural incompatibility to which Vinu refers. With whom, specifically, are she and Michael incompatible? And yet Silas seems to lament the loss of a coloured identity that has been built not on purity, but on impurity, when he looks at Vinu, 'a bushie goddess' and wonders if there is no longer a space for 'bastards' anymore: 'Beauty honed on the same bastard whetstone as I. We will make no more like her, or like Michael for that matter. Our ambitions are too ordinary, a house, a car, a garden. We no longer dream of painful beauty when we make love' (*BF*, 222).

Though home may be a site of violence, structured out of worldly entanglements, complicities and contaminations, it is also a place of comfort and security, one where a sense of ownership and belonging, though fragile, even fictitious at times, is of paramount importance. For instance, it is telling that what finally defeats Baby Suggs and causes her to take to her bed is not the ghostly presence in her home, but the actual (literal) intrusion by

the men who came to capture and return Sethe to Sweet Home. After ‘the Misery’, Stamp Paid’s term for ‘Sethe’s rough response to the Fugitive Bill’ (*B*, 201), Baby Suggs gives up on language and the community—gives up on having a ‘normal’ free life—and vows to get in her bed and ‘fix on something harmless in this world’ (*B*, 211). Stamp Paid pleads with her not to give up:

“You blaming God,” he said. That’s what you doing.”

“No, Stamp. I ain’t.”

“You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?”

“I’m saying they came in my yard.”

“You saying nothing counts.”

“I’m saying they came in my yard.”

“Sethe’s the one did it.”

“And if she hadn’t?”

“You saying God give up? Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?”

“I’m saying they came in my yard.” (*B*, 211)

Baby Suggs had done everything right and still the white man ‘came in her yard’. As a free woman, she thought she had a degree of control over her own home—her moral frame for action—yet they came in her yard anyway. She appears to be as incredulous and perplexed by this act as she is by her daughter’s tragic actions; a choice she could neither approve nor condemn: ‘One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last’ (*B*, 212). Bell Hooks argues that historically, ‘African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack) had a radical political

dimension'.²³⁸ Hence, the struggle by African Americans for place is intricately bound up with their identity politics. For Baby Suggs, her home is a space where she could be a subject rather than an object, where she could maintain a sense of dignity denied her on the outside in the public world. Though heartbroken over the loss of her granddaughter, Baby Suggs is finally defeated by not only the actions of the whitefolks, but perhaps even more, by the inaction of perhaps her only other moral frame for action, her own community. She is overcome by the fact that the physical space of her home has been violated, whilst the metaphorical home of the community to which she belongs passively looks on. Her singular trauma—the killing of her granddaughter instigated by the white man violating her home—is enacted against a collective/communal racialised trauma that initially defines the community as passive victim. Yet, in a similarly compelling manner, both *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* suggest that in order to overcome trauma, one must enact a departure from home. Crucially, however, such a departure means something different for Lydia than it does for Sethe (and Denver). In leaving her home, Lydia also leaves her community (such as it is): she is only able to ‘free [her]self’ when she ‘gives up belonging’ (*BF*, 219). Although in the end Sethe refuses to leave her home, her community comes to her rescue when her daughter, Denver, ‘go[es] on out the yard’ (*B*, 288); enacting a departure from home in an effort to save her mother.

²³⁸ Bell Hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 42.

The Enigmatic Message of Rape

The entanglement of rape and the maternal in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* serves to create a primal scene (seduction) between mother and child that in its later (re)translation results in trauma for both. Hence, as Ashraf Rushdy points out, ‘One of the recurrent tropes of the African-American novel of slavery is the possible response to an institution attempting to render meaningless the mother-child relationship’.²³⁹ I would not say that the mother-child relationship becomes meaningless in these depictions, for in both texts, it is perhaps the single most important relationship in the story; rather, this relationship becomes distorted, compromised and traumatic.

Beloved and *Bitter Fruit* are haunted by the history and memory of rape. In the act of rape, the rapist literally enters the ‘home’ of the victim’s body—a home that represents perhaps the last vestige of protection that one has against the world. Whilst I am conscious of the sensitivity surrounding the use of rape as a metaphor—especially by survivors of such a traumatic experience—I would, nevertheless, like to propose that rape can, in fact, be viewed as a metaphor for the violent forms of social exchange between genders and between races in the American South and South Africa. The metaphor of rape is a metaphor of concealed (and unconcealed) domination and hidden horror, a metaphor of silence, a metaphor of the celebration of dominance and colonialism. Yet, importantly, engagement with this metaphor, and with the reality of rape, is not identical in Southern and South African fiction and requires further exploration.

²³⁹ Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, ‘Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*’, *American Literature*, 64.3 (1992), p. 576.

In South African fiction, women have a long history of having their bodies subjected to metaphor and abstraction. In post-apartheid South Africa in particular, the violated female body and womb are becoming sites from which to re-imagine identities grappling with the country's interrelated histories of political, racial and sexual violence. Indeed, as Meg Samuelson points out, narratives of specifically interracial rape that result in the birth of a child continue to haunt the imagination of post-apartheid writers. These narratives, which include J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Arthur Maimane's *Hate No More* and Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*, amongst others, 'are marked by a reluctance on the part of their authors to disentangle themselves from the anxieties surrounding the female reproductive body that were enlisted during the apartheid era in the service of hetero-patriarchal discourses of racial, and ultimately economic, exclusivity'.²⁴⁰

Literature of the American South has not engaged with rape in the same manner. As a matter of fact, it has almost avoided the topic altogether. The Southern literary landscape is littered with references to the *mythology* of rape whilst remaining silent on its realities. Certainly Southern literature has a long history of focusing on the injustice of lynching, or the joys or horrors of taboo sex. Its literature often deals with the alleged angst of miscegenation. But there is a noticeable gap when it comes to literature that gives language to the reality of rape. One does not find it in Faulkner's work, nor that of Ernest Gaines for that matter. Toni Morrison has commented on the lack of racial truth telling, the absence of black images in the literature even though 'black otherness' dominated the cultural life of America for most of its existence. Hence to find this literature dealing with the realities of rape, we must turn to the writings of African-American women precisely because they are

²⁴⁰ Meg Samuelson, 'The Rainbow Womb: Rape and Race in South African Fiction of the Transition', *Kunapipi*, 24.1&2 (2002), pp. 88-100.

the most victimised by these various forms of domination, and certainly they are the main victims of rape.²⁴¹

Beloved elides the representation of sexual assault as a deliberate narratological strategy. Rape is more often mentioned obliquely rather than portrayed directly, and much is left to the reader's imagination. In this manner, Morrison captures a 'trace' of the trauma as the implicit memory of the event is being converted into narrative memory. In utilising this narratological strategy rather than the multiple graphic details offered by realism, Morrison effectively evokes not only the trauma of the specific individual (a singular trauma), but the collective suffering of the larger community as well. Her presentation of multiple iterations of rape, with victims both female and male, demands that rape be understood as the ultimate signifier of trauma for the black community. Furthermore, by representing a female rapist figure in *Beloved* and a male rape victim (Paul D), Morrison foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the category determining domination or subjection to rape.

In a similar way to *Beloved*, *Bitter Fruit* evokes the trauma of the specific individual whilst also depicting that of the community at large, but it accomplishes this in a different manner. By focusing specifically on Lydia's sexual assault, and her very personal response to it, Dangor takes a more graphic approach to the representation of both individual and communal trauma in apartheid South Africa. Both writers, however, juxtapose individual trauma against a backdrop of racism and hostility to emphasise larger cultural losses; to

²⁴¹ There is a considerable void in Southern literature with respect to the reality of rape in the American South. That reality includes the feelings of white women as they see black children who have the characteristics of their white male partners. One must ask, where is the literature that unlocks the feelings and the realities of the black mothers of these mulatto children? In many ways, as James Baldwin pointed out, although certainly less socially exploited, so-called whites are more psychologically trapped than African-Americans are by the results of rape.

create, as it were, a very public space of haunting. In doing so, these texts allow us to better understand how the singularity of trauma—in this case the trauma of sexual assault and rape—helps to clarify an understanding of the collective trauma of racial violence and oppression in South Africa and the American South.

Sethe is haunted by the ghost of the child she has killed just as Lydia is, in a sense, haunted by the child conceived by her rape. Beloved's return to life corresponds with the return of many of Sethe's painful memories of her enslaved past. Similarly, when Silas sees Du Boise and tells Lydia, the past rushes in and overwhelms her. For both women, memory is figured as a menacing force that must be kept in check. Sethe sees her future as 'a matter of keeping the past at bay' and thus, begins each day with the 'serious work of beating back the past' (*B*, 51, 86). In much the same manner, Lydia has 'lived according to one immutable law: self-containment' (*BF*, 158) in her 'resolve never to dwell on the past' (*BF*, 115). As Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, '[P]atients suffering from traumatic neurosis' are not 'much occupied in their waking lives with memories [...] Perhaps they are more concerned with not thinking of it [the traumatic event]'.²⁴² Cathy Caruth, in a reading of Freud, argues that such unsuccessful effort is at the centre of traumatic experience. Trauma is the event survived, but it is also defined by 'the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits',²⁴³ often in the form of hallucinations and nightmares. What *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* do so well is engage with these notions of trauma from a maternal perspective. In other words, they figure the sexual assault experienced by Sethe and Lydia as a metaphorical rape as well—the rape of motherhood. Both Sethe and Lydia have suffered trauma because of sexual assault, but in addition to this specific trauma is a more

²⁴² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 61.

²⁴³ Ibid., p. 59.

conflicting and ambivalent trauma that involves their children. As a direct result of her enslaved past and the sexual assault by Schoolteacher's nephews, Sethe chooses to kill her infant daughter (just as she was intent on killing her other children) rather than have her face a life of such treatment. Sethe stands by the choice she made, however, and makes no apologies for doing what she thought she had to do. While Sethe must end her child's life because of the sexual assault on her maternal body (she is lactating at the time), Lydia decides to give birth to the child she conceives as the result of being raped by Du Boise. Read together, these texts exemplify what is, for Caruth, the core of trauma stories: the 'oscillation between *a crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival'.²⁴⁴ Sethe's infanticide manifests that correlative crisis as certainly as any story of trauma can: she has survived what she prevents her daughter from surviving. As for Lydia, she not only survives the trauma of rape, but creates another life as a result. Thus, in this case, the event—her rape—does more than survive in Lydia's mind and memory; it lives on in a very literal sense in the figure of her child. For Sethe and Lydia, motherhood is entangled with the trauma of rape and sexual assault. In that sense, motherhood becomes a trauma that is reminiscent of Caruth's notion of trauma as unclaimed experience and never simply one's own; it also becomes the child's trauma, and in an even larger sense becomes the community's trauma. It is, therefore, through the mother-child relationship that we are able to understand the nature of trauma as this trace of unclaimed experience. In these works, mother and child are recognised by their inextricable ties to each other, and to a trauma that cannot be experienced fully. In that sense, both novels are about a crisis of subjectivity, a crisis inseparable from the traumatic legacies of slavery and apartheid culture.

²⁴⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 7.

I find it particularly compelling to think of mother and child in these texts as diasporic subjects in Caruth's sense of being continually en route toward subjectivity. Certainly Beloved and Mikey become diasporic subjects as 'home' is suddenly ripped away from them and they are left searching for someone/something that will root them in the world. Beloved speaks for both of them when she says, 'I need to find a place to be' (*B*, 252). This struggle for a space of belonging (and resistance) is observed by Michael Keith and Steve Pile when they suggest that 'for those who have no place that can be safely called home, there must be a struggle for a place to be'.²⁴⁵ Beloved attempts a joining with Sethe that will both root her in the world and give her form, whilst Mikey searches for an identity by 'retrac[ing] their township sojourns' (*BF*, 181) and researching his family's bloodlines. Neither child finds the home they are searching for in the figure of the mother, however. Given the nature of Beloved's death and Mikey's birth, perhaps this failure is inevitable. Similarly, for Sethe and Lydia to survive, they must enact a departure from mothering and a retreat (or movement) to something else.

Discovering the truth of his parentage in Lydia's diary, Mikey embarks on a search for a 'pure' identity by entering the Islamic world of his 'grandfather's' family. There he is told the story of Ali Ali (Silas's father) and his 'passage out of India'. Ali Ali's sister was raped by a British officer during the colonial occupation of India. The rape bears fruit but the baby dies; Ali's sister is assumed to have murdered the child and is condemned to a madhouse. Ali exacts his revenge by killing the rapist-father before fleeing India and making his passage to South Africa. In Imam Ismail's rendition of the story, the 'mixed race' issue of rape represents the 'bitter fruit' of the title:

²⁴⁵ Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 5.

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. [. . .] You conquer a nation by bastardising its children. (*BF*, 204)

This scene is key to the novel's inscription of Lydia, who conceives a son by a man who 'was the old system' (*BF*, 131). Unlike Ali's sister, Lydia opts to keep the child rather than abort him as an act of 'loyalty' to the struggle and become 'a soldier [. . .] a fearless bomb planter or ruthless arms smuggler' (*BF*, 129). The story of rape that Mikey hears is thus one that belongs to husband and son: as the 'bitter fruit' of rape, both male characters carry the 'shame' of 'mixed-blood'. In other words, the shame is displaced onto the figure of the rape victim-mother. Carrying to term and nurturing the 'bastard' child of rape constitutes an act of shameful complicity with white power: it is to acquiesce to the efforts of a dominant colonial power to 'penetrate' into the womb of a people. Meg Samuelson suggests that 'the narrative of incest that infiltrates the plot can partially be read within this emerging frame of complicity'.²⁴⁶ I would argue that this line of argument risks subsuming Lydia's voice entirely within a masculine discourse, instead of seeing her voice as a distinct challenge to a patriarchal discourse of shame and blood. When Lydia speaks to Silas of her rape, she says that she became her rapist's 'property' and that Silas was 'honour'-bound to avenge this assault upon 'your woman [. . .] your wife' (*BF*, 17). 'If you were a real man,' she confronts Silas, 'you would have killed him on the spot, right there in the mall, spatter his brains against a window, watch his blood running all over the floor' (*BF*, 17). By using the word 'honour', Lydia appears to speak within a discourse of shame: her rape is conceptualised as

²⁴⁶ Meg Samuelson, 'Speaking Rape "Like a Man": Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*' <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/religion/documents/ARISA/2004_AL4.pdf> [accessed 15 September 2011] (para. 9 of 12).

an affront to man's honour rather than as an assault on a woman's body. Lydia knows exactly what she is saying, however, as she makes it very clear that she is well aware that rape is all too often appropriated by men as something that has happened to *them*. This is made more obvious when Lydia says to Silas, 'You don't know about the pain. It's a memory to you, a wound to your ego, a theory' (*BF*, 14). Elaine Scarry observes that without visible markers, somebody else's pain remains to the outsider 'vaguely alarming yet unreal'.²⁴⁷ Lydia reacts to Silas's helplessness in the face of her renewed memories by dancing on glass to create a pain powerful enough to displace the 'deeper unfathomable agony' (*BF*, 21) of her psychological pain. Lydia's dance is both a way of communicating her pain to Silas, making it real, visible, and unavoidable, just as it is a way for her to (re)appropriate that pain for herself and wrest it away from the men who would claim it as their own.

The tree on Sethe's back is also a very visible marker of the pain that was inflicted on her at the hands of one of Schoolteacher's nephews at Sweet Home. She has never seen it—'and never will' (*B*, 18)—but it was described to her by the white girl who helped her deliver Denver. When Paul D asks her about it, Sethe tries to make him understand that it is not the beating that is so abhorrent to her, but the taking of her milk:

They used cowhide on you?

And they took my milk.

They beat you and you was pregnant?

And they took my milk. (*B*, 20)

Unlike the beating, the sexual assault on Sethe leaves no visible markers and is harder for Paul D to comprehend:

²⁴⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 4.

"Men don't know nothing much", said Paul D. [...] "but they do know a suckling can't be away from its mother for long."

Then they know what it's like to send your children off when your breasts are full.

We was talking 'bout a tree, Sethe. (*B*, 19)

Paul D understands a beating, can see the scars on Sethe's back, but has a harder time understanding the depth of anger and shame that she feels because someone took the milk meant for her baby, thereby compromising her position as a mother. For both Sethe and Lydia, then, it is impossible to separate the assault on their bodies from their maternal selves – the latter is always traumatically entangled with the former.

Amongst the effects of the insidious trauma of sexual assault depicted in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* is a feeling of losing ownership over one's own body, and by extension one's desire. For Sethe and Lydia, survival involves a recognition and reclaiming of the body as a source of agency and as the seat of desire. Sethe's decision to kill her child rather than have to return to a life of slavery is an act of willful rebellion. Whilst there is undoubtedly desperation in the choice, there is also control and determination evident in the act. If, as Hortense Spillers suggests, the central horror of slavery can be defined as 'a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire'²⁴⁸ then Sethe's act can be seen as an act of reclamation. In this sense, the flesh is not allowed to become an abstraction; if Sethe has been unable to lay claim to her own body up to this point, she *will* reclaim her daughter's. She will see her dead before she sees her 'dirtied so bad' she can't like herself anymore (*B*, 295). For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the

²⁴⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17.2 (1987), p. 67.

overarching horror of being raped and ‘dirtied’ by whites; even dying at the hands of one’s mother is better than rape.

Meg Samuelson suggests that *Bitter Fruit*’s miring in a shameful discourse of ‘blood’ threatens its otherwise salutary efforts to grapple with the limited discourses available in which to speak rape'.²⁴⁹ Whilst not entirely disagreeing with Samuelson, I would suggest that Dangor’s writing of rape serves to highlight the manner in which women—and more specifically mothers—as bearers of the wombs in which ‘blood mingles’ are precisely the means to circumvent a masculine discourse of blood. Lydia is well aware that within her she carries the child of a white man and rapist. But in an effort to reassert control over her own body, thereby wresting it away from a masculine discourse of blood, she refuses to focus on Du Boise’s whiteness (his white blood). It is the men in her life, Silas and Mikey, who continually frame Lydia’s rape in the language of a discourse of blood:

I am the child of some murderous white man, Mikey thinks, a boer, someone who worked for the old system, *was* the old system, in fact [...] Why think of the man as white, as a boer, there were many black men who worked for that system, and they too raped women, sowed their venomous seed in the wombs of their enemies?

Being fathered by a traitorous black man, that would have been different, poetic almost, some sort of salvation in ambiguity. (*BF*, 131)

It is telling that for Mikey, finding out that he is a product of rape is less traumatising than coming to terms with the realisation that he is born of rape *by a white man*. There is no salvation to be found in this knowledge. Notice, however, that in Lydia’s description of the rape, the word ‘white’ does not appear once:

²⁴⁹ Meg Samuelson, ‘Speaking Rape “Like a Man”’, para. 10 of 12.

Three nights ago, I was raped. By a policeman, in a veld, flung down on the grass [.] I will recover from the physical act of rape. We always do, women have the capacity to heal themselves. But I also know that I am pregnant. Inside of me is a rapist's seed. My child will be a child of rape. (*BF*, 126)

I debated with myself: I could end the pregnancy. Abortions could be bought, even then. But I was already beginning to separate the child in me from the father's ugly, fleshy features, his grunts, his groans. Must the one life be damned because of the other? (*BF*, 128)

Lydia is already able to recognise the life within her as something other than the child of a white man and rapist. She is beginning to take a measure of control over her own body and her own trauma.

Yet Lydia is still very scarred by the horror of her rape; the psychological violation of her womb with Du Boise's seed drives her 'to deny herself the reality of her body, its earth, its power to conceive' (*BF*, 119). Lydia's very sense of herself, and of her body as the seat of desire, are shattered by the rape. At the end of the novel, she has a sexual encounter with the young black Mozambican, João. Rather than seeing this act as a 'shameful' undoing of the narrative of sexual complicity with whiteness, I suggest that Lydia's action is not about whiteness, but is, again, about claiming authority over her own body and just as importantly, her own desire. In an earlier passage she ruminates about 'sleep[ing] with someone younger', someone who 'could offer their bodies unselfishly as her instrument of release' (*BF*, 248). This act is not about guilt, blood, or complicity; for Lydia, it is about taking control and 'tapping [...] the place in which she has imprisoned her sensuality' (*BF*, 248). The end result might be the 'death of her sexual being', (*BF*, 248) but this time, it will be her

choice. It is Silas who once again employs a discourse of blood when he thinks back to the encounter between Lydia and João, an encounter he witnessed from the doorway:

He was glad she had chosen a black man as her medium of expression [. . .]

God, he had to stop going on about ‘black this’ and ‘black that’. He was surprised by this preoccupation with race. [. . .] The kid who fucked my wife is Mozambican, the son of a diplomat [. . .] How could he hope to compete? [. . .]

Would he have been so philosophical if the man whom Lydia had enticed into an abandoned playroom was white? White men can’t fuck. Now white women on the other hand . . . (*BF*, 272-73)

Lydia is very aware that the idea that ‘only wombed beings can carry the dumb tragedy of history around with them’ is ‘macho bullshit’ (*BF*, 251). She understands that it is, in fact, non-wombed beings who have created and perpetuated such notions. In other words, she refuses to allow her womb to become contested terrain, the site from which the nation attempts to (re)construct itself. She struggles with the memory of her sexual assault, but she will not allow her very singular trauma to become fodder for a collective trauma based on her very personal experience.

