Chapter 11

Feminism and Literacy: Tortured and Traumatised Femininity in Njabulo Ndebele's *Death of a Son*

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Introduction

The plight of women in a male-dominated world is well known. There are numerous accounts of women's militancy in challenging the oppression and marginalisation imposed on them by patriarchy. At the institutional level, such militancy has resulted in structures and practices that have indeed improved the fate of women, and it can thus be argued that both women and men have assisted women in their struggle for liberation. Although this chapter deals with women's militancy, it focuses on a text written by a man. Njabulo Ndebele, a fiction writer and critic, characterised singer Brenda Fassie as an icon of 'verbal ungovernability' (Ndebele 2007: 208).[22] Taking a cue from Ndebele's description, this chapter is devoted to exploring this issue of 'verbal ungovernability' in the short story *Death of a Son* (1996), especially in the context of women's experiences during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings. I argue that *Death of a Son* intensifies the work of the TRC—in its content and especially through its particular narrative framing device. Although reference will be made to different texts, this study will be limited to Njabulo's *Death of a Son* as a text that helps theorise about the future of post-apartheid literature, an intervention in a post-TRC culture. An attempt will be made to move that culture in a more ethical direction.

As Ndebele (2007: 208) observes in *Thinking of Brenda*, 'Brenda's dramatic entry into the entertainment industry through her hit song '*Weekend Special*' was accompanied by the media's discovery of her 'outrageous brazenness'. Claiming the 'trademark' of 'a shocker [who liked] to

22 Brenda Fassie's popularity was such that she became known simply as Brenda. Girl, daughter, sister, mother, Brenda later assumed the appellation Ma Brr to suit her advancing age. On Brenda Fassie, see Andrew Whaley's *Brenda Remembered* and Lauren Beukes' *The Magnificent Ma Brr – Brenda Fassie*.

create controversy', Brenda dredged the private into the public. Her statement to journalist Charl Blignaut in the 1992 interview 'In Bed with Brenda' is typical: 'Some men cry /Because I sing /I sing when I make love/I sing for them' (Ndebele 2007: 213).[23] By shifting attention from the salacious details that her statement seems to promise initially, Brenda foregrounds her desire to be heard. This desire is also apparent in her songs, especially '*Memeza*', in which she calls out to her audience to listen even as she is singing at the top of her voice. It is as if the most obvious public statement masks the singer's private experience of pain (Nichols 2005). Brenda commented on the '*Memeza*' song: 'I've been shouting and no one wanted to hear me. When I sing this song, I want to cry' (Whaley 2004: 67). Torn between the public and the private, the discourse of the iconic Brenda raises the need to explore further the private experiences of Black African women, which became public during testimonies given by victims of apartheid during the TRC hearings.[24] Recounting the history of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment in '*Black President*' and her brother's imprisonment for activism in '*Good Black Woman*', Brenda emerged as one of the early public witnesses to apartheid atrocities, anticipating the riveting testimonies of the TRC. This desire to be heard, which is cast in the tension between the private and the public, will be used in this chapter as a frame for critical reading of Ndebele's *Death of a Son*.

This chapter sheds light on the interregnum in South African cultural and language roles in making nationhood and their consolidation in representations of women. The chapter considers how, during the transitional era, the category 'woman' was created in South African literature in the form of a language reflected in short story narratives. The chapter looks at how culture and language contribute to performances of female subjectivities while both constructing a nation and troubling the nation under construction. The performance of female subjectivities can be traced back to both fictional and non-fictional works by some of the foremost writers during South Africa's transition to democracy: Mamphela Ramphela's *A Life* (1995), J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000), Antjie Krog's *There was this Goat* (2009) and Sindiwe Magona's

23 Charl Blignaut's interview with Brenda is presented in the documentary *Brenda Fassie: Not a Bad Girl* (1993).

24 The TRC was established by an Act of Parliament, the National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995. The Commission was organised into three main committees: The Human Rights Violations Committee, which organised the hearings given by victims of apartheid; the Amnesty Committee, which was charged with hearing appeals for amnesty by those who engaged in human rights violations for political reasons; and the Reparations Committee, which made recommendations for reparations to victims of past violence. For transcripts of reports and testimonies given before the various branches of the TRC, visit the official website of the TRC (https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/index.html). The TRC's activities have generated numerous studies, among the most significant of which are James and Van de Vijver (2001), Posel and Simpson (2002), Boraine, Levy, and Scheffer (1997) and Asmal, Asmal, and Roberts (1997).

Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night (2009). However, in this chapter, female performance is studied by a close reading of Ndebele's short story *Death of a Son* (1996), which signals cultural and language significance reflected in the hearings and thus offers opportunities to explore the role of culture and language in the gendered journey of the Black African woman from the private to the public sphere. *Death of a Son*, through language and culture, assembles a particularly traumatised constellation of Black African women and then imagines for them a reclamation of contested spaces in South Africa, both physical and metaphorical. This signifies a recovery of language, which Teresa Godwin Phelps (2004: 44) calls a 'reconstruction of the shattered voice'. Although *Death of a Son* is not written in an indigenous African language, it does speak directly to the importance of African cultures and languages in the lived experiences of Black African women, particularly in the South African context. The role of language is crucial in this chapter as Ndebele also focuses on the stories that emerged during the TRC process as a 'confirmation of the movement of our society from repression to expression', a sign of 'the emergence of a new national consciousness', and finally, 'some of the first steps in the rewriting of South African history on the basis of validated mass experience' (Ndebele 1998: 20). This chapter also employs Julia Kristeva's (1980) reading of motherhood and her theory of the subject-in-process to read agency in the narrator of *Death of a Son*, which is critical to understanding the coming to selfhood and speculating on the role they may play in the post-apartheid future. In this chapter, Kristeva is read in relation to Jean-François Lyotard's (1983) exploration of the difficulties of constructing narratives of trauma in *The Differend*—in particular, the argument of the body as a repository of the evidence of violence, which enables the witnesses to tell their tales. This chapter also draws attention to the woman as mother—an emergent figure with agency in the public sphere—and concludes by examining the difficulties with regard to narration that some of the women who gave testimony in the TRC hearings faced through a brief reading of Antjie Krog's (2000) *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, which marks a significant moment during which the female voice emerged as the foundation of possible post-apartheid subjects.

Njabulo Ndebele and the TRC scholarship

Ndebele's reading of the TRC hearings highlights some of the points raised in *Country of My Skull*. For Ndebele, the hearings provided the grounds for 'the triumph of narrative', which is necessary for the emergence of post-apartheid subjects (Ndebele 1998: 19–21). The portrayal of the Black

African woman as someone waiting for her man is apparent in *Death of a Son*, where the narrator waits for her husband to begin the process of burying their dead son. Significantly, not only does the plaintive testimony of the narrator of *Death of a Son* presage the TRC hearings, but this is also the first of Ndebele's stories before *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) to feature a woman as the first-person narrator.

Although female characters occupy minimal roles in Ndebele's fiction, apart from *Death of a Son* and *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, they are neither subservient nor mere foils to male characters. In fact, women provide important critical voices against male strategies in the liberation struggle. Ndebele debunks highly dramatic modes of representation as engaging apartheid on its own terms and calls for the 'rediscovery of the ordinary [because] the struggle involves people not abstractions, [and] the growth of consciousness is a necessary ingredient in [the] subjective capacity of the revolutionary class to take the mass revolutionary actions that are strong enough to smash the old government' (Ndebele 1994: 58). That concern with 'the growth of consciousness' is critical to understanding the possibilities of the emergence of the post-apartheid subject. Seemingly marginalised and confined to the domestic sphere, female characters such as Sarah in *Sarah, Rings and I*, the prophetess in *The Prophetess* and Nosipho in *Fools* emerge as critical voices against masculine constructions of revolutionary possibilities. Nosipho's critique of her husband's self-rehabilitation project following his rape of a student, and her refusal to carry his burden, are representative. Nosipho is fully articulate and has her own ideas and philosophies. She does not wait for Zamani to recover his selfhood; she is already engaged in projects in the development of consciousness through reading and the practice of medicine beyond the administration of drugs.

Nosipho and similar female characters in *Fools and Other Stories* (Ndebele 1983) articulate the possibilities of a feminist critique of social relations, and these possibilities set the stage for the excavation of women's agency in *Death of a Son*. In spite of her lucidity, Nosipho's story in *Fools* is secondary to that of Zamani, the narrator who seeks to gain control over the narrative of his own life. Therefore, first-person narration in *Death of a Son* creates a space for fully articulating the discursive abilities of the Black African woman as subject. Inherent in this suddenly available space of possibilities is the need for the female subject to find language that will enable the expression of her agency. I will argue that the main struggle of Ndebele's narrator in *Death of a Son* is her struggle with language. As will become clear below, this struggle heralds the problems that victims who gave testimonies at the TRC hearings faced in trying to articulate their experiences.

