

Ewald Mengel, Michela Borzaga and Karin Orantes, eds. *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in South Africa: Interviews*. Matatu 38. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010. 256 pp.

More often than not, a volume of interviews presents a disconnected series of talks that loosely share a general topic. This collection is different. The multidisciplinary perspectives from literary authors and critics, psychologists and public intellectuals add up to a fascinating and complex picture of some salient issues in South Africa. The volume results from a collaborative project, which does not impose Western academic concepts of trauma on a postcolonial country but takes into account perspectives of participant observers in the field, revealing an intricate knowledge of the

country and its issues. I will discuss the arguments systematically according to the major questions tackled in the volume: What are causes and symptoms of trauma? Who suffered and suffers from trauma under which circumstances? Is trauma an individual problem or a collective damage? How does traumatic memory differ from narrative memory in various forms and institutional settings? What are the chances of healing? What does sharing trauma mean to 'victims' or 'survivors' and listeners or readers?

The discussion of trauma is often based on the psychoanalytic paradigm of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as it is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association, which van der Kolk and McFarlane refer to in their publication *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. The two psychologists claim that individuals are traumatized if they cannot "integrate the reality of particular experiences, and [...]replay] the trauma in images, behaviors, feelings, physiological states, and interpersonal relationships."⁸ People suffering from PTSD experience the traumatizing events of the past as if they were present, interfering with their everyday lives. While most interviewees share this standard view of traumatic symptoms, they question the notion of a single traumatic event, and specify the conditions of trauma and ways of coping with trauma in South Africa. The apartheid regime and its aftermath created conditions that have traumatized many people in multiple ways. Practitioners from the Trauma Centre in Cape Town confirm the pervasive effect of daily "continuous trauma" in townships and the problem that internalizing PTSD "has become a way of life, of surviving" (89). They deal with a whole range of traumatized people, torture victims from Southern Africa, ex-combatants, immigrants suffering from multiple traumas of xenophobic attacks and rape. The professor of psychology Don Foster confirms this view of perpetuated trauma and clamours for adding a political perspective on trauma, which goes beyond the Western medical perspective, focusing on the problem on the individual rather than the social level (106-108). The writer Susan Mann considers the 'normalization' of violence in contemporary South Africa as evidence of a traumatized society, albeit with racial differences (54). Alex Boraine, professor of law and deputy chair of the TRC, and the author and professor of literature Zoë Wicomb argue that South Africa is not collectively traumatized as many young people are too young to remember the atrocities of apartheid (21, 145). The psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela combines the individual perspective and the general situation of particular groups, for example black women threatened by abject poverty and rape. These individuals may suffer from "the lived memory of trauma" (180), the experience of a present that is just as traumatic as the past. The writer Sindiwe Magona and the freelance academic Helen Moffett support the gendered view. Moffett alerts us to the problem of rape narratives and recognition, inflected by race, class, generation and circumstances. Moffett warns that the discourse of race or culture too easily gives way to blaming black men and ignoring white men as perpetrators of sexual violence, or the other way round, exculpating black perpetrators by reverting to African 'culture' in order to justify the abuse of

8 Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. New York: Guilford, 1996. Repr. (excerpt) in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. 487-502.

women. Apart from giving rape a more prominent space in the public media, she grants literature a privileged role in raising awareness and countering the gendered ignorance of women's bodies and their traumatic experience of rape.

How does traumatic memory differ from narrative memory in various forms and institutional settings? What are the chances of healing? The narrative forms and therapeutic functions of representation have given rise to heated debates. Many psychologists hope that re-telling disruptive trauma and re-living the experience leads to its re-integration in narrative memory. They consider a coherent, meaningful narrative as a means to healing, whereas poststructuralist critics maintain that since trauma per se is inarticulate and inexplicable the only possible or adequate representation is a disruptive account that defies closure. The psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and the literary scholar Chris van der Merwe take an intermediate position, conceding that even if victims cannot hope for complete articulation and closure as according to Cathy Caruth's postmodern position, the attempt at narrative emplotment helps to cope with trauma (180). Many interviews address the oral testimony at the TRC. The historian Neville Alexander and the psychologists Don Foster and Ashraf Kagee grant that the TRC was a politically valuable institution that gave voice to the repressed and paved the way for a fairly smooth transition to democracy. However, they seriously doubt that the TRC had a large and positive social and psychological impact. Public testimony and the confrontation of the victims with perpetrators could lead to re-traumatisation, not healing, and the TRC did not provide adequate psychological care or treatment (122, 130, 163).

Written forms of representing trauma take shape in the considerable rise of autobiographies and memoirs, which invite readers to share and acknowledge the trauma of others. The literary scholar Thlalo Raditlhalo's rather dogmatic and narrow stance on legitimacy, truth, style and autobiography comes as a surprise in a rather nuanced chorus of voices that ring from the volume as a whole. First of all, he questions the authority or legitimacy of exiled or ex-South African authors and scholars alike without giving a particular argument (220-223). According to Raditlhalo, the truth of traumatic apartheid is simple and autobiographies have to present it in a simple and factual way since anything resembling a postmodern style would be equivalent to invention and only find its legitimate space in fiction (216). However, he appreciates that literature on trauma is often based on autobiographical experience, for example in the writings of Sindiwe Magona, Maxine Case and André Brink. André Brink stresses the author's responsibility to be there and bear witness to traumatic reality, but also to move beyond obscene voyeurism and the limitations of involved eyewitness accounts towards a more detached imagination of the real (6-7). For Case, Brink and Wicomb, the silence of the repressed is as important as the words that can be found to express trauma, "articulating the inarticulate" (Brink 8). The writers Mann and Wicomb, and the literary critic Anne Gagiano would maintain that non-realist style does not take its origin in postmodern playfulness, as Raditlhalo would suspect, but in disrupted lives and traumatic memory.

Sharing trauma with listeners or readers is considered helpful to the victim, but not necessarily writing as such if the victim is left alone with his or her text and the reiteration of the trauma (Kagee 135-36). The concept of the 'inarticulate victim' tends to disempower the survivor as a helpless sufferer in need of the articulate expert. However, the term 'survivor' with its positive individual outlook tends to neglect the real

causes of trauma that need to be addressed. Sindiwe Magona says that once the victim, who more often than not is female, shares her trauma, she feels relieved that she is not alone (37). Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela stresses that empathy, the imaginative participation of an audience, is a crucial form of acknowledging the victim (182). However, the listener or reader may be burdened in turn by sharing the trauma of others, as the Commissioner of Transitional Justice, Alex Boraine, experienced himself (139). Gagiano and Brink argue that literature is of prime importance to sharing trauma and creating empathy among those who have not experienced it (191). Gagiano makes an important point concerning the ethical function of literature, which implies the rejection of binary simplifications, a complex argument she finds in Bessie Head's texts (among others), dissolving "the complete dichotomy between perpetrator and victim, which whitewashes the victim" (203). While Gagiano adamantly rejects the perpetrators' absolution from guilt meted out at the TRC, she calls for de-othering the perpetrator and demands the acknowledgement of the victim's "complicity and contamination" (203) and his or her potential capability of violence (199-203).

In sum, the collection of interviews is very focused and highly stimulating. Last but not least, the introduction, annotations, and the 'Works Cited' after each interview contribute to the great usefulness and interest of the volume to both beginners and experts in the field.

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