The representation of silenced memory—of Sethe’s murder of Beloved, and Lydia’s rape—suggests that the silencing and suppression of traumatic memory take place for complex reasons, some of which are sociologically and interpersonally imposed. As noted previously, many trauma theorists, following Freud, emphasise the repression of trauma and its belated effects due to the unassimilability of the event when it occurs: the notion that ‘the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked

out, malfunction'.²⁵⁰ *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* suggest that the 'unassimilability of the event' is not always, or only, due to the 'malfunction' of the mind under severe trauma. Sethe understands what she has done, and why, when she murders her child, and Lydia registers her rape as a life-changing destructive event as it happens. These women feel unable to speak because of the people and the circumstances surrounding them. Their silence is, at least in part, the result of external circumstances that have made them wary of speaking trauma. Hence, it could be argued that they remain silent because of the lack of 'an addressable other' or an 'empathic listener'.²⁵¹ And yet this hesitation might very well represent something else: the conditional nature of community. In other words, the variability and unpredictable nature of multiple voices—and multiple silences—render a stable community untenable. Thus is produced a tentative community defined as:

a gift of the word without ever being assured of reception by the other, while, at the same time, only the other renders the request for speaking possible. . . To exist I am exposed to the other who possibly neglects me. And this possible denial makes me realize that I can't tremble alone . . .'²⁵²

Although Sethe and Lydia feel unable to speak their trauma, this does not then mean they are without community. For as Nancy reminds us: 'This is why speech—*including silence*—is not a *means* of communication but communication itself, an exposure . . .',²⁵³ or a condition of community. There is a silence, however, related to Sethe's killing of Beloved that must remain intact. Sethe must understand that in killing Beloved she has not put her in a 'safe'

²⁵⁰ Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 57.

²⁵¹ Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', p. 68.

²⁵² Ignas Devisch, 'A Trembling Voice in the Desert: Jean-Luc Nancy's Rethinking of the Space of the Political', *Cultural Values*, 4.2 (2000), p. 251.

²⁵³ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, pp. 30-31. The emphasis on 'including silence' is mine.

place at all, but instead has returned her to the limbo of the Middle Passage. But I suggest that she may never be able to understand or to assimilate that aspect of what she has done. Via that silence, Morrison exposes the reader to an insight that Sethe cannot be permitted if she is to survive her trauma. She must believe that she killed her daughter to save her, and the community's gathering around Sethe serves as a means to protect her from the realisation that Beloved has, in fact, been confined to a state of interminable waiting.

These works are further permeated by haunting rapes. The job of examining rape and creating new language in order to deconstruct the normal, deflate the myth and reveal the truth is a task for all writers. To take this a step further, I would now like to explore the discourse of rape as it relates to incest in these texts. In their depiction of the relationship between mother and child, *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* force us to think about Freud's notion of sexuality—specifically the development of the human psyche that is based on the seduction of the child by the mother—and the ways in which transgenerational trauma may begin with that first seduction. Those institutions that tore apart the mother-child relationship, in effect rendering motherhood a compromised process, also created diasporic subjects who in their continual striving to be at home turned inward only to realise that home had to be found somewhere else.

Incestuous Translation

[T]he racially fractured mother-child relationship is the site at which we glimpse the wounds of history.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen, 'Introduction: The Dream of a Common Language', in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian and Helene Moglen (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 13.

When viewed through a framework of racialised rape, the narrative of incest that infiltrates these works has much to tell us about the way in which motherhood (and the mother-child relationship) becomes a traumatic primal scene around which later traumas revolve. In *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*, Morrison and Dangor raise important questions about the significance of the incest motif in the culture and history of the American South and South Africa, respectively.²⁵⁵ What role does incest play in fiction from the American South? What about South African literature? By posing these questions, I do not mean to imply that all Southern writers utilise the incest motif in an identical manner, or that incest features identically in all South African fiction. Rather, I would suggest that the prevalence of incest in Southern fiction and its increasing occurrence in South African fiction has something important to tell us about the traumatic interaction among race, gender, family, region, and history in these two places.

Critics such as Hortense Spillers have noted that twentieth-century African-American writers have revealed a singular interest in the subject of incest, with Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, and Carolivia Herron all tackling the subject in their work.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, the incest theme figures prominently in Southern literature as a whole: it is certainly prevalent in William Faulkner's work, whilst Dorothy Allison is another writer of the region who has focused on the subject.²⁵⁷ The most commonly held view as to why Southerners and Southern writers are so preoccupied with

²⁵⁵ Faulkner also does this in *Absalom, Absalom!* more so than in any of his other works.

²⁵⁶ I refer to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Jones's *Corregidora*, Walker's *The Color Purple* and the story 'The Child Who Favored Daughter', in *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, by Alice Walker (New York and San Diego: Harcourt, 2003), pp. 35-46; and Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*. See also, Mako Yoshikawa, "A Kind of Family Feeling about Nancy": Race and the Hidden Threat of Incest in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*, ed., by Ann Romines (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), pp. 75-82.

²⁵⁷ Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Plume, 1992) and the story 'Don't Tell Me You Don't Know', in *Trash* (New York: Plume, 2002), pp. 93-108; William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* as well as *Absalom, Absalom!*.

incest is because of the connection between the taboos of incest and interracial sex and an anxiety about blood. In other words, a horror of miscegenation can trigger a romance with incest. Both Eric Sundquist and Richard King have explored how incest relates to miscegenation and how both relate to Southern history. Though specifically looking at Faulkner's work, their insights could equally apply to other Southern writers. Both see incest and miscegenation as bearing intrinsically opposed symbolic meanings—meanings that reconfigure in the course of Southern history into a complex interdependence with one another. In King's words: 'The taboo against miscegenation [is] the inverse of the incest taboo. This taboo provides the injunction to endogamy, the command to marry within one's group, in this case determined by the pseudo-biological categories of the two races. [. . .] The incest taboo forbids the identity relationship based upon repetition, while the prohibition of miscegenation forbids the relationship between the "different"'.²⁵⁸

In its Southern context, this intrinsic symbolic opposition undergoes a complex alteration. Prior to the Civil War, Sundquist argues, miscegenation received covert endorsement in the actions, if not the public statements, of slaveowners. But after the Emancipation Proclamation and from the end of the Civil War onward, hysteria over miscegenation dominates Southern racial attitudes. As Karl Zender points out, 'This hysteria intersects with the incest motif in a double way. On the one hand, nostalgic incest fantasies of the sort found in, [for example], Faulkner's early fiction are its logical outgrowth; they are an understandable if extreme response to its "injunction to endogamy", its yearning for an

²⁵⁸ Richard King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 126-27.

(imaginary) pre-Civil War state of racial purity'.²⁵⁹ Hence these fantasies become a vehicle in the reclamation of an original state—a mythic state of origin—that never really existed.

On the other hand, according to Zender, fear of miscegenation leads to a further nightmarish fear of an actual rise in the incidence of combined incest and miscegenation. In reality, in the post-Civil War South, miscegenational family ties were often a known but unacknowledged fact. As Sundquist says,

to a Southern imagination the emancipation of the slaves may be said ‘to have destroyed the mechanisms of control that were a barrier to incest and to have made possible, if not entirely likely, a further mixing, a “monstrous” violation of blood in which, because both black and white strains could be hidden from view, miscegenation and incest could indeed occur at once.’²⁶⁰

For John T. Irwin, the reigning psychoanalytic interpreter of the incest motif in Faulkner’s work, incest joins with doubling, repetition, and revenge to enact a doomed oedipal struggle against the priority of the father over the son and of the past over the present and the future. In its fullest extension, it expresses ‘the inability of the ego to break out of the circle of the self and of the individual to break out of the ring of the family’, and it becomes a symbol ‘of the state of the South after the Civil War, [...] of a region turned in upon itself’.²⁶¹ I find Irwin’s interpretation interesting for several reasons that directly apply to the characters in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*—especially the women. For Irwin, it isn’t blood

²⁵⁹ Karl F. Zender, *Faulkner and the Politics of Reading* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), pp. 19–20.

²⁶⁰ Eric Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 122; also see Zender, p. 20.

²⁶¹ John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 59. Also see, Joseph Allen Boone, ‘Creation by the Father’s Fiat: Paternal Narrative, Sexual Anxiety, and the Deauthorizing Designs of *Absalom, Absalom!*’, in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 199), pp. 1068–86.

and purity that drive incest; instead, incest is a manifestation of trauma involving family, region and history. In a similar vein, the incest at play in these two texts is not entangled in a discourse of blood, but rather is part of a politics of incest that is specifically associated with women and mothering in racially divided and patriarchal social orders like South Africa and the American South. What is more, Morrison and Dangor are part of a strong countervoice that has emerged in the last twenty to thirty years in the form of feminist critiques of male-centred developmental scenarios regarding incest. This countervoice seeks to recenter the story of incest from the point of view of the female rather than the male participant and to emphasise its costs over its putative benefits.²⁶² In *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*, Morrison and Dangor present a model for psychic development that replaces the male-centred oedipal model that many authors—Faulkner included—so exhaustively explore.

From the outset, it is evident that the relationship between mother and child in these texts is one of intensity and conflict. They relate to one another in an animalistic, visceral, and almost inhuman manner. For example, Beloved acts as an embodiment of uninhibited desire, projecting a ‘bottomless longing’ (*B*, 69) for love that places impossible demands upon the human body. She absorbs Denver’s devotion only to give her more strength for consuming Sethe’s love: ‘Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes’ (*B*, 68). Her appetite is an insatiable hunger for, and a ‘downright craving to know’ (*B*, 91), the life and love that was denied her. Beloved’s hunger and need are great enough to express the need of the whole race brought across the water by ‘the men without skin’ (*B*, 249); men who in their inhumanity separated men and women, parents and children, sisters and

²⁶² See Zender, p. 29. Zender’s understanding of the feminist critique of liberationist views on incest derives from Judith Lewis Herman (with Lisa Hirschman), *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), and Karen Meiselman, *Incest* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978).

brothers, and chained the living to the dead.²⁶³ Beloved's return is also a very specific return to the mother, however, one of the child's primary sources of sustenance, reference, and identification. She returns with the demands of the nursing child, thirsting for her mother's milk and hungering for Sethe's body. Like a vampire, she sucks out Sethe's vitality, fattening on her mother's futile attempts to 'make her understand', to explain and justify the necessity of murdering her own child to save her from the murder of slavery.²⁶⁴

Similarly, the effects of trauma on Lydia also manifest themselves viscerally in relation to her offspring. She is initially unable to dissociate her newborn child from her rapist and thinks she can smell Du Boise on Mikey: the 'stench, the premature decaying of a man who harboured some dreaded disease. A kind of cancer, she thought, something that would one day eat away at his core' (*BF*, 120). Mikey and his mother relate to one another via their sense of smell, unlike Silas who is 'capable of crossing emotional divides only through touch' (*BF*, 143). Mikey registers his changing relationship with his mother via the odors she emits. No longer the little boy who 'snuggled into her [...] feeding on her breasts [...] seeking love' (*BF*, 139), he is now almost an adult who no longer thinks of his mother as 'Mama' with 'her motherly smells, gentle, milky, a blur of undefined generosity' (*BF*, 139). She has become something sharp with 'a sweetness of oranges, tangerines [...] citrus!' Mikey has always been able to sense his mother's whereabouts as well as her moods—her very being—via his nose. As a child he could 'trac[e] her movements along the passages of

²⁶³ Vanessa Dickerson suggests that Beloved's hunger is diasporic in its scope, intensity and ability to express the need of the whole race. See Vanessa D. Dickerson, 'Summoning Somebody: The Flesh Made Word in Toni Morrison's Fiction', in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, ed. by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 210.

²⁶⁴ Terry Otten argues that the 'moral authority' of the novel 'resides less in a revelation of the obvious horrors of slavery than in a revelation of slavery's nefarious ability to invert moral categories and behavior and to impose tragic choice'; Terry Otten, *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), pp. 82-83.

the dark and narrow houses they lived in' whilst noting 'his father's discomfort and his grandmother Agnes's horror when he and his mother sniffed at each other, affectionately, with the innocence of animals' (*BF*, 140). Mikey had such a connection with his mother, he 'had been able once to read her mood long before she entered his room' (*BF*, 140). Similarly, Lydia's connection with Mikey was such that she could always tell when he had 'been in contact with a "foreign" presence'; she knew 'when someone other than his father had lifted him from his cot and held him to their chest' (*BF*, 142).

Yet there is a point when these relationships—Sethe and Beloved's, and Lydia and Mikey's—bump up against the incest taboo. The incestual encounter between mother and child is, however, played out somewhat differently in the two texts. In 'Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*', David Lawrence points out that Beloved's narcissism permits her to 'seduce' her mother in the Clearing, 'an impulsive sensuality that likely derives from her memory of breastfeeding'.²⁶⁵ Here, though, the libidinal element in normal breastfeeding becomes dominant, as Sethe enters a sort of trance and finds herself uncomfortably forced against the wall of the incest taboo: 'You too old for that' (*B*, 115). Yet this is not about sex or even hate; it is about love. Beloved recognises no social bounds, and lacks a socially circumscribed identity. Her effort to find 'the join' with Sethe is an attempt to escape the 'dark place' (*B*, 251-52), and 'take on a concrete form that gives life to the fragmented memories, word-pictures, and sensations, articulated without clearly established frames of reference—inside and outside, past and present, cause and effect—by which she defines herself'.²⁶⁶ But even after she assumes physical form, she is unable to obscure the boundary between her and her mother; Beloved's image of her mother's face—

²⁶⁵ David Lawrence, 'Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*', in *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by David Middleton (New York, Garland: 2000), p. 239.

²⁶⁶ Lawrence, pp. 239-40.

'She smiles at me and it is my own face smiling' (*B*, 254)—suggests that she is unable to see herself as distinct from her mother. Sethe gives Beloved shape and keeps her from disappearing.

When Lydia returns from the hospital, Mikey attempts to comfort her and defuse her anger at the knowledge that he has been with Silas's friend, Kate. He places his head in her lap and again, smells her anger: 'Mama's smell is so sharp it shoots up into his nostrils, like the menthol spray he uses when he can't breathe. But it is a different smell, heavy, and makes him feel drunk' (*BF*, 143). It is here that a subtle shift in their relationship occurs, 'as he detects, for the first time, a different interpretation – inside his body – of the quality of Mama's smell' (*BF*, 144). Lydia also feels the shift and 'is afraid of what she may do if she moves' (*BF*, 144). When they part

there is an acknowledgement, for the first time, of a conspiracy between them, shapeless and undefined, the shadows of two complete strangers cast in their images, shadows they are unlikely ever to explore with words, and so to reveal their cruel meaning. (*BF*, 144)

The brief encounter between Lydia and Mikey, mother and son, consists solely of a kiss, 'her lips on Mikey's lips, her tongue touching, just touching, the wetness of his mouth' (*BF*, 162). Lydia struggles with her actions and wonders at her intent: 'She kissed her son carnally, *she thinks*, and he did not respond. *Did* she then kiss him with carnal intent? This objectified language helps' (*BF*, 166). The reader is left to wonder if, in fact, Lydia imagined the encounter. If 'Mikey walked away as if nothing had happened,' is that because 'the trauma has induced an amnesia in him,' (*BF*, 167) or is it possibly because there was no incestual encounter to begin with—at least not in Mikey's eyes?

These encounters between mother and child must be viewed through the framework of the trauma that preceded them—specifically rape and sexual assault as political tools enacted in the name of institutional racism. Sethe, like all slave mothers, cannot claim her children. During a brief period of heroic escape, Sethe's maternal desire is 'narrativized in terms perfectly inside the dominant conventions of motherhood',²⁶⁷ and we as readers have sympathy with her as a female subject and victim. But the impossibility of her desire is quickly reaffirmed when the legal owner of both Sethe and her children comes to claim his property. What Sethe does next—attempting to murder her own children—is a direct consequence of the trauma to which she has been subjected prior to her escape. Her subsequent relationship with Beloved as ghost is then framed around that trauma. Unlike Sethe, Lydia is able to lay claim to her child and does not necessarily fear that he will be taken from her. Nevertheless, her love for Mikey is entangled with the memory of the act of brutality by which he was conceived.

We can also gain insight into the prevalence of incest in Southern fiction and the increase of the motif in South African novels by exploring certain aspects of trauma theory closed down by Freud's early turn from the seduction theory. Laplanche undertook an elaboration on his understanding of what he called Freud's 'special seduction theory' in a 'general seduction theory', which examines the origins of the human psyche in the 'implantation of the message of the other'. In effect, Laplanche broadened the foundations of Freud's seduction theory, which traced adult neurosis back to early childhood molestation, to include the primacy of the other's enigmatic message and the theory of

²⁶⁷ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 65.

repression as a partial failure to translate this message.²⁶⁸ Laplanche places trauma squarely at the centre of the psychoanalytic enterprise, and he does so by revising our sense of the foundations of Freud's legacy. There is for Laplanche an experience that could be said to be transcultural or universal in the human condition, and that is the uneven relationship of child to caretaker through which each of us must pass in order to begin to make sense of the world as adults. At the centre of Laplanche's theory is a focus on translation—that is, the translation of an 'enigmatic message' passed from adult to child.²⁶⁹ So, for Laplanche, the problem (of the other) is strictly bound to the fact that the small human being has no unconscious,²⁷⁰ and he/she is confronted with messages invaded by the unconscious of the other—the parent/caretaker. The way of coping with this strangeness is to build an ego.²⁷¹ This 'primal seduction'—or what Laplanche calls the inaugural 'communication situation,' so unevenly structured between adult and child—contributes to the formation of the unconscious in the child and forms a type of motor for all future drives to translate experience into meaning. All of this entails a recognition that we are being propelled into our future by the often inadequate translations or answers that we created for the enigmatic situation in which we found ourselves.²⁷²

²⁶⁸ Laplanche is considering the temporal structure of trauma in Freud's work and its significance for Freud's notion of sexuality. Laplanche suggests that Freud's theory does not provide a simple locating of external reality in relation to the human psyche. Rather, his temporal reading of seduction trauma in Freud's early work suggests a dislocating of any single traumatic 'event' in favour of the notion that there are always at least two scenes that constitute a traumatic 'event'. In other words, the traumatic 'event' is defined by a temporal structure.

²⁶⁹ Laplanche suggests that the messages are enigmatic because they are strange to themselves. That is, if the other was not him/herself invaded by his/her own other, his internal other, that is, the unconscious, the messages wouldn't be strange and enigmatic.

²⁷⁰ Laplanche makes this claim that the child has no unconscious. I would suggest that the unconscious is something that can be inferred or speculated on, but I am not certain that it can be known in a positive sense.

²⁷¹ It is in relation to the seduction theory that the subject builds himself as an individual. He Ptolemites himself, being at the very beginning Copernican, that is, circulating around the other's message. He has to internalise this, and he builds an inside in order to internalise. See Laplanche, 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution', in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 52-83.

²⁷² See Zwarg, p. 8.

Embedded in this notion of a primal seduction, or inaugural communication situation, is Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit*. Laplanche's translation of *Nachträglichkeit* as 'afterwardsness' (instead of the usual 'belatedness') is apposite for this discussion because of its focus on the play of 'deceit' between two scenes that constitute a traumatic event. Laplanche describes two directions in afterwardsness: the phrase 'deferred action' describes one direction, and the phrase 'after the event' describes the other direction. The former is associated with a deterministic theory of action in which the first event determines the second event, whilst the latter can be viewed through a hermeneutic theory in which the second event projects, retroactively, what came before.²⁷³ Afterwardsness is important for this discussion, for according to Laplanche, there are always at least two scenes that constitute a traumatic event, and the trauma is never locatable in either scene alone but in 'the play of "deceit" producing a kind of seesaw effect between the two events'.²⁷⁴ Importantly, Laplanche argues that if you don't have in mind the external person, that is, the wet nurse, the stranger, and the strangeness of the other—you cannot grasp both directions implicit in afterwardsness.²⁷⁵ Yet Laplanche also argues that by introducing the mother (or the other, the wet nurse) into the temporal scheme of trauma, the reality of trauma, as a temporal structure, can no longer be thought of in terms of a dual model:

²⁷³ Jean Laplanche, 'Notes on Afterwardsness', in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. by John Fletcher (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 260-65.

²⁷⁴ Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 41.

²⁷⁵ Jean Laplanche, 'An Interview with Jean Laplanche', by Cathy Caruth, 2001 <<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt>> [accessed 15 September 2011] (para. 17 of 142).

If one introduces a third term into this scene—that is, the nurse and her own sexuality—which is only at best vaguely sensed by the baby—then it is no longer possible to consider afterwardsness in dual terms.²⁷⁶

In essence, what Laplanche is saying is that there is not a passage of temporality from the adult to the child. Rather, there is a concentration in something that is not temporal—something extracted from temporality—that is, the compromised message of the other. In this sense, then, the temporality of afterwardsness develops in the child, but the message of the mother itself is not temporal. It is rather atemporal, simultaneous. It is a simultaneity of the message which, at the same time, and at the same moment—in the same message—is self-preservative, and sexual. The simultaneity of the traumatic message is compromised by sexuality.²⁷⁷ After receiving the enigmatic message as something simultaneous, from then on, according to Laplanche, the child develops a temporal dialectic that is also a traumatic dialectic, first receiving the message, and then re-interpreting it in a second moment. Laplanche labels this message dialectical because of the complex play between the external and the internal: the implantation of something from outside, and the re-investing or re-interpreting of the experience (or the memory of it) in a second moment. Also, inherent in a traumatic dialectic is a conversion of the enigmatic message from one of simultaneity to one of temporality. The incestuous encounter in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* is an attempt to find a way back to that primal seduction, or a way back to the atemporal and simultaneous message of the mother.