The intertwined role of African language culture: synopsis of the short story

In *Death of a Son*, set in the wake of the Soweto uprising, African language and culture are central to the narration at a time when police unceasingly patrolled the townships. The story holds the prospect of a narrative of liberation that engages the traditional images of what Ndebele describes as the spectacular. When a stray bullet fired by the police patrolling the township goes through the window of a house and kills a baby, the crude attempts by the police to manage public relations deprive the bereaved parents of the chance to focus on their grief. The police return to their crime scene and threaten to arrest the narrator's mother (who was babysitting her grandson when he was shot) unless she agrees not to tell what happened. They then remove the child's body to get rid of the physical evidence of their crime. The body of the dead child becomes a pawn in a high-stakes game of public relations, with the police demanding a fee to release the body to the family. Buntu, the narrator's husband and the child's father, initially rejects the demand, declaring: 'Over my dead body! Over my dead body!' He claims 'a fundamental principle', setting the stage for a classic confrontation between the massive apartheid security machine and the victimised but determined Black South African. Indeed, as the narrator observes, Buntu sought to engage the security forces in precisely these terms: 'For the greater part of two weeks, all of Buntu's efforts, together with friends, relatives, lawyers and newspapers, were to secure the release of the child's body without the humiliation of having to pay for it' (Ndebele 1996: 145). Buntu (whose IsiZulu name translates to man/humanity in the generic sense) is the ordinary Black African man engaged in a confrontation with the massive apartheid state machinery. However, the generic is subverted by African tradition, under which Buntu assumes the mantle of leader of the family and constructs his wishes as the wishes of the family. Just as Zamani in *Fools* refuses to engage the Boer on his terms by fighting back, the narrator in *Death of a Son* shifts attention away from the fight over the child's body. Telling her story retrospectively, the narrator confesses: 'The problem was that I had known all along that we would have to buy the body anyway' (Ndebele 1996: 145). As a journalist for a Johannesburg newspaper, the narrator would have realised that she was living the stories she encountered in her work.

The overarching theoretical framework

The narrator underlines the significance of bodies in the story at the very beginning: 'At last, we got the body' (Ndebele 1996: 144). Ineluctably linked, the bodies of the deceased child and the

mother frame the narrative. The first dominant image at the beginning of the narrative is the dead body of the child; the final image is that of the narrator as a woman ready to conceive again. Instead of conflating motherhood with womanhood, Ndebele's story seeks to claim the African woman as more than a mother, as an agent in an inclusive narration of liberation. Julia Kristeva's (1980) reflections on motherhood are both an attempt to rescue the image of the mother from the apolitical and asexualised pedestal of the Virgin Mary as the ideal mother and an attempt to challenge Freudian and Lacanian theories of subjectivity to provide a basis for critical engagement with Lyotard's (1983) argument that the witness of trauma 'testifies to an absence'—a point that will be further explored in this chapter. The body of the mother is always marked, carrying evidence of the loss (Kristeva 1980: 138).

The narrator's struggle in imagining the mutilated body of her son underlines the problems of narration for the witness of trauma. According to Dori Laub (1992: 57), 'massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction'. Laub (1992: 57) further argues that 'the victim's narrative, the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma, [begins] with someone testifying to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence'. The idea of 'testifying to an absence' may be further clarified by a reading of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend* (1983), in which he argues that 'it is the nature of the victim not to be able to prove that one has been done wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damage and who disposes of the means to prove it' (Lyotard 1983: 8). Lyotard is concerned with the problem of writing history after traumatic events such as the holocaust. In the case of the holocaust, the challenge issues from the fact that the victims disappeared and, when survivors testify to the traumatic events, 'their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation' (Lyotard 1983: 8). Being dead, the actual victim of the trauma cannot testify as to how they died, leaving the testimony of those who witness open to interrogation. Nothing short of the body of the victim, marked with signs of the trauma, can prove the trauma. The ineluctable relationship between mother and child is thus of critical importance in thinking about bodies that carry marks of trauma and provide evidence for the narrative. Although the narrator bears witness to the absence of her son's body, she inherits the language with which to tell the story of the tragedy from the moment she walks through the door of her house and begins to understand the meaning of the harrowing cries of her mother and other women. Her mother's cry inscribes the language that enables her to organise the traumatic event into narrative.

Significantly, the narrator gives her response to Buntu's rhetorical question: 'Do you realise

that our son is dead?' This rhetorical question paves the way for the trenchant critique that will follow shortly. Having been busy in a show of strength against the system, Buntu realises that their son is dead long after the narrator has been dealing with their tragic loss. As the narrator admits earlier, Buntu's declaration of a '"fundamental principle" was something too intangible for me [...] something that I wanted should assume my child's body' (Ndebele 1996: 145). The discord between Buntu's direct speech and her reported response marks the gulf between two people who initially do not share the same sense of loss. Still, her husband's question launches the narrator into exploring how they came to be where they find themselves. Although her profession involves the use of language, the narrator ironically struggles to recover language that will enable her transition to agency. Her shift from the singular 'I realised' to the collective 'we realised' at the same time marks the couple's reunion and their collective transition to agency. Ndebele thus constructs a framework for a narrative of liberation that is inclusive of women.

Entanglements between African masculinity and language

The narrator's response to the loss of her son must be understood in relation to her husband's response. In his relationship with the narrator, Buntu's response comes out of a belief that masculinity demands militancy. From the moment when the couple sees three Black girls eating fish and chips, the erotics of sexual desire as an expression of masculinity begin to assert themselves in Buntu's interactions with the narrator. His tightening grip on the narrator's hand as he expresses a desire for fish and chips suggests erotic desire for the narrator, and the narrator remarks on 'the strength of it'. After the white boys assault the Black girls, Buntu tightens his grip further (as if holding on to the narrator as a possession) as he warns: 'Just let them do that to you!' He means to assure his future bride of his preparedness to protect her; however, this is also the moment the narrator notices that 'there seemed no connection between that face and the words of reassurance just uttered' (147). Buntu's emasculation is complete when the narrator realises that his grip on her arm has slackened: 'I noticed his grip had grown somewhat limp. Somewhat reluctant. Having lost its self-assurance, it seemed to be holding on because it had to, not because of a confident sense of possession' (147). No doubt, the narrator herself revels naively in the image of the virile man and so is disappointed at being confronted by his impotence. The passage raises important questions about the definition of manhood and its role in the struggle against oppression.

The incident is merely a rehearsal for the real test of apartheid. As the narrator observes, they pass through this incident 'like sheep that had seen many of their own in the flock picked out for

slaughter. We would note the event and wait for our turn' (147). Their turn comes that very day when a Boer walking with his family shoves the narrator out of his way 'as if clearing a path for his family' (147). Buntu does not protect her as he had promised; like a sheep whose turn for slaughter has come, he can only offer a helpless epithet: 'The dog!' The narrator's desire to be protected by Buntu suggests her own concession to notions of women as being inferior—notions that were entrenched by apartheid. Thus, while she charges Buntu with failure to act as he speaks, she herself subscribes to the apartheid construction of women as inferior and helpless.

These incidents illustrate that neither Buntu nor the narrator has developed concrete ideas about how to contribute meaningfully to the struggle for liberation. The narrator and Buntu 'walked hand-in-hand through town [that Saturday morning], [they] were aware of very little that was not [themselves]' (146). The two incidents of that Saturday drew the two lovers out of their self-indulgent and exclusive world. They discovered that 'the world around us was too hostile for vows of love' (147). 'Love died', says the narrator, and the two of them began their 'silence'. As they continued their now disrupted walk, Buntu and the narrator 'talked and laughed, but stopped short of words that would demand proof of action' (147). Once the secure world of self-indulgence between lovers has been exposed to the harsh realities of life under apartheid, the narrator's assessment of Buntu is swift and harsh. Drawing on the image of the scattered fish and chips from the first incident, she concludes: 'I saw that day, how the language of love could so easily be trampled underfoot, or scattered like fish and chips on the pavement, and left stranded and abandoned like boats in a river that suddenly went dry' (147).

Buntu's 'impotence' is implicated in the death of the language of love. To the narrator, Buntu's epithetic response to the Boer's space-clearing gesture signals her man's complete emasculation. She experiences an intense desire to sacrifice herself for him: 'At that very moment, I felt my own hurt vanish like a wisp of smoke ... it was replaced by a tormenting desire to sacrifice myself for Buntu' (148). Thus, when they return to the township that afternoon, she 'gives' herself to Buntu 'for the first time'. Interrogating herself retrospectively, the narrator wonders whether she 'gave' or 'offered' herself to him. The narrator constructs herself as both subject and object. As she performs the actions, she claims her body—the female body—and yet gives it towards 'healing something' in Buntu. In the face of the death of the language of love, the body becomes the only possible gift.

From these crises emerges the realisation that Buntu and the narrator are concerned with different things. Buntu is concerned mainly with asserting his manhood. Therefore, when the narrator gives or offers him her body, his sexual virility and thus his manhood, is reaffirmed despite his sexual impotence. The consummation of their relationship leads to their eventual marriage.

Her sacrifice, however, does not also lead to a recovery of the language of love. Their sexual act does not restore communication between her and Buntu. Instead, the act becomes a mask: 'We were never to talk about that event. Never, we buried it deep inside of me that afternoon' (148). Her body becomes the repository for what they cannot face openly; it masks Buntu's powerlessness and political impotence by assuring his sexual virility. The child is the symbolic materialisation of the secret that Buntu and the narrator buried in her body that day.

The performance of public spectacle

The bullet that shatters the window of their house and kills their child introduces the brutal reality of the pain of the Black African experience into the couple's carefully constructed illusion. Buntu's refusal to 'buy' his dead son's body is as much an expression of what he calls 'fundamental principle' as it is a demonstration of manhood. The 'fundamental principle' is his refusal to participate in the police scheme of deception. However, by enlisting the assistance of lawyers and other influential people, Buntu attempts to bring moral persuasion and critical reasoning to a regime whose security forces flaunt the system of justice from which he seeks equanimity. Ignoring his wife's pleas to accompany him as he tries to retrieve the body of the baby, Buntu commits himself to what he calls 'his task'. The task is less about dealing with personal loss than once again proving his masculinity in a show of power against 'the aggressive Boer'.[25] His task is a man's task, a performance for public spectacle.