²⁷⁶ Jean Laplanche, *Seduction, Translation, Drives*. Quoted from ‘An Interview with Jean Laplanche’, by Cathy Caruth.

²⁷⁷ Laplanche argues, ‘When sexuality has been repressed, let’s say, in the adult, it becomes unconscious, and in the unconscious there is no temporality. So I would say there is something that is extracted from temporality’. From ‘An Interview with Jean Laplanche’, by Cathy Caruth.

In an interesting passage that not only describes how the memory of being raped overshadows Lydia's sexuality, but also introduces a temporal structure to Lydia's relationships, Mikey describes his mother's relationship with Silas:

When Mama touched Silas (still his father, in Mikey's mind), when she made love to him, hugged him, all those gestures immediately belonged to the past. It was as if she were living her life so that the seconds could speed up, and her time with his father could be brought to an end sooner. No, it was not a death wish or a desire to flee from her husband, it was a race against something unseen that seemed to pursue her whenever she was close to him. (*BF*, 141)

His own relationship with his mother, on the other hand, also contains a temporal element, but it is one of presence and simultaneity:

When Mama touches Mikey, time changes to the present. He experiences what he describes (with growing intellectualism) as a 'nowness'. Time slows down, he feels its every movement. This immediacy can cause great joy and great pain. It makes it impossible for him to escape from his mother, or want to escape from her. (*BF*, 141)

This desire for nowness—this discourse of nowness and presence—is what drives mother-child incest in both works. For Lydia who has 'den[ied] herself the reality of her body, its earth, its power to conceive' (*BF*, 119), and for Sethe who desires 'a little space, [.] a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness' (*B*, 21) so that she might 'feel the hurt her back ought to' (*B*, 21), *now* offers the opportunity to really feel that which has been numbed.²⁷⁸ Mikey and Beloved represent the reality of rape for Lydia and Sethe

²⁷⁸ At one point Beloved says, 'All of it is now it is always now' (*B*, 248): the unnumbered losses of slavery are collected in Beloved, in a temporal space outside the linear time of history.

respectively. There is a paradoxical desire for their presence, even I might go so far to say, their incorporation, so that the reality of the rape act doesn't disappear. Lydia and Sethe may not be able to (or do not wish to) speak of their trauma, but that is not the same thing as not wanting their pain acknowledged. Mikey and Beloved become, in a sense, the 'voice' of rape.

As traumatised subjects who suffered the trauma of rape as well as racism, Sethe and Lydia would have experienced motherhood as an essentially conflicted process. Furthermore, because of the distorted and ambivalent nature of motherhood in the segregated South and apartheid South Africa, one has to imagine that any experience of a primal scene of seduction between mother and child would almost always have been a compromised one. It certainly would have been for Sethe and Lydia. Hence the initial enigmatic message passed from mother to child would have contained elements of that conflict and ambiguity. In other words, the unconscious sexual repression in the mother would have been passed on as a compromised message to the child. From then on, the child develops a temporal (traumatic) dialectic, first receiving the message, and then reinterpreting it in a second moment.

I would venture to suggest that the incestual encounter between mother and child in these literary texts does two things: first, it expresses a desire to return to an earlier moment of trauma—in this case the scene of primal seduction—and second, it attempts to transform it. I would add that this desire to return to the scene of the primal seduction is enacted by both mother and child. It is in the effort to *transform* an earlier moment of trauma that these texts reveal the impact of their particular historical moments. If Laplanche posits the idea of a normative, originary trauma as always already defining the

mother-child relationship, the fact that these relationships are comprised as a result of the racialised violence of slavery and apartheid changes the nature of that originary (more natural) trauma. For Sethe, her role as mother to Beloved was suddenly and violently ended just as Beloved's childhood—her role as child—was also put to an end. The return of Beloved and the subsequent relationship that develops between mother and child is both a resuming of their life before the infanticide as well as a role reversal. As their relationship progresses, Sethe also becomes a daughter, 'which is what [she] wanted to be and would have been if [her] ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her' (*B*, 240). What we see, in effect, is a return to the scene of the primal seduction, but this time it is the child seducing the mother.

The institutions of slavery and apartheid deny both Sethe and Lydia their mothering and end up destroying their chance for maternal bonding. Hence the incestual encounter can also be viewed as an attempt to stop time, to stop the traumatic dialectic from developing any further, thereby (re)enacting a lost sense of oneness between mother and child. We certainly see this desire for oneness in Beloved's devouring of Sethe, in her wish to merge and join with her mother, but we are also able to see it somewhat differently in Lydia and Mikey's relationship. Lydia turns to Mikey for comfort after the re-appearance of Du Boise in their lives and after Mikey learns of his true parentage. Throughout his life, Mikey has never been only Lydia's; he has also always been Du Boise's, even if never openly acknowledged by Lydia (though she does confide the knowledge to her journal). In some sense, Mikey is not only Lydia's child, but he is also South Africa's child. He is a child with an uninvited birthright, born out of (and into) the inhumanity of the apartheid state: one who comes to realise that he has no idea who he is or where he belongs. In that sense, Lydia's

entire relationship with her son can be seen as an ongoing seduction aimed to keep him to herself, away from Du Boise and the knowledge that he is a product of rape, and even away from South Africa. Lydia's seduction of Mikey is an attempt to hold on to her own 'best thing', thereby enacting an existence separate from a South Africa where even her best thing is subject to the shame of having inherited the unwanted genes of the white coloniser. In the end it is impossible for Sethe and Lydia to live 'outside' of their respective societies, and impossible to protect their children from the dehumanising messages of others. The narrative of their lives is reduced to one of pain and loss. Perhaps then, when Morrison writes in the concluding lines of *Beloved*, that 'This is not a story to pass on' (B, 324), she is not only referring to Beloved's return as ghost, as well as the horrors of slavery and the Middle Passage; perhaps she also has in mind the unconscious, nonverbal, enigmatic messages that move between mother and child.

At the end of the sections expressing the 'unspeakable thoughts, unspoken' of 'the women of 124' (B, 235), the voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved merge into a single chorus that effaces individual identity in a possessive love sounded by the refrain:

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine. (B, 256)

The fusion of identity expressed in this refrain can only be destructive, as Sethe and Denver lose themselves in the overpowering 'mine' asserted by Beloved. David Lawrence argues that 'in her insistence on absolute possession of her mother, Beloved resurrects the slavemaster's monopoly over both word and body, enforcing the internalized enslavement

that has become a legacy of institutionalized slavery'.²⁷⁹ Whilst I don't disagree with such a reading, I would also argue that such possessiveness also exemplifies the incestuous relationship between mother and child in both Morrison's and Dangor's works. You are *mine*, you do not belong to history, you are not a metaphor or a symbol, you are mine. There is a destructive element to Lydia and Mikey's relationship, just as there is to Sethe and Beloved's. This possessive turning inwards suggests an unconscious desire to return to the scene of the primal seduction between mother and child. It is perhaps even an enacting of a different aspect of temporality—one of retranslating one's own fate: of retranslating what's coming to this fate from the message of the other. In that sense, then, it is enacting a departure as simultaneously a striving to be at home.

At the end of *Beloved*, the community returns to the scene of their earlier failure to warn Sethe of Schoolteacher's approach. This time, in lieu of silence, the women respond to Sethe's need with a group prayer that turns into an intriguing quest for redemption. Approaching 124 Bluestone, the women 'stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like' (*B*, 305). I agree with Cynthia Dobbs when she suggests that this prayer that becomes a 'communal, ineffable "sound" [...] points to the insufficiency of conventional language and posits a certain nonlinguistic code as a primary mode of communication'.²⁸⁰ Morrison is pointing to a sort of pre-linguistic unity, evincing a longing for a lost moment of wholeness. It is this lost moment of wholeness that the incestuous encounter also attempts to recover; a moment before the passing of the enigmatic message from mother to child—a moment before the realisation of a temporal

²⁷⁹ Lawrence, p. 240.

²⁸⁰ Cynthia Dobbs, 'Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited, *African American Review*, 32.4 (1998), pp. 566-67.

and traumatic dialectic. As Dobbs points out, Morrison ‘thus employs a modernist, psychoanalytic “repetition-with-a-difference”, having her characters inevitably return to an earlier moment of trauma and attempt to transform it’.²⁸¹ Beloved’s devouring of Sethe, and Lydia’s turning to Mikey, can be viewed as an attempt not simply to transcend trauma, but to transform and (re)temporalise it.

The problem is that this longing for a lost moment of wholeness, whether enacted via the incestuous encounter or the actions of a gathering community, cannot succeed—at least not entirely—for there is no such lost moment to recover. Much like the nostalgic drive for Nancy’s ‘original community’ this attempt to recover a harmonious and intimate fullness that has somehow vanished over time is destined to fail because such unity is a myth. That is not to suggest the impossibility of resurrecting something else in its stead, but it won’t—can’t—be a lost moment of wholeness that never existed in the first place. Thus, although the exorcism performed for Sethe by the community of women is an act of agency—an attempted retemporalisation—in line with the narrative, and whilst Beloved’s devouring of Sethe is also an act of agency—that which must be halted for the narrative to proceed, neither endeavours are destined to succeed in recovering a lost mythic unity. Lydia’s turning to Mikey as an act of retemporalisation has little narrative consequence, although it does result in (or coincide with) a shift in Mikey’s temporality. He begins to ‘define’ himself as Michael and ‘lives only in the future’ (*BF*, 167) instead of in the nowness that had previously defined his relationship with his mother.

In *Beloved*, Morrison ‘insists on the impossibility of judging an action without reference to the terms of its enactment—the wrongness of assuming a transhistorical ethic

²⁸¹ Dobbs, p. 567.

outside a particular historical moment'.²⁸² And in *Bitter Fruit*, Dangor's use of free indirect discourse inhibits the reader from drawing simplified conclusions about trauma in South Africa. 'Dangor narrates a complex and nuanced alternative to dominant understandings of South Africa, moving away from a bifurcated logic of black and white, good and bad, past and present, into a byzantine and intricate conception of South African culture'.²⁸³ By reading these texts together, we are left to consider what happens when women feel that they have nowhere to turn—not to family, community or country. We are troubled by the 'sight' of the violence enacted on the female racialised body from both within the spaces of interiority (language, the psyche, the family, and all the domains of sexuality and privacy) and without (in these stories both by slaveowners, police, and by neighbours and friends). And we are encouraged to consider what an ethical representation of this body might look like—'one that would not seek to penetrate the sense of its subject from an external position of authority, but rather to open representation as a question by sliding across the surface of sense'.²⁸⁴

The opening sentence of *Bitter Fruit* implies the ubiquity of apartheid violence—the 'inevitability' of meeting an abuser from the past: 'It was inevitable. One day Silas would run into someone from the past, someone who had been in a position of power and abused it' (BF, 3). Sethe conveys a similar concept of inevitability when she explains to Denver her notion of rememory. The inevitability of bumping up against someone else's rememory – the fact that nothing ever goes away:

²⁸² Rushdy, p. 577.

²⁸³ Ronit Frenkel, 'Performing Race, Reconsidering History: Achmat Dangor's Recent Fiction', *Research in African Literatures*, 39.1 (2008), p. 150.

²⁸⁴ Douglas Morrey, 'Open Wounds: Body and Image in Jean-Luc Nancy and Claire Denis', *Film-Philosophy*, 12.1 (2008), p. 30.

if a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory but out there, in the world . . . and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (*B*, 43-44)

Given the omnipresence of these violent traumatic memories, there is a sense that the only way forward is to engage with them, and to enact a form of community through a letting go or departure. Such a departure might look like movement towards a more traditional notion of community, or it might expose the limits (but not the reality) of a community without unity.

Departures

It is against two different departures and histories of the ‘emancipated’ subject that we can inquire into the kind of history Caruth has in mind when she says that ‘history’ implicates us in each other’s traumas: ‘history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own [. . .] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas’.²⁸⁵ On one reading, we could say that Caruth could not mean a shared past. African-Americans and (black or coloured) South Africans may have experienced histories of racial oppression that have certain structural resemblances, but this is not to suggest that these histories are identical. The coincidences between these histories and the traumatic events they register are due to extrinsic reasons, to colonialism or racism, for example. How, then, do we account for the historicity of racial oppression (how do we account for the absence of humanity discussed in the introduction to this project?) that gives rise to such structural resemblances?

²⁸⁵ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 24.

A possible answer would outline the history of trauma, enslavement, and persecution. It might be called a history of traumatic departures. Such a history would only belatedly constitute a possibility of mutual identification. In this sense, a shared history would come after the fact of trauma (much like the shared trauma in Glissant's Caribbean community), and would be a history that is yet to be known. A history that neither Sethe nor Lydia would have, since for both, there is no entity to protect their humanity. We could then say that their 'histories', both psychical and political, are in the future, yet to come, whence—in the future—they will have been recognised.²⁸⁶

For Caruth, the subject in or of trauma is culturally and politically a diasporic subject, *en route* toward subjectivity—a subject continually in a state of departure. She suggests that 'trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves'.²⁸⁷ By paying attention to our own internal 'departures' (by which she appears to mean traumas—those spots in our own lives that we cannot know), we are then purportedly better able to empathise with others. Caruth does not, however, explain how we are to access those encapsulated memories in order to use them to such an end. Listening through those departures that we have taken from ourselves takes on a certain urgency when those departures involve a child of trauma—specifically one's own child. If trauma is both a temporality (of afterwardsness) and the foundation of subjectivity (constituted by an encounter with the strangeness of the

²⁸⁶ It is fair to say that in post-apartheid South Africa Lydia would have been 'recognised' to a much greater degree than would Sethe in the years immediately following the American Civil War. Yet, I would suggest that as victimised women of colour in both societies, they would not have been recognised to the same degree as white men (and coloured men for that matter) and women. A similar argument is examined in Ramadanovic who also cites Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, and Michael P. Steinberg's 'Cultural History and Cultural Studies'. All three writers consider the possibility of a shared history between African Americans and Jews as they treat traumatic aspects of their pasts.

²⁸⁷ Caruth, 'Introduction', in *Trauma: Explorations In Memory*, p. 11.

other, as Jean Laplanche argues), then the maternal relationships depicted in *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* unsettle current thinking about traumatic events and traumatised subjects. How does one listen through one's internal departures if trauma is interconnected with love for one's child? What if, unlike conventional notions of trauma that emphasise latency and unassimilability, maternal trauma is the antithesis: a trauma of presence, punctuality and closeness? Perhaps, then, the mother-child relationship as depicted in these works also represents an attempt to somehow gain a certain type of freedom: the freedom to imagine and live narratives not of coherence, necessarily, but of continuity.

Beloved and *Bitter Fruit* are difficult texts precisely in the way they conflate those traumas that are not 'outside the range' of human experience, the traumas of subject formation, and the violence of particular histories. The mother-child relationship—in the context of these novels always entangled by its relationship to patriarchal oppression and racial and class domination—can never be separated from its own historicity. If the novel of disrupted domesticity can often be read as an allegory of political anxiety, *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* trouble the family at its roots. In other words, they implicitly suggest that family harmony is never possible. For Sethe and Lydia, the only way for them to forge a future is to enact a literal departure from their children and from motherhood.

Sethe resolutely refuses to run from Beloved and the spiteful, haunting 124 Bluestone Road. She insists to Paul D, that she will not leave: 'No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth' (B, 18). Yet, in the end, for Sethe to go on with her life, if she is resolute in not wanting to leave, then it is Beloved who must go. She is only able to look to 'some kind of tomorrow' (B, 322) when Beloved departs.

Similarly, Lydia must leave Mikey and her life with Silas to find the freedom she so desperately seeks. She must leave the burden of motherhood behind her:

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 [. . .] (*BF*, 281)

We come to realise that the ‘bitter fruit’ of the novel’s title not only reflects the child born from rape and the act of revenge he comes to perform. It also represents the woman and mother who smells of the sharp sweetness of oranges and tangerines; the mother who can no longer bear the burden of motherhood as its weight has become too great, too bitter. She has come to realise just what Sethe realises in one lucid moment, ‘Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer’ (*B*, 155). Perhaps in the end, Lydia’s desire for Mikey was nothing more than a desire to lay down the burden of motherhood, if only for an instant. Perhaps she sought to sabotage her own future as a mother, thereby forcing his departure as well.

What are we to make of this matricide, this mother-killing? Are Morrison and Dangor suggesting that the only way one can overcome trauma is through maternal separation? After successfully getting rid of mother figures, these texts never do manage to get rid of desire for the mother. If the mother’s body is the site of history, it is also the trace of an unbearable past. The mother’s refusal to be buried might then be read as a resistance to historic erasure and a reclaiming of the self.

At the end of *Bitter Fruit*, we see Mikey seeking retribution for the rape of his mother by going in murderous search for his biological father, hence enacting a heartbreakingly repetitive repetition of trauma. On the other hand, Morrison enacts a repetition of

trauma with a difference when at the conclusion of *Beloved*, we see the women of the community conducting a ritual ‘clearing’ that allows Sethe to go after the white man who threatens her child rather than going after her own children. Instigated by Denver who realises that to save her mother and herself, she is going to ‘have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world [. . .] and go ask somebody for help’ (*B*, 286), this clearing opens up a space for healing. As Denver gets ready to make her own departure, she thinks:

Out there where there were places in which things so bad happened that when you went near them it would happen again. Like Sweet Home where time didn’t pass and where, like her mother said, the bad was waiting for her as well. [. . .] What was more—much more—out there were whitepeople and how could you tell about them? [. . .] Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did. (*B*, 286-87)

Denver hesitates to leave the porch and then suddenly hears Baby Suggs laugh as she asks her why she can’t walk down the steps. Denver responds:

“But you said there was no defense.”

“There ain’t.”

“Then what do I do?”

“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (*B*, 288)

And Denver does, in fact, go on. She leaves the confines of her home and ventures out into the larger community seeking help for her mother.

Elleke Boehmer observes that there are ‘those among the once-colonised for whom the silences of history have not ended’.²⁸⁸ Caruth suggests that these traumatic histories and our implication in each other’s experiences mark the moment when ‘we’—a diasporic, entangled ‘we’—comes into being.²⁸⁹ This community is provisional, however, and cannot fully experience its togetherness or its identity. This is so not only because of the nature of history, but because, to paraphrase Nancy, a traumatic event serves not only to form a community, but to interrupt it as well. In *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit*, community is enacted through departure, but this movement is not identically situated in the two texts. Denver must depart her home to search for, and subsequently embrace, a more traditional notion of community and communion. Lydia’s departure, on the other hand, appears to be an exodus away from any form of community whatsoever. But I suggest that this is not the case. If Lydia (like Sethe and Dulcie) is representative of the nation violated by history, the conclusion of the novel is more hopeful than might be initially determined. She asserts her autonomy and in her departure, exposes the limits and the ‘yielding’ of community. Or as Nancy says,

The community that becomes *a single* thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader . . .) necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is made of what retreats from it . . . The retreat opens, and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-other to which we are exposed.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, p. 132.

²⁸⁹ See Ramadanovic, p. 58.

²⁹⁰ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxix.

In a very real way, Lydia's retreat is a refusal to be part of a South African (TRC) narrative that sought to 'bring about a transcendence of the fragmented body of the South African body politic and, as a logical consequence, the attainment of a unified humanity, conceived of as both the individual made whole and the nation reconciled in unity'.²⁹¹ Her departure and her silence interrupt such a narrative and desire for a unified community. In other words, she will not allow her personal trauma to become part of a national narrative. And yet, if, as Nancy suggests, 'Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated',²⁹² the question remains, can Lydia still experience this being-in-common even as she enacts a departure from home? She can if we accept that communion is not analogous to being-in-common:

Being *in* common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in* common means, to the contrary, *no longer having in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) "lack of identity".²⁹³

In her retreat, Lydia gives up her identity as mother, resists signification and calls into question the notion of a unified South African community. Nancy reminds us that this view that community cannot be presupposed, only exposed, is undoubtedly not easy to think. It is perhaps even 'inaccessible (inaccessible without the being-in-common of thinking, without the sharing of reading, without the politics within which all writing and reading are

²⁹¹ Lara Buxbaum, 'Remembering the Self: Fragmented Bodies, Fragmented Narratives in Marlène van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat*', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 29.2 (2013), p. 84.

²⁹² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxvii.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii

inscribed)',²⁹⁴ and yet it forms a point of essential convergence and solidarity when thinking and writing community.

There is a type of freedom in evidence in Lydia's and even in Sethe's departures. A freedom to choose, certainly, but also a freedom more intimately connected to the being-in-common of community. Rather than a definable characteristic that one can possess, this type of freedom resides in the 'inability to reduce people to a defining (set of) characteristic(s), to a signification'.²⁹⁵ In Nancy's terms, community is the mutual exposure of a singularity's freedom to the freedom of other individuals (singularities), and in this relationship that resists signification, the communal bond is formed. Freedom in this sense is not the common substance that defines the nature of community; rather it is precisely the resistance to the kinds of identities of which common substances are made.²⁹⁶ Lydia resists signification and her departure from home and from motherhood can be viewed as an exposure of that freedom. Sethe also resists signification in her traumatic departure from motherhood (in killing her daughter), and though it could certainly be argued that it was not her choice to make, her refusal to allow her child to live the life of a slave is also an expression of a certain type of freedom. Initially that freedom was not recognised (or shared) by the broader community, but Denver's departure from the confines of her home begins to change that sentiment. Community then becomes a dynamic movement of sharing (being divided from and joined with others), instead of a collection of already constituted subjects owning a common substance. Morrison depicts this dynamic

²⁹⁴ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. xxxix.