Central to 'his task', Buntu promises his wife that he will 'do everything in [his] power to right this wrong ... even if it means suing the police!' (150). Given that the language of love has never been revived between them, the narrator is not convinced by this new promise. She feels a widening divide between them: 'As he spoke, I felt the warmth of intimacy between us cooling. When he finished, it was cold' (150). Keenly aware of the intransigence of the system, the narrator 'disengaged from his embrace, [wondering] why Buntu had spoken'. 'The problem was I had known all along that we would have to buy the body anyway' (151). Although this was the first personal loss for the

25 Here, the expression 'the aggressive Boer' is drawn from Ndebele's portrayal of the Afrikaner as representative and beneficiary of the system of apartheid, a figure that he describes as having taken 'three centuries to develop the characteristics of the massive wrestler'. This iconographic figure, of course, conflates the state and the individual such that the state is the individual and the individual is the state, and both are (or at least articulate) the system. For a fuller discussion of this iconic figure, see Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (143). It is worth noting here that Ndebele masterfully articulates these very conflations in *Death of a Son* in the representation of the Boer and his family, whose aggressive ousting of the narrator echoes salient features of the government's cavalier declaration of Black settlements as 'Black spots' to be demolished. For further discussion of forced removals under apartheid, see Murray and O'Regan (1990). Needless to say, the same figure appears as the Boer who whips Zamani in *Fools* (274–276).

narrator and Buntu, it was certainly not the first 'accidental' shooting of a Black African person by the police—something that the narrator, as a reporter, already knows. Thus, when Buntu promises to 'do everything', they easily revert to silence again.

However, the narrator is now aware of the limits of the silence: 'I knew something else at that moment: that I had to find a way of disengaging myself from the embrace' (150). Unlike the Saturday she gave her body so that the afront to Buntu's manhood could be appeased, the narrator now 'disengages from his embrace slowly, yet purposefully' (150). It is not possible for the narrator to sacrifice her body again, for the body of the child as materialisation of the secret they buried inside her that day is the very extension of her own body.[26] Therefore, she uses silence as a weapon against Buntu. Whenever he returns home and reports on another frustrating day of pursuing old and new leads about how to recover their son's body, the narrator 'gave speech to [her] eyes. And he answered without my having parted my lips' (152). Buntu squirms under the 'female gaze' of his wife. Through her silence, the narrator 'sensed, for the first time in my life, the terrible power in me that could make [Buntu] do anything' (152). 'Anything' is perhaps hyperbolic. For instance, it does not include Buntu allowing her to participate in 'his task'. Still, the narrator now interrogates Buntu's project of affirmation of masculinity as a struggle for liberation, much like that of Nosipho in *Fools*. Nosipho's refusal to carry Zamani's burden contrasts with the narrator's sacrifice of her body to Buntu. Nosipho's condemnation of the woman who washed the feet of Jesus and Jesus himself as the 'worst cases' of self-righteousness is instructive; the narrator of *Death of a Son* indulges in such self-righteousness in sacrificing herself for Buntu.

The narrator develops a critical understanding of her own position, and this is important to her development as a subject with agency. Despite Buntu's refusal to allow her to participate in 'his task', she ultimately '[feels] in him the disguised hesitancy of someone who wanted assurance without asking for it' (152). She wonders whether 'he could prove himself without me' and realises: 'I have always drawn him into me whenever I sensed his vulnerability' (152). The narrator now understands her culpability in 'mothering' him to assure him of his manhood. Now that she understands her own contribution to his self-indulgent pursuit of masculine validation, she can explain the goal of her critique of his project:

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26 For a discussion of the relationship between mother and child in the development of the subject, see Julia Kristeva (1985). It is important to draw attention to Freud and Lacan's formulations about the emergence of the subject as predicated on fear of the father, which forces the child to leave the safe haven of the mother, implicated in the emergence of the subject. For her, motherhood is not just biology or nature but also culture or construction. See also Kristeva's *Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini* and *Tales of Love*. For this discussion, see Butler (1993).

> I wanted him to be free to fear. Wasn't there greater strength that way? Had he ever lived with his own feelings? And the stress of life in this land: didn't it call out for men to be heroes? And could they live up to it even though the details of the war to be fought may be blurred? They should. (152)

This passage contains strong echoes of Ndebele's argument in essays such as 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary', so the line dividing the thoughts of the character and those of the author is very thin. Suffice it to say that the narrator, being a reporter, is capable of articulating an argument in such lucid language, and there is much evidence to that effect throughout the text of this story. The main point of the passage is contained in the first three sentences, which include her wish that Buntu should feel free to fear, and the question about whether he had ever acknowledged and embraced his own feelings. The rest of the passage is ironic. In referring to the struggle as calling on men to be heroes, the narrator does not suggest that there is no place for women in the struggle but rather aims to expose the phallogocentrism of a narrative of liberation that places the Black man in the centre as a courageous victim engaged in a heroic fight against the massive apartheid machine. Consider Buntu's insistence on proving his heroism by carrying out 'his task' alone. In his desire to be exalted as a hero, Buntu reduces the struggle to a staging of masculinity. The struggle's details are unclear to him as the narrator remarks that Buntu's thoughts 'lacked the experience of strife that comes from acceptance of fear and then, only then, the need to fight it' (153).

The narrator claims for herself a discourse that embraces fear: 'Me? In a way, I have always been free to fear. The prerogative of being a girl' (153). As discursive code, 'the prerogative of being a girl' underlines the construction of the feminine as the binary opposite of the masculine. If the heroic, as inscribed in Buntu's 'task', is the demonstration of manhood, womanhood is, by implication, the unheroic. This is evident in the narrator's expectation that Buntu would avenge her on that particular Saturday, and when that failed, she sacrificed herself for him. What the narrator calls 'the prerogative of being a girl', therefore, dangerously evokes the social construction of the feminine as weak. However, at this stage in her development as subject, the narrator deploys this seemingly uncharitable view of women to create a space for her subaltern voice and, by bringing the private into the public sphere, takes a necessary step towards the construction of a new public.

Framing the female voice towards the emergence of the post-apartheid subject

The sound of women crying in her home opens the narrator to the possibilities of crying as an expressive code that can move her towards a new public self or to a self with agency. When she comes home on the day the child is killed, she finds the house filled with people, mostly women, and more crowding into the yard. As soon as she makes her way into the house, she is confronted by her mother's cry: 'Her voice rose above the noise. It turned into a scream when she saw me' (148). Although the narrator sensed that something terrible must have happened, she did not yet know what it was. When she asked what had happened, her mother initially 'pushed me away with a hysterical violence' and cried out in despair: 'What misery have I brought you, my child!' The women picked up the mother's cry, and 'many women in the room began to cry', producing a sound so harrowing that the narrator could barely describe it in words: 'The sound of it! The anguish!' (148). This cry marks the possibility of strengthening the female voice towards the emergence of the post-apartheid subject. The narrator is disoriented by the sound of her mother's cry, which rises above the harrowing sounds coming from the rest of the women in the room. She 'understands' and is 'yet eager for knowledge' and 'desperate to hold onto something'. She understands only that something traumatic has happened. Although aware of her mother's pain, she '[desires] to embrace her mother not to comfort her [the mother]' but 'for all the anguish that tied everyone in the house into a knot'. The narrator desires to belong, 'to become part of that knot ... to know what had brought it about' (149). Thus, when she finally hugs her mother, she begins to understand the potential of the anguished cry in the house as something that 'had to be turned into a simmering indignation' (149).

Since the bodies of the mother and son are intertwined, the narrator's raw and guttural response to her son's violent death is marked by fears about what might happen to the dead body. As she and Buntu wait to recover the body of their child, she is assaulted by 'the horror of her own imagination'. She imagines the police mutilating the body of the child by performing an autopsy 'to determine the cause of death', even though the child was clearly killed by a police bullet. This fear underlines her motherly instinct and is a marker of her consciousness of public opinion. The narrator is afraid of what other women in the township will think of her if she does not act in accordance with public expectations: '"What kind of mother would not want to look at the body of her child?" people will ask ... the elderly among them may say: "Young people are strange"' (145–146). As Ndebele points out, the apartheid regime's focus on race ignored class distinctions. Thus, although the narrator and her husband have money and initially cast themselves as different, she still feels bound by the morals

of the community in which she lives. Her reference to 'the elderly among them' acknowledges them as custodians of African traditions and values. This is significant because the rhetoric of the young militants in the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s tended to cast older people as conservative and as having abandoned the struggle. Through her self-interrogation, the narrator begins a return to the fold from her sojourn in the wilderness of material self-aggrandisement. She comes to appreciate that the elderly women are not mere custodians of past African traditions but are, in fact, actively engaged in the struggle. It is important to note that the women's crying initially brings about this shift in her thinking and establishes the knot to which she seeks to belong.

The narrator's struggle while imagining the mutilated body of her son underlines the problems of narration for the witness of trauma. According to Dori Laub, 'massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction'. Laub (1992: 57) further argues that 'the victim's narrative, the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma, [begins] with someone testifying to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence'. The idea of 'testifying to an absence' may be further understood through a reading of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend* (1983: 8), in which he argues that 'it is the nature of the victim not to be able to prove that one has been done wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damage and who disposes of the means to prove it'. Lyotard is concerned with the problem of writing history after traumatic events such as the holocaust. In the case of the holocaust, the challenge is that the victims disappeared, and when survivors testify to the traumatic events, 'their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation'. Being dead, the trauma victims cannot testify about how they died, leaving the testimony of those who witness open to interrogation. Only the body of the victim, marked with signs of the trauma, can prove the trauma. The ineluctable relationship between mother and child is thus of critical importance when thinking about bodies that carry marks of trauma and provide evidence for the narrative. Although the narrator witnesses to the absence of her son's body, she inherits the language to tell the story of the tragedy from the moment she walks through the door of her house and begins to consider possible reasons for the harrowing cries of her mother and the other women. Her mother's cry inscribes the language that enables her to organise the traumatic event into narrative.