²⁹⁵ Todd May, 'From Communal Difference to Communal Holism', in *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1997), p. 37.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

movement of sharing in a very literal sense when the neighbours converge on 124 to help Sethe and her family.

Perhaps in reading these two texts together we are able to gain insight into two different ways to view Nancy's notion of community: one evident in the manner in which Denver departs home *towards* community, the other via Lydia's departure from home as an exposure of the *limits* of community. And yet in both cases, we are reminded, 'That we are . . . always in-common through the act of sharing a world, a spacing in-common in which we are thrown. . . this is the horizon out of which we have to think the question of community'.²⁹⁷ These texts also remind us that the community in question may be large or small, contained in a specific region, or dispersed across say, the American South and South Africa. The community may represent a diaspora of mothers who via their very singular traumas remind us that, in some instances, working through trauma requires enacting a departure from those who have provided one with an identity—for example, as mother. As novels that are focused on departures and returns set against a backdrop of home, rape and incest, *Beloved* and *Bitter Fruit* seem to try and answer Caruth's 'urgent' question: 'Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it'?²⁹⁸ Regardless of the answer, this unfinished becoming, surviving and being with others—this sharing of a history of traumatic departures—serves to remind us of our humanity and our mortality.

²⁹⁷ Devisch, 'A Trembling Voice in the Desert', p. 246.

²⁹⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.7.

Chapter Three

The Coming Community in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Marlène van Niekerk's *Triomf*

Things come apart so easily when they have been held together with lies.²⁹⁹

--Dorothy Allison

Class has come to replace race.³⁰⁰

--Zoë Wicomb

The epigraph to Dorothy Allison's 1992 novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* reads: 'People pay for what they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it simply: by the lives they lead'.³⁰¹ James Baldwin's quote would seem to have been written for the protagonists of the two works examined in this chapter. The Boatwrights in Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and the Benades in Marlène van Niekerk's 1994 novel, *Triomf*, emerge as partly self-destroying and partly casualties of history, and in portraying them, Allison and van Niekerk reveal a fine instinct for the class betrayals that shape what Rob Nixon calls 'tribal memory's brittle, xenophobic bonds'.³⁰² I have chosen to compare two texts which at first appear to have little in common. One tells the story of a young girl growing up poor and abused in the 1950s American South, while the other is a twisted, allegorical tale of the Afrikaner people narrated partly through the interior consciousness of a mentally retarded character. But on closer examination, there is a great deal that unites

²⁹⁹ Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, p. 248. Hereafter cited within the text as *BOC*, page number.

³⁰⁰ Zoë Wicomb, 'Five Afrikaner Texts and the Rehabilitation of Whiteness', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 4.3 (1998), p. 364.

³⁰¹ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*; originally published in 1961.

³⁰² Rob Nixon, 'The White-Trash Bin of History', *The New York Times*, March 7, 2004.

the Boatwrights and the Benades. They are both products of violent nationalist mythologies that should have benefited them but did not. They are also a threat—to themselves, to the societies in which they live, and to hegemonic forms of whiteness that associate being white with privilege and social power. Finally, they are an indictment; an indictment of violent and debased ideologies upon which two of the most egregious and inhumane systems of apartheid were constructed and perpetuated. What these families have allowed themselves to become is very much a direct result of what they in fact are: they are poor. But they are not only poor, they are poor and white: an unconscionable combination of two social identities in two places that were built upon a premise of white superiority and a divine right to rule.

In this chapter I will examine how poor whites are depicted against a backdrop of a changing Southern and South African landscape in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf*. In doing so, I suggest that both Allison and van Niekerk place poor whites at the centre of a Southern and South African community from which they have long been banished. Cleanth Brooks writes that a ‘true community . . . is held together by manners and morals deriving from a commonly held view of reality’.³⁰³ In his work on narrative forms of Southern community, Scott Romine responds to Brooks by pointing out that although this idea of ‘true community’ is central to Southern literature and Southern literary studies, Brooks makes a mistake so obvious that it threatens to go unnoticed. The mistake being that ‘the commonly held view of reality to which [Brooks] refers is a fantasy and always has been’.³⁰⁴ This Southern fantasy is very much analogous to Nancy’s notion of an original/mythic

³⁰³ Scott Romine, *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p. 1. Romine is referencing Cleanth Brooks, ‘William Faulkner’, in *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. by Louis Rubin et al. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p. 339.

³⁰⁴ Romine, p. 1.

community. Writers in the conservative Southern tradition cultivated this fantasy—this mythical view of community and reality—to perpetuate a notion that racial discrimination was an incidental flaw of the Southern community that need not implicate an entire system of cohesive (and presumably otherwise legitimate) social relationships. A particularly pernicious form of Nancy's mythic community, this Southern fantasy minimised the importance of race whilst avoiding the issue of class discrimination entirely. If, as Romine argues, 'community is enabled by practices of avoidance, deferral, and evasion' just as it 'relies not on what is there so much as what is, by tacit agreement, not there',³⁰⁵ then writers like Allison and van Niekerk seek to destabilise the boundaries separating poor whites from the centre of the communities of which they have always been a part, even if a problematic one.

There is a growing spectacle called 'white trash studies' in U.S. academic and popular discourses in which the stereotype 'white trash' is mediated by what appears to be an intense nostalgia for an imagined and mythical Southern community in which class distinctions were easily read and clearly coded.³⁰⁶ *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (1997), edited by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, introduces the notion of 'trash' to the field of cultural studies and begins to theorise its relationship to current discourses of whiteness, multiculturalism, and poverty. Although it contains some insightful essays, as Dina Smith points out, by reading 'white trash' ahistorically and ignoring the long history of scholarship on poor whites, the focus is primarily on contemporary notions of 'white trash identity' as 'a hero for a strain of cultural studies wishing to reconcile the sometimes

³⁰⁵ Romine, p. 3.

³⁰⁶ See Dina Smith, 'Cultural Studies' Misfit: White Trash Studies', *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 57.3 (2004), p. 369.

competing discourses of race and class in America'.³⁰⁷ What is missing is a critical engagement of the ways in which 'white trash' 'operates and has operated as a class, racial, and regional signifier'.³⁰⁸ It is not the intent of this chapter to delve into the current state of 'white trash' cultural studies—to argue for or against the merits of such a field—nor is it my aim to dissect in any detail the historical reality of the Southern (and South African) poor white underclass or for that matter the development of the standard poor white stereotype.³⁰⁹ It is important, however, to try and understand the complex connection between the absence of socio-economic and political power that defines poor whites in order to make sense of the social identities of the characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf*. Such an approach also enables us to make sense of the shame associated with that absence. Played out as a form of collective mourning, the ways in which some of these characters seek a sense of community and communal engagement in an effort to work through that mourning serve to contest the myths of white supremacy that they both fight against and upon which they desperately depend.

The Southern poor white is arguably the oldest and most persistent social type to appear in American literature. Making his first appearance in 1732, in William Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line*, he persists, in the basic outlines that Byrd sketched, into the present day: lazy, ambitionless, ignorant, habitually drunk and extravagantly violent. As historian Wayne Flynt, a scholar of the South's lower-class whites, observes:

³⁰⁷ Smith, p. 369.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 375.

³⁰⁹ There is a long history of scholarship on poor whites that, amongst other things, details the shift from 'poor white' to 'white trash'. For example, see Shields McIlwaine, *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939); W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); and Evan Watkins, *Throwaways: Work Culture and Consumer Education* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993).

American writers seem always to be creating their own images of poor whites, a fact inextricably connected to the fate of the class. From Virginia aristocrat William Byrd to Northern abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe [and, one could argue, into the present], authors used poor whites to serve their own ideological purposes.³¹⁰

Over the last forty years, there has been a surge of interest in exploring the history and psychology of poor Southern whites. That this interest in ‘Dixie’s forgotten people’³¹¹ has coincided with a renaissance in what Brian Carpenter calls ‘Rough South’ literature is certainly no accident.³¹² Only in the last three decades has Southern literature seen the emergence of a body of work authored by those who are themselves members of the white lower classes, and who write of the ‘Rough South’—writers like Dorothy Allison, Larry Brown, Tim McLaurin, William Gay, and Harry Crews. This emergence has provided readers with an opportunity to witness the lives of poor Southern whites—one of the most ubiquitous and yet most misunderstood characters in all of Southern literature—up close and personal rather than from a distance.

In South Africa, the poor white has been part of the landscape since after the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The so-called ‘poor white problem’ was brought on by the new phenomena of urbanisation, economic depression and the emergence of a vast white, landless class—most of whom were rural Afrikaners. The current stereotypes of poor whites, and the open contempt with which today’s middle-class regards them, emerged

³¹⁰ J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People: The South’s Poor Whites* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1979), pp. 17-18.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² In the anthology titled *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader*, Brian Carpenter and Tom Franklin edit a collection of excerpted works about what they call the ‘Rough South’. They define ‘Grit Lit’ as ‘typically blue collar or working class, mostly small town, sometimes rural, occasionally but not always violent, usually but not necessarily southern’. Whereas ‘Rough South’ is defined as ‘mostly poor, white, rural, and unquestionably violent—Grit Lit’s wilder kin or Grit Lit with its back against the wall and somebody’s going to get hurt’. See Brian Carpenter, ‘Introduction’ in *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader*, ed. by Brian Carpenter and Tom Franklin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), p. xxvii.

during the apartheid era when they also became a permanent feature in the middle-class imagination. Through their very marginality and invisibility, they have a central position in white South African identity. Much like their Southern counterparts, in everyday South African usage this discourse on whiteness is split into two opposing parts: good successful middle-class whites, and the failed, pathetic poor whites.³¹³ The same discourse that glorified the white elite and the middle-class as superior to ‘wild’ and savage Africans was also used to portray poor whites as pathetically inferior. Hence in South Africa, poor whites became inscribed with all the signs of otherness. Much like lower-class Southerners, this South African underclass does not fit into the discourse that presents whiteness as a form of power. In other words, they defy the assumed superiority of whiteness by their very existence.³¹⁴

Brian Carpenter poses the question, ‘Why a Rough South Renaissance, and why now?’ Carpenter suggests that it is very difficult to deny the impact of the Civil Rights movement on the white Southern psyche and particularly on poor Southern whites, ‘who for generations had tended to define themselves in mostly negative terms, not for who they were but for who they were not, at a time when to be poor and white in the South was

³¹³ See Annika Björnsdotter Teppo, *The Making of a Good White: A Historical Ethnography of the Rehabilitation of Poor Whites in a Suburb of Cape Town* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2004); available at <http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisutvalsosio/vklteppo/themakin.pdf>. Teppo notes that the Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking whites have different versions of this, but the similarity of these versions is overwhelming and far exceeds the differences.

³¹⁴ It should be noted that no society took better care of their poor whites than the Afrikaners during apartheid. The middle-class Afrikaners were genuinely concerned about their fate. The poor whites were still part of the *volk* and it was thought they could be improved. See Teppo, p. 60. Similarly, as part of the New Deal the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created by Congressional charter in 1933 to modernise the very poor farms in the Tennessee Valley region of the Southern United States—a region particularly affected by the Great Depression. The project involved dam construction planning on an unprecedented scale in order to curb flooding, generate electricity and promote economic development. Under the Farmers’ Relief Act of 1933, the government paid compensation to farmers who reduced output, thereby rising prices. As a result of this legislation, the average income of farmers almost doubled by 1937. Designed to modernise the region and revitalise a vast area of ruined rural America, the TVA continues to operate today.

more a matter of being *not black*'.³¹⁵ Only after the death of Jim Crow, when there was 'no more segregation to defend and no more North to defy,' said James C. Cobb, were Southern whites finally able to 'reconnect with their true identity'.³¹⁶ The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (and the end of Jim Crow laws) provides the backdrop for *Bastard Out of Carolina*, while *Triomf* is set during a pivotal moment in South Africa's history; the end of apartheid and the eve of the first democratic election. These are moments when poor whites like the Boatwrights and the Benades would have had to begin facing up to the myths that provided them with their 'not black' identities.³¹⁷

The existence of poor whites blurs order-keeping boundaries and problematises the notion of a stable and ordered Southern and South African community. In suggesting that working class whites found themselves in a difficult situation, I am not denying their role in oppressing blacks in society. It is worth noting, however, that poor whites and poor blacks historically and in the present have much more in common than either class does with the upper-class. After the US Civil War, poor whites and poor blacks held a similar position in society. They typically worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, with no possibility for land ownership or education, and were constantly under the control of land owning wealthy whites. It was always in the best interest of these wealthy whites to encourage animosity between these two groups of people and with the obvious racial distinction, it was not

³¹⁵ Carpenter, p. xxv.

³¹⁶ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 222.

³¹⁷ Of note: The Report of the Carnegie Commission on 'The Poor White Problem in South Africa' (Stellenbosch University, 1932) was a study of poverty among white South Africans that made recommendations about segregation that some have argued would later serve as a 'blueprint' for Apartheid. The preoccupation of the Carnegie Corporation with the poor white problem in South Africa was at least in part the outcome of similar misgivings about the state of poor whites in the American South. In both situations, the integrity of the white race appeared to be put at risk by the fitness of the lower classes. See Carnegie Corporation Oral History Project, 'First Inquiry Into Poverty' at: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/oral_hist/carnegie/special-features/ [accessed 1 May 2013]; as well as Frank Furedi, *The Silent War: Imperialism and the Changing Perception of Race* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 67.

difficult to do. Hence, whilst not entirely eliminating the distinction between white and black, poor whites seemingly occupy a border position between the two. Sarah Robertson suggests that ‘the question arises as to which category, black or white, “trash” belongs, since historically “white trash” has existed in a peculiar state of un-belonging’.³¹⁸ Hence lower-class whites are distinction-blurring because although they aren’t black, neither are they ‘white enough’. However, once there was no longer the legalised victimisation to structure Southern and South African society—once Jim Crow ended, and once apartheid was abolished, there was a shift in perspective—poor whites began to be seen, and to see themselves, more for what they were, than for what they were not. The distinctions to which they so desperately clung were undermined.

In her article, ‘Controlling Images in Dorothy Allison’, Katherine Henninger compellingly suggests that ‘Crucial to the visual tradition of “white trash” representation, and to Allison’s revision of it, are issues of access—issues inseparable from cultural deployments of race, gender, sexuality, and class boundaries’.³¹⁹ Because the South was so poor compared to the North, so the argument goes, its social problems lay right out in the open for all to see. In other words, there has always been a visual accessibility to Southerners that has a great deal to do with being poor and that has followed strict gender and racial lines. Put more simply: ‘historically, access has been the privilege of white patriarchs’.³²⁰ Similarly, according to apartheid logic whites, as a privileged group, are disembodied, their bodies all but invisible, while ‘non-whites’—to include poor whites—are bound to their bodies as objects of access. White men, then, in both the American South

³¹⁸ Sarah Robertson, ‘Poor Whites in Recent Southern Fiction’, *Literature Compass*, 9/10 (2012), p. 636.

³¹⁹ Katherine Henninger, ‘Claiming Access: Controlling Images in Dorothy Allison’, *The Arizona Quarterly*, 60.3 (2004), p. 87.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

and South Africa had a culturally-endowed, presumptive access to the bodies of blacks and white women that had an economic, sexual and/or representational dimension. ‘The power and privilege of whiteness (and patriarchy) was at core an ability to resist others’ similar access and this is one reason the notion of “poor white trash” has been such an extraordinarily loaded and contested one’—particularly in the South.³²¹ So even though an ‘inherent’ racial superiority was the one privilege poor white Southerners could claim, the accessibility forced by poverty placed them in a position analogous to the one traditionally reserved for women and male African Americans.

Henninger further suggests that it is this excessive accessibility that has come to define poor whites, and more specifically, has come to define the ‘white trash’ community:

“White trash” becomes a figure of this excessive accessibility, but in terms of a sexual, almost racial nature that effectively elides the real question of class inequality, even while it would seem to foreground it. To accommodate the curious existence of subjugated white southerners without uprooting the foundation of white superiority, dominant southerners deployed a rhetoric of sexual degeneracy, violence, contamination, and genetic inevitability.³²²

This rhetoric had, and continues to have, a physical, bodily dimension. As Kelly Thomas asserts, ‘white poverty necessitates a differentiation within whiteness itself, the signs of which are visible characteristics. . . . Bodies become coded as trashy when associated with unregulated reproduction, unrestrained or perverse sexuality, and lax work ethic’.³²³ Hence

³²¹ Henninger, p. 88.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Kelly L. Thomas, ‘White Trash Lesbianism: Dorothy Allison’s Queer Politics’, in *Gender Reconstructions*, ed. by Cindy L. Carlson, Robert L. Mazzola, and Susan M. Bernardo (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 169; cited from Henninger, p. 88.

“*‘Trash’ . . . becomes more than a class designation: it represents an essential state.* This essence, like other putative essences in the South, is highly visualized, and is reinforced through a long tradition of visual and literary images’.³²⁴ It is this essential state upon which poor whites—and more specifically, ‘white trash’—communities are imagined and formed. Poor whites both embraced and fought against these essentialist labels in the sense that they certainly attempted to claim an ‘inherent’ racial superiority just as they fought against the label ‘trash’ that was levied on them based on an essential state of degeneracy, violence and contamination. Both Allison and van Niekerk put the Southern and South African ‘white trash’ community under erasure by writing against this notion that ‘trash’ is, in fact, some form of transcendental state. And yet in doing so, they insist that the bodies of their poor white protagonists be seen; their fragile and even grotesque bodies are never hidden from view.³²⁵ To that end, Allison has stated that central to her work is an examination of the myriad ways in which a politics of marginalisation pervades contemporary society: ‘Most of all I have tried to understand the politics of *they*, why human beings fear and stigmatize the different while secretly dreading that they might be one of the different themselves. . . [A]ll the other categories by which we categorize and dismiss each other—need to be excavated from the inside’.³²⁶ In carrying out this excavation, both writers depict the manner in which the category ‘white trash’ was formed on the back of violent foundational myths of civilisational superiority, moral rectitude and racial purity. Hence they attempt to think a community that is not an essence—not an identifiable totality which receives its meaning

³²⁴ Henninger, p. 88; emphasis added.

³²⁵ See Lara Buxbaum, “Give the People What They Want”: Bodies on Display in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Triomf*, *Kritika Kultura*, 18 (2012), p. 202.

³²⁶ Dorothy Allison, ‘A Question of Class’, in *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (Ithaca: Firebrand, 1994), p. 35.

and determination from a transcendental signified—but is instead, a ‘community without unity’. Perhaps even a ‘community without community’.³²⁷

At their core, these are also texts centred on wounded bodies and the power of touch to enact community. As Derrida demonstrates, ‘Nancy’s interest in the body turns around the crucial trope of touch which comes to stand, in his philosophy, as the marker of the most fundamental limits that shape our understanding of and interaction with the world: between inside and outside, subject and object, matter and meaning’.³²⁸ The act of touching becomes the means by which some of the characters in *Triomf* begin to enact community. Via encounters with the bodies of those they consider ‘other’, they not only begin to consolidate stable identities for themselves, but they also begin to share in the identity of those with whom they come in contact.

Touching Community in *Triomf*

In *Triomf*, almost all of the encounters that the Benades have with people they see as ‘other’ are positive as opposed to their interactions with their neighbours, the National Party representatives and the visiting Jehovah’s Witnesses who are all white and with whom the Benades have mostly antagonistic relationships. The Benades are neighbourhood pariahs, ostracised by those around them because of their behaviour, their grotesque bodies, and the poverty explicit in their appearance. Hence they feel no connection to the people amongst whom they live in the suburb of Triomf, and only begin to cultivate a sense of community by engaging, even if only fleetingly, with those whom they consider to be

³²⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 71.

³²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. by Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); cited from Morrey, p. 10.

outsiders. Van Niekerk centres these engagements on the power of touch to collapse the narrative of racial and class difference.

In one of their few ventures beyond the confines of Triomf, the Benades set out for Braamfontein for a furniture sale. They are quickly caught up in a peace march when they are mistaken for ardent supporters of the Mass Democratic Movement on the basis of their Volkswagen's number plate which begins with the letters MDM. The Benades quickly take note of the mostly black crowd—‘kaffirs wherever you looked’—and instantly feel threatened. Lambert shouts, ‘Stay together!’,³²⁹ but they are quickly dispersed in the crowd. Mol’s experience as she is swept along in the demonstrating mass of bodies is worth recounting in its entirety:

Then a black girl with a Chicken-Licken cap on her head came over and said: “Peace be with you, Ma,” and she smiled at Mol and pinned a light-blue ribbon, with two doves on a bright blue pin, one white and the other light-blue, on to her housecoat. Only then did she see what was going on—everyone was wearing ribbons and doves and holding hands. So that was the story! And all this time the young girl kept squeezing her hand and smiling at her with shining eyes. She smelt like Chicken Licken and her hand was a bit greasy. But then Mol squeezed the hand back, even though she’d never touched a black hand before, clean or dirty. On her other side was an old man with only one leg, leaning on crutches. He stuck one of his crutches under his arm and then he shook her hand. That hand was cold and the skin was loose. And the bones felt like they had come apart. But he held her hand nice and tight.