If, for the narrator, her mother's cry initiates the language in which to articulate her trauma, it is necessary to critically read her claim regarding 'the prerogative of being a girl'. Clearly, the narrator constructs herself as different from Buntu, who is presented as insisting on a certain ineffectual masculinity. Thus, the narrator struggles to tell her own story, distinct from Buntu's. By identifying

herself as a 'girl', the narrator may seem to infantilise herself and accept apartheid constructions of Black African women as inferior. However, her use of the word girl re-appropriates a term of denigration towards claiming space for Black African women. Buntu's question, 'Do you realise our son is dead?', at the beginning of the story signals the beginning of their mourning. In other words, by the time narrator tells this story, she already knows that even Buntu cries, or at least mourns. In this sense, 'the prerogative of being a girl' might be called a gesture to clear a space for the articulation of women's voices rather than an essentialisation of the inert qualities of women.

It is useful to recall here that within the first few weeks of the TRC hearings, it became apparent that most of the witnesses of apartheid violence were women. Yet the stories they told were not about themselves. It took the intervention of advocates for women's stories to convince the TRC to organise special hearings at which women were invited to tell their own stories of victimisation under apartheid.[27] Women's testimonies revealed the tension between the private and the public as witnesses found it difficult to express the personal in the public arena (Laub 1992: 27–50). According to Mark Sanders (2007: 61), women's testimonies have 'the potential to bring the customary to crisis. Implicitly laying claim to legal and political universality, Black women render apparent the disjuncture and conflation of custom and law.' Sanders underlines the disjuncture under colonialism in Africa between the law as circumscription of civility (applicable to the world of the colonials) and the customary (as marker of the native and traditional, and outside the purview of the law), which still had to be conflated with invented customary law. As Sanders (2007: 70) observes, '"customary law" as codified by colonial and apartheid rulers caricatured relations between men and women, as it did other aspects of African life'. The construction of women as 'insignificant' under apartheid was maintained through extreme forms of discrimination against women in public life in the name of tradition or custom. The narrator's claim of 'the prerogative of being a girl' thus expresses the desire to be heard.

The narrator's struggle with language is similar to the experiences of the witnesses described by Antjie Krog (2000: 45) in her memoir *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. Within days of the commencement of the hearings, Krog and other reporters were overwhelmed by the threnody of the victims' narratives: 'It is not so much the deaths, and the names of the dead, but the web of infinite sorrow woven around them [...] A wide barren,

27 See Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes' report on 'Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: A Submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission' (https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/submit/gender.htm). For further exploration of the problems of women's witnessing during the TRC victims' hearings, see Ross (2003), Olckers (1996), Sanders (2007), Van Schalkwyk (1999), Oboe (2007) and Driver (2005).

disconsolate landscape where the horizon keeps on dropping away'. During 'a Question and Answer on a current affairs programme' two weeks into the hearings, Krog 'stammers and freezes' and finds that she is 'without language' (Krog 2000: 51). Her symptoms are typical of what happened to journalists listening to the testimonies of victims—it is 'a textbook case'. A TRC counsellor explained to journalists: 'You will experience the same symptoms as the victims. You will find yourself powerless—without help, without words' (Krog 2000: 51).

Krog later put these experiences into perspective based on 'a conversation' with Professor Kondlo, a 'Xhosa intellectual from Grahamstown',[28] whose suggestion was 'to take the tale of Nomonde Calata and make a comic out of it'. Kondlo may be Krog's alter ego, constructed to provide a voice that interrogates her experiences, for one of the central problems of her account of the hearings is that she had to act as a proxy for the voices of the victims.[29] Kondlo's proposed title, *The Contestation of Spaces*, would track the migration of the traditional African female storyteller from the domestic to the public sphere. Especially important for consideration is Kondlo's description of the female storyteller as telling stories that transgress boundaries, questioning, revising and undermining the stories of the male storyteller as a historian. Through 'Migration, Urbanization, Forced Removals', the female storyteller appears in the person of Nomonde Calata, 'sitting in the male space of the British colonial city hall of East London and relating a story as part of the official history of his country' (Krog 2000: 52). This is the type of transformation of the Black African woman that Ndebele also explores in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. Ndebele began this project in *Death of a Son*. A close reading of Kondlo's arguments is, therefore, important to the project of exploring the construction of the Black African woman as subject in post-apartheid South Africa.

Kondlo's reference to the female storyteller at the city hall draws attention to the symbolic aspects of the TRC hearings. The city hall, the locus of white male privilege and power for a long time, now

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28 As critics of Krog's *Country of My Skull* have established, Professor Kondlo is a fictional character. This is why 'a conversation' is here placed in quotation marks. Krog's invention of this fictional character allows her both to interrogate herself and to place her experience in the broader perspective of national narrative. For further discussion, see Cole (2007), Viljoen (1996), Phelps (2004) and Harris (2006).