³²⁹ Marlène van Niekerk, *Triomf* (London: Abacus, 2008), p. 364; hereafter cited as *T*, page number.

She saw the old man had no blue on, so she worked her hands loose to give him her own ribbon . . . And then she smiled at him, and she saw the young girl smile as well, and then all three of them were smiling much better, and they all took each other's hands again. . . .

Suddenly everything went so quiet you could hear a pin drop. All around her people began to cry . . . Next to her, the black girl was sniffing. The next thing, that girl picked up her hand, with Mol's hand still in it, and she used it to wipe her nose. Mol thought, ja, it's hard to believe, but if that girl had rubbed her snot off on the back of Mol's own hand, she would really not have minded. There was such a nice feeling in the air that she almost started crying herself. (*T*, 364-65)

The encounter with the body of the other enables Mol to begin to feel, for the first time in her life, that she might belong to something outside of her own incestuous family. Mol has never been in such close physical proximity to a black person, her perceptions of black people the result of stereotypes, narratives of racial inequality, and political dogma. This scene beautifully enacts Nancy's thoughts on touch as described by Douglas Morrey in his article on Nancy and the film director and writer, Claire Denis. Morrey describes Nancy's somewhat abstract conception of touch as 'an approaching and withdrawing, a momentary proximity to the other that serves as much to consolidate the stable identity of the one as it does to share in the identity of the other'.³³⁰ The Benades are not supporters of the MDM, but at this moment in time it doesn't matter. What is important is that Mol is able to experience the positive touch of another human being; a touch experienced as a hesitation between touching and withdrawing. Nancy suggests that if the body can be thought of as an

³³⁰ Morrey, p. 11.

image, it is not an image of something, not a presentation of something, but a ‘*coming to presence*’.³³¹ Mol experiences this coming to presence as her body makes contact with that of the young black girl. Her body becomes the site of her sharing with the world—‘a fleshy communion with other bodies’³³²—just as it also exists as a site of otherness and alienation. It is a body always projected outside the self. In this sense, Mol’s body will always remain a stranger to her, will always be other, even as other people appear to her first and foremost as bodies. Or, as Nancy writes, ‘*An other is a body because only a body is an other*’.³³³ Via Mol’s encounter with the young black girl, van Niekerk depicts the problematic of the body not only in its relation to the identity or integrity of the self, but also in relation to questions of national identity and foreignness. Given the irredeemable foreignness of the body, it is no wonder, suggests Nancy, that the body (our own or someone else’s) ‘inspires so much hatred’.³³⁴ And yet at this particular moment, Mol feels anything but hatred because actual physical contact with the body of another has momentarily stripped away such an ‘irredeemable foreignness’ and replaced it with a sense of communion and comfort.

Mol’s desire to feel as if she is part of a larger community and her need to connect with someone outside her family is mediated by the body; she appears to crave intimate, sensual (seeing and touching) encounters with the bodies of others, even those who treat her with contempt. The Benades’ relationship with their neighbours is strained and yet subsequent to a tumultuous Guy Fawkes celebration, Mol’s desire for comfort and communion blinds her to their derision:

³³¹ Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 63; emphasis in original.

³³² Morrey, p. 13.

³³³ Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 31.

³³⁴ Ibid., p.9.

Mol wants a cigarette, one of those the man's offering over the wall. She wants to see another person's face. She wants to touch another person's hand. If someone wants to give her a cigarette, who's she to say no? Some people still care when they see you're suffering. That's what Mol's thinking. Pop knows. Shame. Poor Mol. (*T*, 292)

The neighbour's offer is not one of genuine compassion, but rather mockery. Referring to the Guy Fawkes celebration fiasco when Lambert was badly burned, he quotes a cigarette advertisement as he says, 'Anyone for a smoke? After action, satisfaction' (*T*, 292). But Mol is either oblivious to his mockery, or chooses to ignore it because she is so desperate for a communion with the people around her. Despite Mol's desire, the neighbours treat her with ill-disguised disdain:

Pop watches Mol take a cigarette. He sees the man from Fort Knox lean over and light it up for her. The man cups his hands round the lighter and holds them close to Mol's face. He sees how the Fort Knox women look over the wall at Mol from both sides of the Fort Knox man. They're looking at how she lights her cigarette, but they're also looking her up and down. Her body, and her legs. Their faces look like they want to say: Sis. But they're also curious. Like the faces of people looking at an old tortoise or reptile or something eating its food in the zoo. Eating food or shitting. Or shitting off. 'Cause now the Benades have taken another big blow and everyone's staring at them, as if they're the only people who have setbacks like this. (*T*, 292-93)

The above passage exemplifies the manner in which poor whites—and 'white trash' in particular—become figures of an excessive accessibility. This visual accessibility has a great deal to do with the poverty in which the Benades live, just as it is also a direct result of their

'curious' bodies. Mol's body is exposed to the constant intrusion of the other's gaze and yet she appears oblivious to the overt contempt with which the neighbours view her. Although van Niekerk doesn't allow an easy empathy with her protagonists, for we know that much of what they suffer is a result of their own misguided loyalty to a corrupt Afrikaner nationalism; nevertheless, we do feel a degree of sympathy for Mol and her family as they attempt to make a connection with the people around them.

Even Pop—despite his cynicism—expresses a longing to be viewed as part of a larger community. On one particular day, he drives into Braamfontein:

He doesn't know what he's looking for. He's not looking for anything. He just wants to feel the rush of people around his shoulders; he wants to look at their faces. (*T*, 86)

Pop is feeling good. He exchanges good wishes with a beggar and shares in the camaraderie of the black men standing in the Ithuba scratch card line. As she explains to him how the game works, he receives a big smile from the black woman selling the tickets and he thinks, 'Never in Triomf has he seen a black woman smile at him like this (*T*, 88). Pop gets lucky and wins 75 rand and enjoys the support from the men behind him. As he turns to leave:

A big black man takes him solidly by the shoulder and says: 'Hey, well done, old man, now wish me luck.'

'I wish you luck,' Pop says, smiling at the man, and now the feeling in his flesh runs like warm syrup through his bones and into his marrow, right down to his feet. (*T*, 88)

Not only is Pop able to enjoy communion across racial boundaries, but when the black man grasps him on the shoulder and Pop wishes him luck, he feels a pleasurable sensation throughout his body. Thus it is not only the exchange of words, but the other man's touch that allows Pop to feel a certain openness—for the individual with whom he makes contact, as well as the larger community and world. Nancy would say that this openness is facilitated by the body as always already open; bodies are that which opens space (to itself), therefore there can be no entering in to this openness as though from outside. In other words, 'if all things co-exist within the open, then their relation can only be one of mutual exteriority *inside*'.³³⁵ Pop would not have considered that he and this black man would have—or even could have—co-existed *inside*, and yet the contact between the two men is not depicted as an actual penetration of the body in any sense, nor does it represent the projection of a world outside itself, rather it opens the inside upon itself. And we are reminded that, for Nancy, bodies and the world are always already open.

Finally, there is an exchange that takes place in Chapter Thirteen between Lambert and a city-slick black character called Sonnyboy that compellingly enacts community through touch. Lambert is looking for discarded plastic wine-bags which he imagines he will use to store essentials such as petrol in a hole he is digging under the surface of Triomf, for the family's escape to the 'North' when the 'shit hits the fan'—that is, when democracy finally arrives. Once at the dump in Martindale, near Triomf, the grind and noise of a dump-truck causes Lambert to become faint and he starts to feel a seizure coming on. He is saved by Sonnyboy, who pulls him aside and gives him some Coca-Cola. When Lambert comes to, he finds himself staring into the face of Sonnyboy, who strikes Lambert as the epitome of unreadable otherness. The exchange is described via a third-person narrator situated just

³³⁵ Morrey, p. 21.

behind Lambert's shoulder, and the scene is generally read as van Niekerk's 'version of the anti-myth of whiteness'.³³⁶ Leon de Kock suggests that, 'Lambert, the figure of whiteness, the apparent holder of command and power in external, social and political terms—even if only just—is shown to be the weaker of the two in the Symbolic domain' as Sonnyboy has quickly taken measure of Lambert and is able to read him in a way that Lambert is not able to read Sonnyboy. Whilst I would agree with such a reading, I would also suggest that there is something else occurring in the exchange between the two men. There is no doubt that Sonnyboy is mocking Lambert, and yet for Lambert, this is one of the only times he has a conversation of any length with someone who is not his family, and the exchange is filled with moments of pleasurable physical contact. For example, after Lambert comes to:

he feels himself offering the kaffir his hand. Ja, can you believe it? And the kaffir smiles at him from behind his reflectors, and Lambert sees in the reflectors how he smiles back at the kaffir. And then the kaffir takes his hand. He shakes Lambert's big, knobbly hand. He half lets go of Lambert's hand and then he swivels his own hand, grabbing hold of Lambert's thick thumb. Lambert gropes to get hold of the kaffir's thumb, and when he does get a grip on it, a thin little thumb, the kaffir suddenly lets go and turns his hand straight again. Lambert gropes for the kaffir's hand until he gets hold of it again. And then he gives it a good shake. (*T*, 274)

The two men are obviously attempting to execute a sort of 'jive handshake' (or jiveshake), but can't quite get the timing right. It is one of the warmest encounters in the book, and one that is facilitated by touch. Sometime later when the two men part,

³³⁶ Leon de Kock, 'The Call of the Wild: Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa', p. 25.

They both hold out their hands, and this time they shake all three grips smoothly, in time with each other.

'Now we're tuned,' he says.

'Greased and oiled!' says Sonnyboy.

So long,' he says, 'and thanks again for saving my life, hey!'

'Thanks for saving mine!' says Sonnyboy. (*T*, 281)

This is more than just a conversation with another person, as the encounter is full of smacks on the back and shoulder nudges, and it is a way for Lambert to feel a sense of communion with someone who he would normally treat with derision. This exchange between Sonnyboy and Lambert represents a very unusual episode in Lambert's life, not only because it is one of the few times he interacts with anyone outside of his immediate family in anything remotely resembling a positive manner, but it is the only time in the novel that he touches the body of someone he has been conditioned to treat with suspicion and contempt.

Despite Lambert's initial reservations about this unusual kaffir, he does begin to enjoy the conversation between them. In as much as he is able to comprehend irony and the nuances of a conversation, he does understand that Sonnyboy is teasing him and making fun of him because of their racial differences and Lambert's supposed white superiority, yet he likes Sonnyboy and even opens up to him about his loneliness and isolation: "Well," Lambert says, and he doesn't know what gets into him, but he says to Sonnyboy, right there under those scrappy trees, among the rocks, across the road from the dumps: "I'm hungry for love, man, and that's now really a bad thing, man" (*T*, 276). He tells this virtual stranger something very personal about himself, and Sonnyboy reacts by saying, "Shame," [. . .]

"That's bad, man" (T, 276). Despite what he is most likely thinking, he doesn't make fun of Lambert and only commiserates with him about the difficulty of finding love. It is telling that the person Lambert is able to speak with most easily is a black man—someone whose 'irredeemable foreignness' would have inspired in him little but hatred and disgust. It would be overstating things to suggest that this is any sort of a transcendental moment for Lambert. He certainly doesn't walk away from the dump with a new found respect for his fellow man, nor is he able to look at his life with new insight, yet despite the fact that each man recognises the other for what they are, the act of touching one another begins the process of *exposing* each to the other—an exposure all the more powerful for its lack of expectation or demand.

Perhaps in the end it is Treppie who conveys a sense of the body that is most in keeping with Nancy's views when he says:

All you do is expose yourself. As if you're not exposed enough as it is, with your soft human skin and its holes for seeing and smelling and tasting and farting – that's if you're lucky enough still to do all those things. (T, 383)

Treppie appears to espouse Nancy's conception of the body as nothing more than an exposure: as a place of existence that 'take[s] place at the limit . . . the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a continuum of matter'.³³⁷ Nancy maintains that slits and holes do not present things to be seen, however, they do not reveal anything: 'vision does not penetrate, but glides along swerves and follows along departures'.³³⁸ It is this experience of the body as open space—or exposure—that allows the Benades to realise community, even if only fleetingly. Their contact with others is presented

³³⁷ Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 17.

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

as 'a touching that does not absorb but moves along lines and recesses, inscribing and exscribing the body. A mobile, unstable caress'.³³⁹

Do Not Touch Me: The Wounded Body in *Bastard Out of Carolina*

Allison centres *Bastard Out of Carolina* around the figure of the wounded body—in particular Bone's wounded and battered body. Most of the touch Bone experiences is abusive in nature and even that contact meant to bring comfort often ends up being distressing, confusing and alienating. And yet, the touch that is most terrifying for Bone—that of Daddy Glen—also serves as the catalyst for her to seek a form of refuge in her own touch as well as in an alternate form of community that she is only able to begin to imagine at the end of the text. As Allison depicts the beatings and sexual abuse that Bone endures from her step-father, it is noteworthy that the description of Bone's fear is centred on Daddy Glen's hands, the mechanism for his touch:

But it wasn't Daddy Glen's sex that made me nervous. It was those hands, the restless way the fingers would flex and curl while he watched me lean close to Mama. (*BOC*, 62)

His hands were big, impersonal, and fast. I could not avoid them. . . gorilla hands, monkey paws, paddlefish, beaver tails. . . My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around doorframes and crept over the edge of the mattress, fear in me like a river, like the ice-dark blue of his eyes. (*BOC*, 70)

³³⁹ Nancy, *Corpus*, pp. 45-46.

When Bone looks at Daddy Glen's hands, all she sees are weapons for abuse. 'The palms that slapped, the fingers that dug in and bruised, the knuckles he would sometimes press directly under my eyes, the hands that shook and gripped and lifted me up . . .' (*BOC*, 109).

Although she has a cursory understanding of the sexual nature of his abuse, 'It wasn't sex, not like a man and a woman pushing their naked bodies into each other, but then, it was something like sex, something powerful and frightening . . .' (*BOC*, 109), she is further confused when she considers that the only time Daddy Glen's hands were gentle was when he 'held [her] that way' (*BOC*, 109). Hence even her step-father's abusive touch invokes conflicted emotions in Bone.

One particular day Bone incites Glen by running through the house so he grabs her, slams her body against the wall and commences to beat her mercilessly with his belt. Anney interrupts the beating and in her fury slaps Glen across the face. Bone then finds the solace and comfort she so desperately craves in her mother's arms and in her mother's touch, as Anney washes her face, her neck, the backs of her swollen thighs (*BOC*, 107). Afterwards, however, Bone listens through the wall as Glen tells Annie lies about what happened and why he beat Bone. As Bone continues to listen, she realises that her mother and Daddy Glen are having sex: 'I heard Daddy Glen whispering, heard a murmur as he comforted Mama and she comforted him. Sex. They were making love, Mama sighing and sobbing and Daddy Glen repeating her name over and over' (*BOC*, 108). For Bone, the fact that Anney would even consider making love to Glen after what he has just done to her, is abhorrent. Thus begins Bone's association of sex with pain and danger, and just as importantly, she begins to conflate the comforting touch of her mother with Anney's sexual relationship with Glen. In her rendering of Bone's sexual identity, Allison reveals a link between physical pain and

sexual pleasure: 'Unable to imagine anything but horror associated with sex or sexuality because her physical torture invades and pervades her thoughts as well as her body, Bone confuses—conflates as well as mistakes one for the other—sex with being a victim of violence'.³⁴⁰ In an article on the film *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Nancy argues that the imperative nature of touch means that sex threatens always to run out of control.³⁴¹ This sense of sexuality as excessiveness, and as necessitating an intrusion of the other permeates *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Like a fire, it is that which always threatens to rage out of the characters' control, and in its very excessiveness, 'it addresses, though it never resolves, the characters' immense sense of deprivation'.³⁴² Of course, what Daddy Glen does to Bone is not about sex, it's about power, yet even the sex he engages in with Anney has an intrusive and desperate quality to it. And yet via these sexual encounters—this excessiveness, Allison depicts the manner in which the sexual touch becomes both the means by which the body is torn, just as she also explores the manner in which it becomes a source of comfort and agency.

Bone begins to masturbate and orgasm to fantasies of being tied up and put in a haystack while someone sets the dry stale straw ablaze. Bone's daydreams and fantasies coupled with her masturbation become her way of attempting to gain control—to own—her own story and her own body. Although she is ashamed of herself for the things she thinks – more ashamed for 'masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place' (*BOC*, 113), she also begins to understand that it is her fantasies that allow her to

³⁴⁰ Deborah Horvitz, 'Sadism Demands a Story': Oedipus, Feminism, and Sexuality in Gayl Jones *Corregidora* and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Contemporary Literature*, 39.2 (1998), pp. 244-45.

³⁴¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Icon of Fury: Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*', *Film-Philosophy*, 12.1 (2008). Also see Morrey, p. 15.

³⁴² Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), p. 119.

cope with what Daddy Glen does to her. In other words, she exercises agency via her own sexually comforting touch:

Yet it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen. Only there that I had any pride. I loved those fantasies, even though I was sure they were a terrible thing. They had to be; they were self-centered and they made me have shuddering orgasms. In them, I was very special. I was triumphant, important. I was not ashamed. There was no heroism possible in the real beatings. There was just being beaten until I was covered with snot and misery.

(BOC, 113)

For Bone, whose rape and ongoing beatings by her step-father destroy her self-image and cause her to feel alienated or detached from her body, emotional survival depends upon salvaging her creative/sexual capacities and pleasures. ‘Only if she unites her wounded and fragmented “selves”—her ravaged and, according to her, “ruined” body with her “other self” who wishes for love, sex, and artistic expression—can she have a future’.³⁴³ Depicting the manner in which touch desires to destroy, and is destroyed by this desire; it gets to the point that even Anney’s touch no longer soothes Bone. After Bone’s Aunt Raylene sees the marks on Beau from one of Glen’s beatings, it is, naturally, her mother’s touch that Bone craves:

She sat up and pulled me down beside her so that my head was on her shoulder. I began to shake with hard, mean sobs, a strange kind of crying without tears. Mama’s hand moved automatically, stroking my head as if I were a wounded dog. I knew from the way she was touching me that if I had not come to her, pushed myself on

³⁴³ Horvitz, p. 240.

her, she would never have taken me into her arms. I shuddered under the unfeeling palm, slapped her hand away, and ran for the bedroom. (*BOC*, 252)

Finding no solace in her mother's touch, Bone cries herself to sleep and dreams about being a baby again, held against her Mama's hip, soothed by her Mama's voice. 'She held me and I felt loved. She held me and I knew who I was. When I put my hand down between my legs, it was not a sin. It was like a murmur, like music, like a prayer in the dark. It was meant to be, and it was a good thing' (*BOC*, 253). In this depiction masturbation becomes a way for Bone to reconnect with the child she once was, a child who felt safe in the soothing embrace and love of her mother. As paradoxical as this might seem, it could even be suggested that such an act is an attempt by Bone to return to a lost moment of completeness, to a 'before' when there was no trauma to leave her wounded and fragmented. The sexual aspect of the masturbatory act has been removed; instead there is only a desire to return to place of recognition.

In the climactic scene in the novel, Glen rapes Bone and then immediately pleads with Anney. Allison makes it clear that it is the way Anney touches him that is as horrifying to Bone as what has just been done to her: 'She was holding him . . . I could see her fingers on Glen's shoulder, see the white knuckles holding him tight. . . . I hated her now for the way she held him . . .' (*BOC*, 291). Bone cannot believe that her mother would touch Glen in anything resembling a comforting manner after what has just happened. It is this, as much as anything Glen has done to her that threatens to destroy Bone. Indeed, as Allison herself has pointed out, 'the story's emotional centre is the damaging and ongoing failure to protect Bone rather than the abusive acts themselves'.³⁴⁴ The individual failures of the adult

³⁴⁴ Cited from Doane and Hodges, p. 120.

women in Bone's life, as well as in the larger community, stem, in part, from this unwavering support of the bad behaviour exhibited by their men: 'Hence there is no 'outside' to which any one individual can appeal'.³⁴⁵ In the same manner that van Niekerk does not allow too much sympathy for her characters—after all, none of them are completely innocent—Allison depicts the ways in which the Boatwright women are also not innocent. The meanness and cruelty of Bone's world is not only a result of grinding poverty and limited horizons, but is a direct result of the manner in which its women accept—and even to a certain degree, encourage—the bad, and often violent, behaviour of its men. Bone's uncles, described as 'invariably gentle and affectionate' with Bone and her cousins, instil fear in the surrounding community:

half the county went in terror of them . . . Only when they were drunk or fighting with each other did they seem as dangerous as they were supposed to be. . . My aunts treated my uncles liver over-grown boys—rambunctious teenagers whose antics were more to be joked about than worried over—and they seemed to think of themselves that way too. . . Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding. (BOC, 22-23)

Although Bone's uncles are never abusive to children, Bone learns from her aunts, and even from her own mother, that women love men who are mean. Bone witnesses the way that Anney relates to Glen even as his abuse is made obvious, so for Bone, love is a double-edged sword. Deborah Horvitz suggests that *Bastard Out of Carolina* 'yokes male-female intimacy with the potential denial/destruction of women. No heterosexual relationship in this novel

³⁴⁵ Doane and Hodges, p. 120.

(and many are portrayed) offers anything desirable or appealing. . . All the Boatwright men are philandering, alcoholic, ineffective husbands and fathers . . .'³⁴⁶ In the intense focus on their love for these mean but hurt little boys, there is a familial pattern of neglect of girls that even extends to Anney whose love for Glen almost always takes precedence over her desire to protect her daughter. By showing that this form of destructive love is 'both a familial pattern and a dimension of the family's economic circumstances, Allison lifts the novel away from blaming individuals, while still refusing to make these individuals innocent'.³⁴⁷

Much like Sethe, it becomes crucial for Bone's survival that she feel surrounded by a community of nurturing women who would provide a 'safe' place for her. But Allison 'figures just such a comforting and healing community in the Boatwright aunts', and then simultaneously 'shows its investment in passive constructions of femininity and oppressive forms of heterosexuality that are inimical to Bone's safety'.³⁴⁸ The Boatwright women seem unable to recognise the support they derive from the strong community of women in the novel. In an interview with Carolyn Megan, Allison points out, 'They knew it was important but didn't think it was nearly as important as what a man and woman made together'.³⁴⁹ Bone likes feeling part of what her aunts have with one another; something 'nasty and strong' that provides an alternative world to that of the 'spitting, growling, overbearing males' (*BOC*, 91) who take up so much of their time and energy. Bone's aunts nurture and sustain one another, they help one another survive, but ultimately they are unable to realise

³⁴⁶ Horvitz, p. 244.

³⁴⁷ Doane and Hodges, p. 119.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁴⁹ Carolyn E. Megan, 'Moving Toward Truth: An Interview with Dorothy Allison', *Kenyon Review*, 16 (1994), p. 77.

a life that doesn't involve taking care of their misbehaving men. In the end, although there is no clear consolidation of Bone's identity within anything resembling a harmonious context, she does find comfort in her Aunt Raylene's touch (the only one of her aunts who doesn't seem to need a man), and that reassurance allows her to begin to explore an alternate sense of community.

In her article on *Triomf*, Lara Buxbaum suggests, 'it is only when characters are faced with the irrefutable evidence of trauma as wrought upon one another's bodies that they are forced to reckon with the truth of their familial narratives'³⁵⁰. It is only when Aunt Raylene actually sees the marks on Bone's backside and legs that she is faced with the irrefutable evidence of Bone's abuse at the hands of Daddy Glen. Similarly, it is not until Mol and Pop see the scars on Treppie's skin that they begin to understand the truth of their situation. Treppie's scars are the result of the beating he received as a child from his father, Old pop, when the latter discovered the sexual activities of his children:

Honour, for what should I honour [Old Pop] - all that's left of me is a drop of blood, a wet spot with some skin around it struggling for breath. A lump of scar-tissue with a heart in the middle. . . Then [Mol] saw how terribly those blows had set into Treppie's skin. She hadn't known. She thought people outgrew things like that. Treppie's stomach and hips were covered with nicks and grooves, as if he'd been tied up with ropes and beaten over and over again. . . "Marked for life!" he said, prodding his finger into the nicks and scars on his skin. (T, 464-65)

³⁵⁰ Buxbaum, 'Remembering the Self', p. 98.

Both Bone and Treppie are incapable of talking about their abuse, their traumas resist ‘narrative recuperation’ but they both do achieve a degree of self-articulation:³⁵¹ Bone via her masturbation fantasies, Treppie via the manner in which he retraces his nicks and scars with his own finger. Buxbaum suggests that Treppie’s ‘fragmented, wounded body belies any coherent narrative which would gloss over such trauma; narratives dissemble, but bodies cannot’.³⁵² There is a sense, then, that in both texts the truth of the body appears in its dismembering, in its tearing apart. And yet if we are to agree that bodies can’t conceal (and I’m not certain that I do), the bodies of the characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf*—especially Mol’s and Bone’s bodies—are constantly made both physically and visually accessible to others. Nancy discusses this access to the body as a form of insanity: ‘The only entry into the body, the only access regained at each of its entries, is an access of madness’.³⁵³ And yet, in typical Nancy fashion, paradoxically he further suggests that ‘There is no “access”. The madness of the body isn’t a crisis, and isn’t morbid. It’s just this endlessly untied and distended place-taking, tending toward itself. The body’s madness is this offering of place’. So if Buxbaum suggests that the body is incapable of disguise and concealment, Nancy would in turn argue that there is ‘No secret of the body to be communicated to us, no secret body to be revealed to us. “Revealed” is the fact that bodies are more visible than any revelation’.³⁵⁴ And that may be exactly the point. Both Allison and van Niekerk allow the bodies of their protagonists to be seen because, in some sense, they are attempting to make

³⁵¹ Elleke Boehmer, ‘Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26.3 (1993), p. 272. Boehmer argues that the task of the postcolonial writer is one of transfiguration: ‘transfiguration, in effect becomes the recuperation of the body by way of narrative’. See Buxbaum, ‘Remembering the Self’, p. 88.

³⁵² Buxbaum, ‘Remembering the Self’, p. 88.

³⁵³ Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 57.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

it clear that there is ‘nothing to see’. These shattered, bruised, grotesque bodies are nothing more than an offering of place and an exposure of community.

The deeply ingrained gender, race, and class roles of the Benade and Boatwright families help support and shape their identities while at the same time limiting and containing them. Rather than presenting a falsely unified definition of ‘white trash’ experience, Allison and van Niekerk refuse to synthesise the contradictions of their characters, thus permitting a dialectical understanding of the reality and diversity of their lives. Van Niekerk accomplishes this, in part, via the use of modernist techniques of interior monologue, free indirect speech, and unreliable narration (Lambert acts as a mouthpiece for sentiments that others might not voice publically thus serving as a naive narrator); whilst Allison utilises a first-person narrative technique to be discussed in more detail below. These characters both reinforce and contradict preconceived stereotypes and commodified images, thereby creating space for a revised historical understanding of ‘white trash’ identities. Both writers also accomplish this by, as previously noted, insisting that the bodies of their poor white protagonists be seen, that they be revealed and never hidden from view. They allow us this access not only to revise the visual tradition of ‘white trash’ representation, but also as a means to expose the wounded body, and by extension, the wounded (and wounding) community.

Bastard Out of Carolina and *Triomf* depict the manner in which the interruption of myth disrupts, or unworks, a community. And yet, if, as Nancy suggests, the very rejection of myth becomes an act of community, then these characters have yet to reach a point where they are fully able to reject the myths upon which their identities have been constructed. Both Treppie and Bone are able to see the fallacy of these myths, but it is only

Bone who begins to take advantage of the space that opens in the identification of the community with itself. She alone is able to begin to see a new way of living in a ‘different’ community. And yet, both Allison and van Niekerk hint at what such a community might look like, one not premised on exclusivity, one that cuts across class, racial, sexual and gendered boundaries.

A Saving Perspective: Telling Stories in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf*

Allison utilises Bone as both a child narrative focaliser and as an adult, first-person narrator.³⁵⁵ As such, Bone retains the immediate perspective and psychological effect of her own childhood events and impressions, meanwhile rendering those same events with a certain mature diction and temporal distance. As Michelle Wallace Gunn suggests, ‘This bifurcated narrative strategy is important to Allison’s consideration of class: Bone (the child protagonist) may experience firsthand those attributes and assumptions traditionally affiliated with the Southern underclass, while Bone (the adult narrator) simultaneously may contemplate their viability’.³⁵⁶ Thus it is via Bone as the narrator of her own story that Allison deconstructs the category of class:

By demonstrating that the dichotomous and hierarchical terms it rests upon to distinguish the privileged from the lower classes—industrious/lazy, legitimate/illegitimate, respectable/shameful, civilized/uncivilized—are arbitrary,

³⁵⁵ Bone is ‘not even thirteen years old’ (*BOC*, 282) at the end of the novel, but she is at least seventeen when she tells the story *Bastard Out of Carolina*. On the second page of the novel, Bone, discussing the car accident which preceded her birth, says, ‘My Aunt Alma insists to this day that what happened was in no way Uncle Travis’s fault, but I know that the first time I ever saw Uncle Travis sober was when I was seventeen and they had just removed half his stomach along with his liver’ (*BOC*, 2). Also see Vincent King, p. 136.

³⁵⁶ Michelle Wallace Gunn, ‘Talking Trash: Grotesque Realism and the Poor White in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Emory University, 2007), p. 186.

self-serving, and reversible. [. . .] Thus the qualities ascribed to the underclass and the elite cannot embody metaphysical essences constituting the nature of each class since the allegedly defining qualities of each are interchangeable.³⁵⁷

As Gunn argues, this binary template may ultimately prove a bit mechanical, but nevertheless, it offers a useful way of considering Bone's appraisal of her own class identity. Bone must define herself against these polarities, and she does so by rewriting the narratives that have come to define her.

In his article on the prospect of a postmodernist feminism in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Vincent King discusses some of the criticism levied at Allison regarding the novel's unusual structure. The novel begins with Bone's early years and quickly focuses on the relationship between her and Daddy Glen. Glen's abuse reaches a fever pitch in the eighth chapter but then at the beginning of chapter nine, the novel takes a surprising—and, King suggests, potentially misguided turn. Glen, who has played such a pivotal role in the novel, becomes little more than a peripheral character. While Bone's world is still haunted and shaped by the threat he poses, Glen no longer figures prominently in the action. And the story of Bone's abuse, which has heretofore dominated the novel, does not fully resume again until chapter seventeen.³⁵⁸ The intervening chapters focus heavily on a host of other things: gospel music, Bone's friend Shannon Pearl, Bone's violent sexual fantasies, her reading and storytelling, and her midnight escapade at a local Woolworth's. So, the criticism goes, by interrupting the story of Bone's abuse, Allison appears to be sensationalising her already

³⁵⁷ Moira P. Baker, "'The Politics of They': Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* as Critique of Class, Gender, and Sexual Ideologies', in *The World is Our Home: Society and Culture in Contemporary Southern Writing*, ed. by Jeffrey J. Folks and Nancy Summers Folks (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), pp. 118-19.

³⁵⁸ Vincent King, 'Hopeful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminism in Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 33.1 (2000), p. 122.

shocking subject matter; simultaneously promising and delaying the inevitable climactic rape scene.

Yet King argues that it would be a mistake to categorise *Bastard Out of Carolina* as an example of this kind of lurid, cultural opportunism as he suggests that these intervening chapters are crucial in their representation of Bone's efforts to survive the trauma to which she is continually subjected. Bone must 'rewrite—and in some cases simply reject—the names and stories that make her vulnerable to violence'.³⁵⁹ She instinctively understands that her identity is transactional—the result of the ongoing conflict between the names and stories thrust upon her by others and those she creates for herself. This realisation gives her the freedom to rewrite what King calls, 'the relentless linear narratives that threaten to silence her':

So instead of accepting the language of Daddy Glen (and most of the other Boatwrights), which confers upon her a singular, and particularly constricting, identity, she must replace his coercive, linear narrative with ones that are more liberating. Bone's obsession with gospel music, her complex sexual fantasies, bizarre tales of violence, and avid reading are not subplots that lead nowhere; they simply reflect her attempts to create stories (read identities) that will provide her with what Allison describes as 'the hope of a remade life'.³⁶⁰

Such a remade life requires a certain amount of faith, however, and yet both *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf* highlight the danger in telling—and living—stories centred around, in particular, a misguided, religious faith. In many ways, the stories that the Benades and the Boatwrights continually tell themselves are the wrong stories, and the stories that might

³⁵⁹ Vincent King, p. 124.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

lead them to healing remain untold. Silence, fear, obsession, and trauma narratively structure both texts as they are haunted and invaded by more than just Glen's viciousness or Lambert's violence. Anney's need to camouflage her family's secret proves almost fatal for Bone, just as Mol, Pop and Treppie's desire to hide the truth of Lambert's parentage does, in the end, prove fatal for Pop. Thus the novels address the 'potentially cataclysmic repercussions of lying to oneself and refusing to bear witness to one's own story' (and history).³⁶¹ The Benades bear witness to a mythic history—a mythic story—via their, at times fluctuating, adherence to the tenets of Afrikaner nationalism. Van Niekerk inserts satirised biblical symbolism and images into her text to illustrate just how the Calvinist religion plays a crucial role in the construction of a skewed Afrikaner identity. Yet by deconstructing religion, I would suggest that van Niekerk is not attempting to entirely vilify—or eliminate—Calvinism, rather, she is undoing the covering over, the avoidance, denial, and distortion to which religion has been insistently and repeatedly subjected in South Africa. In a sense, she is allowing the trauma which is religion to come back to traumatisise us.

The Benades are explicitly the product of South Africa's rampant national myth-making and represent the spectre haunting the cultural consciousness. As whites, they are comforted by the trappings of their national myths; yet, on the other hand, as *poor whites*—degenerate whites—they disrupt the maintenance of those same myths that have been such an integral part of the development of South Africa. The mythologizing of the Voortrekkers as a spiritually chosen people and the creation of Boer republics such as the South African Republic and the Orange Free State were the seeds of the modern South

³⁶¹ Horvitz, p. 255.

Africa. The national heritage supplied by the Voortrekkers became the centre of Afrikaner culture; the Calvinist religious principles and the quasi-spiritual implications associated with the Great Trek informed a sense of both cultural superiority and divine mandate. The mythology that arose around the Voortrekker ‘founders’ of South Africa and the political machinery that derived from that common cultural story combined to create a civil religion that enabled and maintained the segregationist policies and the ideology of apartheid.

However, when the basis of this civil religion is shown to be fraudulent, the culturally sustaining mythology invented around the Voortrekkers is put into crisis. If the myths that create the Afrikaner worldview are inauthentic, how can the culture embedded in that view have any claims to moral authority or social cohesion? From this point, cultural instability spreads to the artificial nature of the Afrikaner suburb: ‘For fucking crying in a bucket, Treppie says, how can people lie to themselves like that, with walls full of mock paradise? But that’s what happens, he says, when you take a place like this, full of prefab wagonwheels and aloes, rotten with rubble, and give it a name like Triomf’ (*T*, 112). Treppie is the most evolved, or at least self-aware, of all of the Benades in part because he has direct experience of the hypocrisy of Afrikaner nationalism by way of the abuse he took from Old Pop and by way of his interaction with the outside world. Caught between the hypocrisy of Mol and Pop and the sheer violence of Lambert, Treppie comes to represent the emergent crisis of Afrikaner identity in the post-apartheid world. He wishes that he could somehow transcend the models of Afrikaner masculinity that he inherited from Old Pop and Pop, but seems to realise that he, too, is trapped. This is manifested in the way that Treppie continually talks about his constipation—a physical symbol of his psychological entrapment. The result is an intense self-loathing and a corresponding urge toward self-

destruction. Treppie realises what it is to be a Benade, and thus what it is to be an Afrikaner, is in crisis, and about to change. In some ways he is something of a post-modern subject, revealing and disrupting the grand narratives at work around him. He repeatedly dupes Mol, Pop, and particularly Lambert, then delegitimizes his own authority, as if attempting to help them 'read' their lives with a greater degree of critical insight. He is often frustrated by their inability to learn from this training. He has struggled to come to terms with the lies of his past and his people's past, and while that has caused him suffering, he knows that it is to be preferred to the blindness of Pop. This recognition of the damaging legacy of Afrikaner nationalism is also why he wishes to bring Lambert to self-knowledge, so that the next 'Pop' might see his Afrikaner heritage for what it is. Treppie asks, '[W]hy can't [Lambert] know where he comes from? It's his right, isn't it?' (*T*, 531)

Despite Treppie's exasperation with his family's blindness to the farcical nature of Triomf, the Benades participate fully in repeating the rituals and myths of Afrikaner culture: Mol plays the part of the steadfastly loyal and subservient Voortrekker woman; Treppie never questions his family's right to the land they inhabit; one of Pop's fondest memories is the re-enactment of the Great Trek he took part in as a child; and Lambert unwaveringly believes in voting for the National Party. And yet, although the family is comforted by the trappings of the national myth, as Jack Shear suggests, they are also 'thoroughly inhabited by the spectres of the past'.³⁶² Pop, Mol, and Treppie were witnesses to the razing of Sophiatown when, as Mol recalls, 'The kaffirs screamed and shouted and ran up and down like mad things' trying 'to grab as much as they could to take with when the lorries came' (*T*, 2).

2). The Calvinist religious principles and the quasi-spiritual implications associated with the

³⁶² Jack Shear, 'Haunted House, Haunted Nation: *Triomf* and the South African Postcolonial Gothic', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 22.1 (2006), p. 81.

Great Trek that informed a sense of divine mandate in Afrikaners may provide the Benades with a comforting justification for the razing of Sophiatown, but they are unable to pretend ignorance regarding the treatment of those who were forcibly displaced in order for the Benades to ‘triumph’.

Triomf further illustrates the manner in which biblical discourse is finely woven into the conscious and unconscious daily lives of Afrikaners and remains so even in the new South Africa. In spite of their biblical roots, the Benades (and by extension Afrikaners) still evolved into what society defines as inbred, backward, and violent sinners. Only a few pages into *Triomf*, we see the ‘Witnesses of Triomf’ visiting the Benades in their home. The scene is telling for its humour and the reader quickly gains insight into the role of religion in the family home. No one is actually paying any attention to the two Witnesses as they read from the Bible; Lambert looks at his hands, then at Treppie who is looking at an outdated calendar on the wall above Mol’s head, then he follows a lost ant as it scurries across the floor. He thinks about the girls he’s going to get for his birthday as he watches Pop begin to fall asleep sitting on a crate with his back against the wall. As the Witnesses continue to read Lambert thinks about the last visit they received from the ‘chappy from the NP’ (National Party). ‘Five minutes of talk about the election, five minutes explaining the pamphlets, and then he’s in a sweat’ (T, 37). The exchange that follows beautifully captures the dysfunctional interplay between religion, the National Party and the Benades:

Last time he was talking about the pamphlet with the NP’s new flag on it. Treppie said it looked exactly like a lollipop in a coolie-shop. The sun shines on all God’s children, the oke said, and Treppie said hell, after all this time the NP still thought it was God, with the sun shining out of its backside. God or no God, Pop said, he was

going to miss oranje-blanje-blou a lot. How was a person supposed to rhyme on the new flag? But the NP man's girl, who always comes with him on his rounds, suddenly said: "The more colours, the more brothers!" and then she quickly straightened the straps on her shoulders again. That silly little sun on the pamphlet, his mother said, looked more like the little suns on margarine and floor polish if you ask her. Now she'd really hit the nail on the head, Treppie said. The little sun stood for grease, for greasing. The NP was full of tough cookies, and you had to grease a tough cookie well before you could stuff her, he said. And then he looked so hard at that girl's tits that she got up right there and then, and walked out, dragging the NP chappy behind her. (*T*, 37-38)

Lambert pays no attention to what the Witnesses are saying, instead he thinks about how his mother removes her 'overall' (housecoat) when the Witnesses come to visit. Lambert hates his mother's housecoat; the way it 'smells sour, like the dishrags in the kitchen (*T*, 39) and wishes the NPs would move in with them 'so his mother would never have to wear the overall again' (*T*, 38). So for Lambert, the NPs represent nothing so much as a way to get his mother to stop wearing a garment that he despises. He then muses over the other times his mother removes her housecoat: 'when Pop still wanted to, how she used to take the housecoat off for him,' and 'when she and Treppie go sit in the back room to talk about family matters [...] Family secrets (*T*, 38). Lambert is, of course, referring to the times when his mother is having sex with Pop and Treppie. In this scene, van Niekerk weaves together the absolute dysfunctionality of the Benades with religious fervour and nationalist pride. Religion, nationalism and the incestuous family coalesce to symbolise the extremes of the apartheid philosophy of racial exclusivity, as well as a perversion of the Afrikaner myths of

origin. The Witnesses of Triomf and the men from the NP form the fabric of their lives, and the Benades do their duty as good Afrikaners by listening to the rhetoric. But they don't really pay attention to what they hear, and their lives are in no way a positive testament to either their Calvinist roots or their Afrikaner nationalism.

Hence, this community premised upon a foundational violence³⁶³ is not a successful one. Here the foundational violence of the collective, unified (Afrikaner) community serves only to erase differences and contradictions, and in doing so, closes in on itself. By satirising those religious elements that served to prop up Afrikaner nationalism, van Niekerk shifts the question of community away from one invested in the notion of identity and belonging—there is the sense that the Benades don't actually feel any real sense of belonging to the National Party—to an idea of the community that works to produce more democratic, open and fluid relationships with others in order to foster a sense of 'being with'.

Again, it is Treppie who is not only the most self-aware, but also the most cynical. When the Jehovahs come again to preach to his family, Treppie launches into a tirade about God's intervention:

When the Jehovahs took out their bibles that day, he went and fetched a pile of old newspapers in his room. He threw the papers down in the middle of the lounge and said *that* was where the afflictions of suffering mankind were reported. They mustn't come and talk shit here about wall of jasper and streets of gold. He stood there, telling the Jehovahs he believed what he read in the papers and he hoped it would

³⁶³ Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Mystical "Foundation of Authority"', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, trans. by Mary Quaintance, ed. by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (Routledge: New York, 1992).

all come to an end as soon as possible. He said he didn't pray for God's intervention, he prayed for the End itself, without any mediation. (*T*, 219)

Treppie certainly isn't opining on the value or merits of community in this passage, but perhaps even for him a sense of community is only truly realisable in death: a death that reveals itself as the true community of . . . *others*'.³⁶⁴ Treppie finishes his outburst by pointing out that he'd learnt to know the End when he was still young and found his father hanging from a belt in a Railways truck with his tongue sticking through his teeth. 'Completely humiliated in the struggle with death'. For Treppie, religion brings no solace and provides no answers. He knows that his family, and by extension his people, are just a bunch of 'fuck-ups' who, in order to survive have adopted a 'saving perspective' that tries to explain how they have become the people they are. For Afrikaners—whatever the ethical issues may be—the end of the Old South Africa cannot but be accompanied by feelings of loss. And because the injustice of apartheid has now been thoroughly exposed through, amongst other processes, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there is certainly an element of shame and guilt—disgrace—associated with the figure of the Afrikaner.³⁶⁵ In other words, the mythology that narrativized Afrikaner ideology—and by extension, Afrikaner community—has imploded just as has the Benade family.

Just as the Voortrekker myth allowed white South Africans (particularly Afrikaners) to believe in the divine right to rule, Southern whites also adopted a rhetoric of divine purpose that allowed them to hold on to the Old South and their right to rule. Flannery O'Connor once said, 'I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it

³⁶⁴ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 15.

³⁶⁵ Melissa E. Steyn, 'Rehabilitating a Whiteness Disgraced: Afrikaner *White Talk* in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Communications Quarterly*, 52.2 (2004), p. 150.

is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God'.³⁶⁶ The characters in *Bastard Out of Carolina* feel the shadows cast by a Christ-haunted South even as they are unable to live Christ-centered lives. Allison explores not only the inscription of identity through cultural models of gender, class, and ethnicity, but she also depicts the South's powerful attraction to charismatic religious experience. Her characters—especially Bone—search for a sense of community in meaningful religious experience, just as they are also suspicious of religion's pull. They struggle with religion on a personal level in large part because they recognise the hypocrisy of its tenets.

In turning away from the language and the stories that Daddy Glen and others have used to confer on her a singular identity, Bone looks for a story that will better serve her needs. She turns to gospel music because she suspects that in it is a story that will bring her comfort. This attraction to zealous, charismatic worship has been a hallmark of Southern religious experience and it is one that Bone is driven to by a hunger and need for something she, herself, is unable to articulate: 'I wanted, I wanted, I wanted something—Jesus or God or orange-blossom scent or dark chocolate terror in my throat. Something hurt me, ached in me' (*BOC*, 151). Standing outside a revival meeting, she listens rapturously to a gospel choir: 'The sweet gospel music poured through me in a piercing young boy's voice, and made all my nastiness, all my jealousy and hatred, swell in my heart' (*BOC*, 135). Bone's 'odd but acceptable lust' (*BOC*, 158) for gospel music—a black cultural form, albeit with a hybrid origin—is one of the ways that Allison, like van Niekerk, collapses the space in which white and black reside. In so doing, she also writes against a notion of community premised upon

³⁶⁶ Flannery O'Connor, 'Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction'; Paper read at Wesleyan College for Women, Fall 1960, Macon, Georgia, repr. in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1972).

a foundational violence that erases differences, contradictions, and forms of being and belonging that close down multiple figures of affiliation.³⁶⁷ Ultimately, though, gospel music fails to purge Bone of her hateful emotions, and she realises that it—as well as the story of Christian redemption—is not powerful enough to provide her with what she needs. Indeed, she recognises that it is designed ‘to make you hate and love yourself at the same time,’ to make you both ‘glorified’ and ‘ashamed’ (*BOC*, 136).³⁶⁸ As King points out, of course, what Bone needs is less shame, not more, and while the music does make her feel ‘glorified’, that feeling does not translate into salvation or even real comfort. She comes ‘close to being saved about fourteen times’ but never can go through with it (*BOC*, 151). Bone explains, ‘The magic I knew was supposed to wash over me with Jesus’ blood was absent, the moment cold and empty’ (*BOC*, 152). Eventually Bone’s mother forces her to be baptised, but Bone reports, ‘Whatever magic Jesus’ grace promised, I didn’t feel it’ (*BOC*, 152). Although Bone loves the music, in the end it amounts to little more than ‘a song of absolute grief’ (*BOC*, 203).

Finally giving up on religion, Bone must find hope in other stories. She embraces the Bible’s dark side: ‘I liked Revelations, loved the Whore of Babylon and the promised rivers of blood and fire. It struck me like gospel music, it promised vindication’ (*BOC*, 152). As the

³⁶⁷ Gospel grew out of slave owners desire to Christianise their slaves. Slaves often appropriated traditional hymn melodies but modified the lyrics and added African rhythms. Since the 1950s, various white gospel traditions, derived from black gospel, have emerged. Allison represents Southern gospel, featuring the quartets and family groups resembling those in country music. John Duvall suggests that Bone’s attraction to gospel music ‘is symptomatic of her larger movement toward blackness’ and to her ‘appropriation of black culture’. See John Duvall, *Race and White Identity in Southern Fiction: From Faulkner to Morrison* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 134.

³⁶⁸ John Duvall compellingly puts forth the notion that for Bone, religion is intricately tied up with her sexual abuse and her sexual fantasies. ‘Her response to religion and gospel music reproduces the dynamic of the unspeakable incest she suffers at the hands of her stepfather. Bone goes to revival meetings to come forward as a sinner, yet defers her baptism because she wants to remain on the border between salvation and damnation, a situation that doubles her inability to reveal the abuse she knows she ought to speak. [...] With religion, she is able to substitute God, the transcendent Good Father, for the violating Daddy Glen’. See Duvall, p. 133-34.

novel progresses, Bone's stories begin not only to reflect her sexual confusion, but her hatred as well. As Aunt Alma observes, 'Bone's gotten almost mean-hearted. . . . Something's got to be done' (*BOC*, 119). Understandably consumed with hate, Bone finds herself less and less able to fashion the horror of her life into something more positive. Thus, her stories are now 'full of boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered, babies cooked in pots of boiling beans, vampires and soldiers and long razor-sharp knives' (*BOC*, 119). These are not stories that provide her with an alternate, positive identity and they bear an uncanny resemblance to the stories that Shannon Pearl creates before her death—stories of 'decapitations, mutilations, murder, and mayhem' (*BOC*, 157). But Shannon's death becomes a moment of reckoning—or perhaps recognition—for Bone and as a result her stories become less hateful after she witnesses her friend consumed by fire.

Shannon is the 'ugly' albino girl whom Bone befriends, and whom she fiercely loves and fiercely hates. Despite the two girls' physical dissimilarity—Bone is thin and dark, with black eyes and hair and Shannon is obese, with white skin, eyes, and hair—Shannon ultimately functions not only as 'a visible sign of Bone's feelings of white trash ugliness and shame-rage'³⁶⁹ but as Bone's double. If Bone is a scapegoated figure within her own nuclear family (because of her darkness), Shannon, because of her hyper-whiteness, is a pariah in a broader social context. She is the hyper-white Other. Shannon is large, myopic, and, intriguingly, exceptionally white: 'Six inches shorter than me, Shannon had the white skin, white hair, and pale pink eyes of an albino, though her mama insisted Shannon was no such thing' (*BOC*, 155). A 'lurching hunched creature' (*BOC*, 155) and an object of public ridicule, Shannon is taunted and bullied by other children because she is physically different. Bone

³⁶⁹ J. Brooks Bouson, "'You Nothing but Trash": White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*', *The Southern Literary Journal*, 34.1 (2001), p. 113.

recognises in Shannon a fellow enraged victim of social ostracism and is drawn to her: 'My fascination with her felt more like the restlessness that made me worry the scabs on my ankles. As disgusting as it seemed, I couldn't put away the need to scratch my ankles or hang around what Granny called "that strange and ugly child"' (*BOC*, 156). Much like Lambert, Shannon's grotesqueness depends on something more than mere 'ugliness'. Emphasising her pale, thin skin through which the blue veins are clearly visible, her baby-fine hair, and her pudgy body, Bone describes Shannon as if she were a monstrous infant, one whom only a mother could love: 'Looking back at me from between her mother's legs, Shannon was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction. There had to be something wrong with me, I was sure, the way I went from awe to disgust where Shannon was concerned' (*BOC*, 155-56). Ultimately, Bone recognises Shannon's 'ugliness' and her vulnerability, her hurt and her rage, because they are also Bone's.

Bone not only wishes to protect Shannon, she also hopes that in Shannon she will find a different story, a way to the peace and salvation she so desperately seeks: 'I had the idea that because she was so ugly on the outside, it was only reasonable that Shannon would turn out to be saintlike when you got to know her. [...] A patient and gentle soul had to be hidden behind those pale, sweaty features' (*BOC*, 157). Contrary to Bone's expectations that the ugly Shannon will be a model Christian and act in a patient, wise, and generous way, Shannon, in fact, is filled with hatred for those who shame her. She spends most of her time 'brooding on punishments either she or God would visit' on people who have hurt her (*BOC*, 157). Observing Shannon visibly wilt when a man pronounces her ugly, Bone intones the shaming discourse of dirt and defilement used to describe her own

illegitimate status and white trash identity by calling the man a ‘bastard’ and an ‘ugly sack of shit’ (*BOC*, 165). Bone sees the hate in Shannon’s face, recognises it, and thinks, ‘If there was a God, then there would be justice. If there was justice, then Shannon and I would make them all burn’ (*BOC*, 166).

It is, however, Shannon who burns. In her spectacular demise, Shannon becomes engulfed in flames at a family picnic when she lights a match after spraying too much lighter fluid on the charcoal grill. Various theories have been offered as to the significance of Shannon’s death: Bouson suggests that the fiery death of Shannon ‘depicts the self-consuming nature of her chronic shame-rage’ whilst also dramatising ‘the social death experienced by the socially stigmatized individual and the annihilating power of the other’s contempt’.³⁷⁰ Whilst John Duvall argues that Shannon’s death, ‘within the symbolic logic of the larger narrative, instantiates an element of Bone’s fantasy life that links blackness and queer desire’.³⁷¹ By contrast, Nicholas Lakostik claims that Shannon is ‘evil’ and ‘demonic,’ that she ‘is not someone for whom men should sacrifice, nor is she the most valuable of friends’.³⁷² In fact, he argues, her death can be read ‘as an animal sacrifice to God—at the barbecue instead of the altar’; for ‘Shannon is not one of God’s children, and from what readers can gather about her personality in the story and her fiery death, she will not be spending eternity in heaven’.³⁷³ I would suggest that in Shannon’s ‘disappearance’ from the world we are not meant to question the likelihood of her resurrection, but instead, to view her death as a marker of her infinite difference, and as an exposure of her finite singularity.

In Nancy’s *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, he appears to subscribe to the

³⁷⁰ Bouson, p. 114.

³⁷¹ Duvall, p. 136.

³⁷² Nicholas Lakostik, ‘A Crown of Conflicting Glory: Biblical Allusions in Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*’, *The Explicator*, 66.1 (2007), p. 59.

³⁷³ Lakostik, p. 60.

Resurrection a meaning diametrically opposed to that which it has in Christian dogma. He is insistent in rejecting any reading of the resurrection that would make it tantamount to the resuscitation of a corpse. Nancy states quite bluntly that ‘the resurrection ‘is not a return to life’, that instead it reveals the truth of each life as mortal, and as singular.³⁷⁴ In this way, the Resurrection becomes a parable not about the promise of eternal life, but about the inevitability of death, about the necessary inscription of discontinuity within the continuum of life and being. In other words, for Nancy, resurrection is the letting go of the departed into departure.

Whether or not the ‘crown of burning glory’ (*BOC*, 201) suggests Christ-like sacrifice; Bone sincerely grieves for her friend and just as importantly, is only able to realise the importance of her connection with Shannon after her death. Bone witnesses Shannon’s demise and via that witnessing is presented with her own mortality and the knowledge that she is part of a community that exceeds the confines of her family connections: a community that presents to its members their mortal truth.³⁷⁵ For Bone, then, a sense of community is revealed in the death of her friend, and with that knowledge, the ‘hardheaded anger’ (*BOC*, 203) she had previously felt for Shannon disappears.

Although we are left uncertain as to the likelihood of Shannon’s resurrection, there is a resurrection that does occur in *Bastard Out of Carolina*—Bone’s. Although she is far from a Christ-like figure, Bone enacts a resurrection of sorts at the end of the novel when she lets go of her mother into her departure whilst enacting a departure of her own. Bone is ‘looking for something special,’ ‘something magical,’ stories which can transform her and

³⁷⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. by Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 17-18.

³⁷⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 15.

her world (*BOC*, 207), yet she does not find that magic in gospel music, in the mean-hearted tales she shares with Shannon Pearl, or in her violent sexual fantasies. It is Bone's Aunt Raylene who finally offers her that elusive magic.³⁷⁶ Raylene teaches Bone how to create a different kind of story for herself, one based on something more than hate. At the end of the novel, when Anney visits Bone at her Aunt Raylene's, Bone quickly realises that she and her mother had become lost to one another: 'I had lost my mama. She was a stranger, and I was so old my insides had turned to dust and stone' (*BOC*, 306). The memory of her rape fills her with a despair 'whose only relief would be death' (*BOC*, 307), she even prays for death. But Bone does not die. She lives. Given a new birth certificate with her illegitimacy erased, she is essentially born again, still a Boatwright woman, 'already who [she] was going to be' (*BOC*, 309), but now able to trust the love of her Aunt Raylene as she begins to write an alternative story for herself.

With her Aunt Raylene as a model, Bone begins to realise that there are other ways to live and survive—a defiance of a heteronormative law of the father—ways that, though she would not be able to articulate them as such, violate middle-class and heterosexual traditions that have failed her so completely. In spite of all that Bone must endure, she is able to seize a degree of power for herself. And she does so, in part, by using the space of her Aunt Raylene's front porch. Jocelyn Donlon suggests that 'Raylene's porch is where Bone finds permanent safety and where she can begin to define a 'white trash lesbian' identity—a transgressive identity which violates conventional, middle-class, heterosexual [...] rituals of romance'.³⁷⁷ Bone is not fully aware of her lesbianism as she says, 'What I really wanted was not yet imagined' (*BOC*, 193), yet she is quite aware of her taste for

³⁷⁶ See King, p. 134.

³⁷⁷ Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, "'Born on the Wrong Side of the Porch": Violating Traditions in *Bastard Out of Carolina*', *Southern Folklore*, 55.2 (1998), p.

transgression, and Raylene's lesbianism helps her realise her unconventional preferences. In creating a space for herself, Bone begins to heal as she takes steps to face the world on her own terms—to imagine a new community that will accept her as she is.

A Coming Community

Allison and van Niekerk interrogate and challenge the exclusionary logic of U.S. Southern and South African nationalisms, and the myths of civilisational superiority, moral rectitude and racial purity that such nationalist discourses perpetuated. And they do so by writing against the notion of a mythic, original white man's community from which the Boatwrights and the Benades have been banished. They further question the function of founding traumas that typically play a tendentious ideological role, for example, in terms of the concept of a chosen people or a belief in one's privileged status as victim. The communities they write then become something akin to Giorgio Agamben's 'coming community'—a community 'without destiny and without essence', a 'community that . . . is never present in the first place'.³⁷⁸ An as yet-to-be community, it is also a community of singularities and fragments: 'mediated not by a condition of belonging . . . nor by the simple absence of conditions . . . but by belonging itself'.³⁷⁹ *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf* depict such a community as an active, interruptive idea, a continual unworking of totalising and exclusionary myths of collectivity upon which community (and the nation) is formed.

³⁷⁸ Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 156.

³⁷⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 85. Also see Durrant, p. 111.

Scott Romine suggests that, 'If community is not merely a kind of place, but a mythology of place, it may well be that a certain kind of place must be there to mythologize'.³⁸⁰ Romine considers whether the notion of a Southern community is still a possibility for narrative and makes the general observation that as segregation ended, Southern narrative tended to become more segregated. Whilst he doesn't see this as a necessarily pernicious development, he observes that instead of evolving on a more authentically consensual ground, that coercive relationship (of segregation) has simply disappeared.³⁸¹ That being the case, he then considers to what extent community survives in Southern literature. He suggests that it 'survives vestigially in the sense of place that has long been designated (and often exaggerated) as a distinctive and defining trait of southern literature,' although he contends that place means less now (than it did in the fiction of a half century ago) because less meaning is displaced to it. I would suggest that if place is never 'just place', but is, on some level a name for and a form of ideology,³⁸² then perhaps it is not that less meaning is assigned to place, but that the boundaries of what constitutes 'place' are shifting. Rather than simply a geographical entity, we might begin to consider how places of 'representational trust', spaces 'that can be created, or re-claimed'—perhaps even a type of 'coming to consciousness'—may come to redefine current notions of place. Bone experiences such a 'coming to consciousness' via the manner in which she refuses victimhood. In doing so, she not only refuses Glen the power to represent her identity, but she refuses the larger community—the Southern community—to do so as well. There is the sense that, for Bone, the boundaries of place are shifting. She will not only re-vision her place in the world, but the 'place' of her family, her class, and her sexuality in creating her

³⁸⁰ Romine, p. 203.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid., p. 204.

own personal space of change. ‘Bone’s determination to accept her female, Boatwright identity is part and parcel of a recognition of her individual and communal life—to picture her own self, her South, and her “home”’.³⁸³ Minrose Gwin suggests that for Southern daughters like Bone, ““home” may not be grounded in place, but in the replacement of the self elsewhere’.³⁸⁴ That Bone chooses finally to remain in Greenville with her lesbian Aunt Raylene ‘suggests that the “home” Bone will create will be a queer one, but that it will not be radically “elsewhere”’.³⁸⁵

For the Benades, home is grounded in place, but van Niekerk depicts the manner in which they finally begin to understand that they must at least attempt to live differently in that home and in the spaces they inhabit. As the novel draws to a close, it is Election Day, 27 April 1994, and Lambert finally discovers the family’s secret, the ‘key to his existence’ (*T*, 553). At the same time that he realises the truth of the circumstances surrounding his birth, he also becomes painfully aware of the monstrosity of his own body—‘his large knees, his hollow shins, his knobbly, swollen, monster-ankles, his skew, monster-feet, and monster-toes’ (*T*, 564). He sees himself as a devil-monster and thinks, ‘No wonder! No fucken wonder he’s such a fuck-up!’ (*T*, 565). In his anger he breaks a drawer over Pop’s head as he sleeps, resulting in Pop’s death. A melee ensues during which Mol, Treppie and Lambert are also injured, and although they are all scarred from their violent confrontation (Lambert is wheelchair-bound), afterwards the family exists in an uneasy, subdued peace. Their familial wounds have, to a degree, been mended. Treppie and Lambert no longer abuse Mol, ‘[t]hey’ve learnt by now to leave her alone (*T*, 577), and Treppie—always the most aware—

³⁸³ Henninger, p. 101.

³⁸⁴ Minrose Gwin, ‘Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse: Reading the Incest Story in Southern Women’s Fiction’, in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. by Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 437; cited from Henninger, p. 101.

³⁸⁵ Henninger, p. 101.

is able to turn his gaze to the broader South African community when he says: ‘The most important thing was that they should never again say the word “kaffir”. Not in their own house and also not outside. What was past was past (*T*, 574-75). This is hardly a breakthrough moment for the Benades, they have not suddenly jettisoned the myths of Afrikaner nationalism and civilisational superiority in which they have been so heavily invested and to which they have so tightly clung. Yet there is at least the beginning of an awareness that in order to imagine an alternate way of living—one that doesn’t include abusing each other—they must start to embrace the knowledge that they are always already part of a larger South African community.

These texts are also written around the ultimately untouchable figure of the wound: ‘bodies of misery, bodies of famine, beaten bodies, prostituted bodies, mutilated bodies, infected bodies, swollen bodies, bodies over-nourished, too *body-built*, too erectile, too orgasmic’.³⁸⁶ The wound is only its own sign, says Nancy, signifying only the suffering of a body, not a sorrow, not a sickness, but an evil. This relentlessly exterior contact with other bodies that drives the body ever further within itself (the body’s extreme concentration within itself) is, for Nancy, a wound opened up on itself, the sign of a self so far reabsorbed into itself that it’s no longer a sign, no longer a self. But whereas Nancy sees the body covered with stigmata, injuries, fractures, sores, humiliations and fears as a wound that won’t heal,³⁸⁷ Allison and van Niekerk provide us with an alternative to such an image. Despite the constant gaze (and more) to which the characters in these texts are exposed, there is also a space created for healing, and for the beginning of a turning away from suffering and the, at times, self-inflicted wound.

³⁸⁶ Nancy, *Corpus*, p. 79.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

What Sustains Us

Bastard Out of Carolina and *Triomf* remind us that, in the words of Brian Carpenter, ‘what sustains us is not necessarily what is good for us, whether it is public policy or cultural myth’.³⁸⁸ The myths of Afrikaner nationalism certainly aren’t good for the Benades whose lives are an ongoing catastrophe and the Boatwrights spend their lives rebelling against Southern romantic narratives of white supremacy and southern womanhood. What makes these families so compelling is that they are partly self-destructive and partly casualties of history. In depicting them, both authors resist both the determinism of personal pathology ('those mad inbreeds') and the determinism of ideology ('those poor victims of history'). Instead, both *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf* activate an imaginary space—the realm of psychology, pathology, ideology—just as they also inhabit the entirely physical locations of Greenville County, South Carolina and the suburb of Triomf. There is evident a particularly Southern logic of violence in the junction of this imaginary and physical space; a realm where race, religion and violent foundation myths are played out in devastating ways. These novels excavate the rubble beneath the white man’s nationalism; the myth of Afrikaner nationalism to which the Benades, in a half-blind tribal way, have so long been loyal, and the ideology of white supremacy to which the Boatwrights are drawn, and against which they vehemently rebel. In this excavation, these stories serve as national allegories in which the family serves as a microcosm of the violent nation. The characters in these texts experience an at times overwhelming sense of absence and shame that manifests itself as an identity crisis because their reality and their cohesive myths never actually resembled one another. In other words, they attempt to come to terms with the collapse of a collective narrative in

³⁸⁸ Carpenter, p. xxiii.

which they have never really played a part. As the national myth disintegrates, so do the Benade and the Boatwright families.

The very accessibility of the poor white subject in these texts is ‘figured in terms of a “queer” sexuality that effectively re-inscribes the white trash body within a frame of middle-class anxiety and re-assurance. Sex—excessive, perverse, sometimes comic, and always highly visible—becomes a primary marker of “white trash” representation’.³⁸⁹ It is these now-classic visualisations of white poverty against which Allison, and I would argue, even van Niekerk write. This right of access to poor white bodies renders them visible only to the extent that they support a national imaginary as the demonized or comically corrupt “other” against which the purer nation (both South Africa and the United States) is formed.³⁹⁰ It’s a very difficult position for poor whites to occupy: they are thought to be (or at least think themselves) superior based on an ‘inherent’ racial superiority (a myth) and then when they’re found lacking, they become subject to another myth, the myth of ‘trash’ and degeneracy.

There is a sense that in attempting to reconcile the absence experienced in their daily lives with the myths upon which they try and form an identity, the characters in these extraordinary novels are destined to fail. As Dominick LaCapra says:

One may even argue that it is ethically and politically dubious to believe that one can overcome or transcend structural trauma or constitutive absence to achieve full intactness, wholeness, or communal identity and that attempts at transcendence or

³⁸⁹ Henninger, p. 89.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

salvation may lead to the demonization and scapegoating of those on whom unavoidable anxiety is projected.³⁹¹

The shame of being amongst ‘the chosen’ but never having had the socio-economic or political power that such nationalist myths imply courses through the characters in these texts. They use each other to try and find a way out of their own perceived shaming deficiencies just as they hold on to each other for their very survival. In the end, the stories we tell ourselves matter more than we know. The Boatwrights and the Benades constantly narrate their own lives, telling themselves stories, whether true or false—going over past experiences whose wounds are still unhealed, or spinning elaborate fictions to protect themselves, their family secrets and their tenuous sanity. They do what they do to try and survive the cruelties of life, and as such, they are very much representative of the possibilities of being within the human condition. For Nancy, this human condition manifests itself in community—the ontological social condition that, according to him, we are always already in. In other words, every form of being-with starts out from this condition. The poor whites depicted in *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Triomf* strive for community; the Benades only begin to realise its potential when they are able to make a physical connection with those they consider Other, whilst Bone must realise community by finding her own safe place from which to re-imagine an alternate mode of living. Nancy would insist that whether they see themselves as already in (a community) or not, they, in fact, always are. Perhaps, then, what is needed for them to begin to work through the collective mourning that threatens to overwhelm them is a recognition of this condition—an understanding that if all things co-exist within the open (in the sense that bodies are always

³⁹¹ LaCapra, ‘Trauma, Absence, Loss’, p. 727.

already open), then their relation can only be one of mutual exteriority *inside*.³⁹² A recognition that they are part of a ‘being-in-common’ and a shared, constant exposure to finitude that makes up community. Rather than embracing an inward turning incestuousness and violence, they might then be able to explore the reasons for their chronic shame and insularity. And they might further begin to recognise that in South Africa and the American South, an ideology of white supremacy coupled with apartheid/segregation (a Master Race philosophy) did not end up benefitting the vast majority of whites as intended, on the contrary, it has brought disastrous and crippling consequences.

³⁹² Morrey, p. 21.

Conclusion

A Southern and South African Community

[. . .] each of us remembers and forgets in a pattern
whose labyrinthine windings are an identification
mark no less distinctive than a fingerprint.

--Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

Leigh Anne Duck has suggested that early comparative scholarship on South Africa and the United States tended to investigate and explain the similarities and differences between these contexts rather than the interactions between them. By contrast, Duck notes how ‘Recent work has powerfully challenged that trend, revealing how cross-cultural exchange and observation shaped identities and experiences within each country’.³⁹³ Such a process of cross-cultural exchange has certainly influenced the comparative approach adopted in this study. Rather than focusing on specific examples of textual interactions, however, this dissertation has sought to trace the ways in which the American South and South Africa are mutually informative ‘mirrors’—far from identical, but able to invoke insight precisely through their differences.³⁹⁴

In a note at the end of the essay, ‘The Inoperative Community’, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the writing of our being-in-common, or of our being-with, as a community of

³⁹³ Duck, p. 38. Also see, Rita Barnard, ‘Of Riots and Rainbows’.

³⁹⁴ Duck, p. 39; see also Lesley Marx, ‘Home on the Range: The Americanization of My Father’, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 7.3 (2006), p. 9.; Mary E. Pope, ‘Holding Up the “Mottled Mirror”: Teaching South African Literature in the United States’, in *South Africa and the United States Compared: The Best of Safundi, 2003-2004*, ed. by A. Offenburger, C. Saunders, and C.J. Lee (New Haven: Safundi Publications, 2005), pp. 205-10, and Kristen Klaaren, ‘Teaching in the Mirror’: The Pedagogy of Prejudice in Cross-Cultural Comparison’, in *South Africa and the United States Compared: The Best of Safundi, 2003-2004*, pp. 211-25.

writing: ‘intercalated, alternating, shared texts, like all texts, offering what belongs to no one and returns to everyone: the community of writing, the writing of the community’.³⁹⁵ It is the spirit of this notion of a community of writing and the writing of community that has informed my approach to the body of writing assembled in this study. Amongst other things, by examining a selection of literary texts about South Africa and the American South, I have attempted to expose a community of writing, small as it might be, of texts that in their narrative possibilities constitute a writing of community incorporating these two places. As Nancy suggests, this would be a ‘sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature’.³⁹⁶ Perhaps this non-essentialist understanding of community and the literary allows us to escape the borders of South Africa and the American South (the metaphorical borders of the South) to consider how writing exposes ‘*the limit upon which communication takes place*’, and how literature serves as a ‘voice of interruption’.³⁹⁷

I began this comparative project by considering Sam Durrant’s work, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, with an aim to further explore his thoughts on whether it is possible to found community on a recognition of our infinite difference. It is a question worth asking for several reasons, not least of which is because despite the fact that we know that an ‘original presence’ is unreachable, perhaps this longing for immediacy and authenticity—a nostalgic longing for an ‘original community’—should still be taken seriously. To that end, in examining six texts from South Africa and the American South, I have argued that an emphasis on coherence and unity is misplaced. We must learn to live with fragments—of narrative, of subjectivity, and of community. Thus, woven through the narratives examined in the previous chapters is the motif of the fragment, ‘a sign of the

³⁹⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 42.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 67, 62.

ineffable and of the disruption of epistemological certainty, which is figured variously as the piece, the shard, the swatch, the clipping, the partial story, the dissected body, the atomized family, and the arrested life'.³⁹⁸ For example: Sutpen's fragmented and speculative story; Dulcie's fragmented and exposed body; Sethe's attempt to remember a fragmented, dismembered family and community; Lydia's refusal to allow her singular trauma to become subsumed in a national narrative of unity; the Benades, 'Pieced together and panel beaten . . . Throw-away pieces, leftover rags, waste wool, old wives' tales, hearsay' (*T*, 569)—the inevitable result of disfiguring ideological myths and narratives. And finally, Bone Boatwright: a resourceful protagonist who 're-members' her past and utilises the power to fragment as a weapon against her victimiser. Fragmentation is thus depicted as a sign of agency even as it is a marker of vulnerability. Hence, if stories of trauma resist, or prove incapable of being told (Morrison's unspeakable thoughts unspoken) and the narratives remain fragmentary and even elusive, somewhere in that fragmentation there may lie an alternative understanding of healing that is not necessarily predicated on attaining narrative coherence, but rather on recognition.³⁹⁹

Just as Maurice Blanchot maintains that the fragment need not be read in relation to any previous or future desired unity,⁴⁰⁰ Durrant suggests that the success of community lies in 'its capacity to remain perpetually open to the difference of the other, to the possibility of different others and not yet imagined modes of being'.⁴⁰¹ The novels examined in the previous chapters present us with opportunities to consider such alternative modes

³⁹⁸ Molly Abel Travis, 'Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 40.2 (2010), p. 233.

³⁹⁹ See Buxbaum, 'Remembering the Self', p. 83.

⁴⁰⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. by Lycette Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 40; and *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 308. Also see Buxbaum, 'Remembering the Self', p. 91.

⁴⁰¹ Durrant, p. 111.

of being—to consider how Nancy's thoughts on a non-immanent or non-closed community function as a deconstructive interruption of the unifying myths of Southern and South African forms of community. In reading and comparing these texts, we are left with a sense that those communities instantiated through racism might begin to mourn and to heal—to work through those experiences that traumatised—by exploring and embracing an always already 'being-with'. We might further heed Agamben's call for an '*inessential* commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence' and in so doing, better realise how '*the communication of singularities . . . does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence*'.⁴⁰²

Any scholarly attempt at a comparison of South African and American Southern literature must first and foremost recognise that there is simply not one literature that fully represents either of these diverse places. Michael Chapman discusses the heated response in South Africa to the publication of his work, *Southern African Literatures*; for Chapman, such arguments involved the matter of identity politics:

[W]hose language, culture, or story can be said to have authority in South Africa when the end of apartheid has raised challenging questions as to what it is to be a South African, what it is to live in a new South Africa, whether South Africa is a nation, and, if so, what its mythos is, what requires to be forgotten and what remembered as we scour the past in order to understand the present and seek a path forward into an unknown future. What is our story when storytelling in its most harrowing form occupies the attention of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

⁴⁰² Agamben, pp. 18-19.

with families and friends recollecting those who were bludgeoned to death by the forces of the racist state?⁴⁰³

Although I use the term 'South African literature' throughout this thesis, the reality of the situation is that South Africa is a country made up of communities that have always been linguistically and culturally diverse. The limitations imposed by my inability to speak or read any of the 11 African languages except for English means that I approach this comparative project from a very limited perspective—that is, the texts I consider are all either originally written in English, or are later translated into my native language. There is, then, a rich literature left unexamined. Similarly, although the American South is much less diverse in terms of language than is South Africa, it is similarly difficult to define 'Southern literature'. One might consider Southern literature in terms of generic forms that are, if not uniquely Southern, substantially recognisable as contingent upon Southern identifiers: geographic, social, cultural, as well as historical and linguistic contingencies that constitute 'the South'. But this still doesn't answer the question, 'What is Southern literature?' Or, 'What does South African literature look like?'

With these limitations in mind, I have attempted to examine the relationship between literary culture and political life in countries with fiercely contested histories. But as any scholar must, I have had to choose what to include and what to exclude as I have undertaken this monumental and rewarding task. More space would certainly have seen the inclusion of works by the South African Nobel Laureates, J.M. Coetzee, and Nadine Gordimer, as well as the American writer, Cormac McCarthy—for all three writers have much to say about trauma, violence and storytelling. In particular, Faulkner's American

⁴⁰³ Michael Chapman, 'The Problem of Identity: South Africa, Storytelling, and Literary History', *New Literary History*, 29.1 (1988), p. 85.

South and Coetzee's South Africa bear an uncanny resemblance to one another. Both writers explore the notion that identities are constructed by, amongst other things, an attachment to a particular space; by our relation to each other through race and class, and through our notions of home.⁴⁰⁴ Yet it is not only Faulkner's South and Coetzee's South Africa that strikingly resemble one another; there are also similarities to be found in the violence of Coetzee's South Africa and Morrison's American South, and even in Faulkner's and van Niekerk's depictions of the ways in which class, religion and violent foundation myths are played out in devastating ways in their respective Souths.

Given the disjunctions of cultural history, ethnicity, and literary tradition between these different sites of production, it may seem that a comparative reading of texts from South Africa and the American South risks a reduction of specificity. Yet such a concern would overlook the uncanny echoes that resonate between the texts comparatively examined – echoes that this thesis has sought to amplify. Despite very significant sociological and historical differences between the United States and South Africa—such as dissimilar racial classification systems and populations ratios—some parallels have proven persistent. In addition to the more often noted parallels between black American and South African life—or the transnational links relating African-American culture and black South African modernity—there are broader resemblances that stem from the trauma associated with lack and loss, desire and death. For all of the texts examined in this study are centred on a deep sense of lack and loss of some kind, or are what André Bleikansten calls ‘texts

⁴⁰⁴ See Nkosi, p. 166.

spun around a primal gap'.⁴⁰⁵ Lewis Nkosi writes about that loss in a specifically South African context that is equally apposite to the American South:

What strikes me as quite significant about South Africans is the feeling all groups share of having "lost" something through a devilish cunning of history; a plenitude that once filled their lives seems to have been forfeited, perhaps "lost" for ever [sic] through circumstance, through careless indiscretion or through the machinations of malicious adversaries, above all through official policy that led a dominant group to suppose that in order to cultivate and maintain its identity it had to deny the humanity of others; obviously this has created terrible guilt that constitutes the very "hole" where there should be "wholeness".⁴⁰⁶

How that 'hole' is dealt with and whether it can be addressed through a process of mourning, or whether that absence signals a state of melancholy in which trauma is doomed to endless repetition, is a central focus of all of the texts examined in the chapters that form this thesis. There is a sense, however, that so much of what is sought by the characters in these texts is, and will always be, unassimilable: Beloved's ghost, David's (and Dulcie's) story, Lydia's pain, Bone's legitimacy.

These texts also highlight the manner in which attempting to construct an identity around a hole—or primal gap—that is founded on a mythical concept of racial purity or an ideology that frames a particular ethnic group as a chosen people, engenders a split personality in many Southern and South African citizens. Such a form of illness is shrewdly diagnosed in Coetzee's novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, when Magda says, 'I am heir to a

⁴⁰⁵ André Bleikansten, *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1976), p. 53.

⁴⁰⁶ Nkosi, p. 171.

space of natal earth which my ancestors found good and fenced about. To the spur of desire we have only one response: to capture, to enclose, to hold. But how real is our possession?⁴⁰⁷ Indeed, all of the works previously examined inevitably end up asking a variant form of Magda's question: 'How real is our possession?' For how real are the stories constructed in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *David's Story*? How real is the story that Shreve and Quentin construct about the murder of Charles Bon? How real is the story told by David or his amanuensis? Or for that matter, how real is Dulcie's story? How real is the child Beloved in Morrison's text, and how real is the identity Mikey constructs for himself once he learns that he is the bitter fruit of a violent rape? Lastly, how real are the stories of Afrikaner and Southern white nationalism that have both enabled and circumscribed lower-class whites like the Benades and the Boatwrights? What is clear is that the inability to possess, verify and assimilate trauma does not lessen its impact. The traumas depicted in these texts are real, whether their source can be verified or not.

Despite disagreement today over the mechanisms through which trauma is experienced and remembered, critics generally converge in defining the phenomenon as an overwhelming and life-threatening experience, accompanied by feelings of extreme fright and helplessness. Viewed thus, trauma is a break from the norm, an interruption of an existing sense of the self as anchored in a decipherable past. Within this framework, discussions of phenomena such as colonialism, racism, and cultural assimilation—phenomena in which psychic violence and alienation from history *are* the norm—have been limited. The literature examined in the previous chapters serves to broaden our understanding of the ways in which trauma is experienced and remembered by focusing on those 'insidious traumas' that do violence to the soul and spirit.

⁴⁰⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 124.

Cathy Caruth argues that a textualist approach such as that attempted in this thesis, can afford us a unique access to history. Indeed, it makes possible a ‘rethinking of reference’, which aims not at ‘eliminating history’ but ‘resituating it in our understanding, that is, at permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not’.⁴⁰⁸ By bringing the insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artefacts that bear witness to traumatic histories, critics can gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation. Caruth insists on the ethical significance of this critical practice. She claims that ‘the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand’ a ‘new mode of reading and of listening’⁴⁰⁹ that would allow us to pass out of the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience. In a ‘catastrophic age’ such as ours, according to Caruth, ‘trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures’.⁴¹⁰

With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, so the argument goes, listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community. In listening to the traumas of the characters in these texts from the American South and South Africa, I have also attempted to trace the founding limits of community—an idea that has much in common with Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense of what community means as well as Durrant’s invitation to ‘participate in a ceaseless labor of remembrance, a labor which radically redefines the borders of community’.⁴¹¹ Community is the limit, the excess, and the openness where we can experience what is common to us: our being singular and our being mortal. Community, in the sense Nancy gives it, cannot be

⁴⁰⁸ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 11.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴¹⁰ Caruth, ‘Introduction’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 11.

⁴¹¹ Durrant, p. 1.

defined in the positive terms of propositional logic. Rather, community realises itself in the sharing of the limits of a meaningful community, or an understanding of its conditions of impossibility.

One of the conditions of impossibility that Nancy's inoperative community—a community without unity—appears to overlook is the way in which shared histories and collective memories of violence and oppression have been denied a voice. It is the refusal of these histories and memories to be silenced that this thesis has sought to track. At times the articulation of such collective histories and memories is loud and demanding, at other times it is nothing more than a whisper. Although unanticipated and surprising in its persistence and continuity—surprising in that I had not intended for it to be a presence in every textual comparison—the articulation of such histories and memories is there, nevertheless, asking that we listen through our departures to hear the anguish of such histories just as we also listen to the silence that contains their strength. These are the histories and memories of women. In his work on Nadine Gordimer, Stephen Clingman writes, 'In a white-male-dominated culture, which has abrogated to itself a fiction of romantic bravado [...] it has frequently been women (both black and white) who have been amongst [...] the most uncompromising witnesses of the culture's social ills'.⁴¹² In many respects, women have both the most to lose and the most to gain in these stories, hence the tone of ambiguity that characterises many of these works. With perhaps the exception of *Triomf*, these stories feature strong, agential, and rebellious female subjects who refuse to be conceived of as the passive, symbolic holders of a dominant history. The gendered memories of and about

⁴¹² Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), p. 105.

women provide a counterpoint to narratives that have, in Wicomb's words, 'failed to imagine the world from another's point of view' (*DS*, 87).

Through the examination of narratives of myth, memory and the body in these texts, a logic of violence emerges that is specific to the contexts of South Africa and the American South. One could even go so far as to say that, in the United States, the South is notorious for its violence. South Africa has undertaken a more public engagement with violence as, according to Mark Sanders, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission 'may have been the most massive public reckoning with a legacy of political violence in recent times'.⁴¹³ Amongst other things, the Truth Commission provoked questions about the nature of violence and probed the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary violence. Perhaps, then, in its singularity and unverifiability, literature has been able to respond to the criticism levied against the TRC that its mandate bound it to turn its focus toward extreme instances of violence at the expense of the ordinary violence of apartheid. For it is works of fiction such as those examined in the chapters which form this thesis that have explored the fine distinctions between ordinary and extraordinary violence in ways that a commission cannot, or is perhaps unable to do.

The six texts examined in this study give voice to ordinary violence in varied and complex ways: via a story that delves into the violence conducted against women in the South African liberation movements; and by means of two tales that exemplify the tension between the narrative and anti-narrative dimensions of trauma; by depicting home as the site of psychic trauma that sheds light on dominant spatial regimes of apartheid and slavery, and the racialised forms of sexual violence that underpinned these spatial regimes; and

⁴¹³ Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, p. 75.

finally through an examination of how violent foundation myths inextricably tied up with religion are played out in significant ways in the American South and South Africa.

I have, furthermore, attempted to heed Paul Gilroy's charge that 'the spirit in which we undertake' the analysis of racism is 'critical'.⁴¹⁴ In doing so, I have not only focused on race and racial conflict, but have attempted to bring other manifestations of similarity and difference, such as culture, class, and gender, into view. It is my hope that in undertaking a comparative study of South African and US Southern literature, I have illuminated new aspects of each of these regional literatures and opened the door for new ways of thinking about racial division and political culture. For, as Duck points out, 'As scholars both within and without South Africa describe a system of "global apartheid", comparative study of these two locales may help not only to "pave the way for a genuinely global history" but also to think about how human expression has shaped and responded to these social dynamics'.⁴¹⁵ In essence, I have tried to do justice to the manner in which twentieth and twenty-first century writers of the American South and South Africa attempt to tell stories that resist being told, and at the same time, restore dissenting voices that have been repressed to audibility and make their marginalised experiences visible.

If imagining the world from another's point of view is possible, all of the writers examined in this study illustrate the kinds of struggles such a desired outcome necessitates. The requisite ideological and discursive struggles help stage what Wicomb has favourably termed a 'conflictual model of society', one in which dissonant voices 'render problematic the demands of one in relation to the others and where discursive formations admit of

⁴¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 31.

⁴¹⁵ Duck, p. 42. See also M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 166-67; P. Alexander and R. Halpern, 'Introduction: Comparing Race and Labour in South Africa and the United States', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30.1 (2004), p. 7.

cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs'.⁴¹⁶ So it is against the backdrop of a picture that accommodates many histories and genealogies that the claim by any single voice to authority or truth is automatically called into question. In so doing, we can only answer Magda's question, 'How real is our possession?' by replying, 'only as real as the stories we tell'.

⁴¹⁶ Zoë Wicomb, 'To Hear the Variety of Discourses,' in *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory, and Criticism, 1990-1994*, ed. by M.J. Daymond (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 47.

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