29 Nomonde Calata is the widow of Fort Calata, one of the Cradock Four. The Cradock Four, four anti-apartheid activists in the Eastern Cape town of Cradock, were ambushed and killed by the police while travelling from Port Elizabeth in June 1985. For more on the Cradock Four, see Nicholson (2004). The testimonies of their widows during the TRC hearings helped to establish the harrowing tone of the testimonies. The full texts of Nomonde Calata's testimony and the testimonies of other Cradock widows are available on the official website of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the following url: https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/hrvel1/calata.htm. Footage of the testimony is also included in the documentary on the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, *Long Night's Journey into Day* (2000).

serves as a space for the expression of an inclusive national narrative. This is the most salient marker of the movement of the Black African woman from the domestic to the public sphere, one of the elements of social transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. The emergence of the female subject marks that moment of transition through language. As Kondlo says concerning the cries of Nomonde Calata: 'For me, this crying is the beginning of the Truth Commission—the signature tune, the definitive moment, the ultimate sound of what the process is about' (Krog 2000: 57). What Kondlo calls the signature tune is, in his mind, associated with the image of Nomonde Calata: 'She was wearing this vivid orange-red dress, and she threw herself backwards and that sound ... that sound' (Krog 2000: 57). In other words, sound and image combine to produce the narrative of trauma. In a mirroring fiction and reality, Archbishop Tutu started singing the song 'Senzeni na, senzeni na ... What have we done?' during a break from the proceeding, echoing the narrator's mother in Ndebele's *Death of a Son*. The archbishop provided the context for that question when he added: 'Our only sin is our skin colour'. Both the question and the lament *Senzeni na*? underline the very inadequacy of language. The question expresses bafflement at human callousness and cruelty in treating fellow humans who happen to be different. Significantly, this expression of dismay at human cruelty was one of the rallying cries of the liberation struggle. Inscribed in the seeming failure of language in that expression of dismay is the very beginning of possibilities of expressiveness.[30] As Kondlo observes:

> Academics say pain destroys language, which brings about an immediate reversion to a prelinguistic (*sic*) state—and to witness that cry was to witness the destruction of language ... was to realize that to remember the past of this country is to be thrown back to a time before language. And to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with the precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself. But more practically, this particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you because you have taken control of it—you can move it wherever you want to. So maybe this is what the Commission is all about—finding words for the cry of Nomonde Calata (Krog 1998: 63–64).[31]

30 This reading is challenged by other readings of the TRC hearings, which draw attention to the overdetermination of the project of national reconciliation that was so central to the process and sometimes demanded that victims narrate their personal experiences within the prescribed framework. On the tension between individual testimonies and the TRC's demand for a national narrative, see, inter alia, Verdoolaege (n.d., 2003) and Harris (2006).

31 Here, Kondlo paraphrases Elaine Scarry's (1987: 5) argument written in response to Virginia Wolf's (2002) argument in the essay 'On Being Ill': 'Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.'

The irony of this argument is obvious, for the cry is prelinguistic, a non-language. The difficulty is that the witness ends rather than begins with the crying. Commenting on the hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee, Saul Tobias observes that 'some of the testimony presented at the TRC was fragmented and disjointed, and at moments of particular distress or trauma, bordered on the incoherent'. Established under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, the TRC sought 'to [investigate] and [establish] as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed during the period from 1 March 1960 to the cut-off date contemplated in the Constitution, within or outside the Republic' (Office of the President 1995: Preamble). In lay terms, the mandate of the TRC was to establish the truth about the apartheid past as part of an inclusive national narrative. Thus, Tobias (1999) argues that the goal of national narrative suffered when witnesses broke down in the course of giving testimony, witnesses broke down because 'the factual recounting of events gave way to lamentation and prayer, a flood of metaphorical and lyrical language'. The TRC could not use that 'flood of metaphorical and lyrical language' to construct a national truth. It is important to note that Tobias is less concerned with the project of the construction of a national truth than he is with acknowledging the stories of the victims of apartheid. Thus, he observes that 'behind [the] shattered sentences lay depths of personal suffering which were glimpsed but would never fully find their way to language' (Tobias 1999: 7).

The 'metaphorical and lyrical language' as a form of expression is not symbolic but poetic language. Even though Lyotard (1983: 15) argues that 'survivors rarely speak', he notes that an entire literature of testimonies suggests otherwise. Lyotard opens the door, if only by a crack, for consideration of nuanced forms of expression when he observes that 'not to speak is part of the ability to speak, since ability is a possibility and a possibility implies something and its opposite' (Lyotard 1983: 15). Although Lyotard's project illustrates the failure of the victim to speak, his argument allows for the exploration of that ability to speak that is inscribed in silence. Ndebele's reading of the potential of the TRC characterises the metaphorical as critical to what he terms 'the restoration of narrative' (Ndebele 1998: 27). Citing Archbishop Desmond Tutu's reference to the first round of testimonies before the Human Rights Violations Committee in East London as 'stories' ('The country has taken the right course in the process of healing to hear these stories'), Ndebele raises the rhetorical question: 'Is it not that we think of stories as imaginary events which we may call tales, fables or legends: stories as narratives of one kind or another?' (Ndebele 1998: 19) Stories *can be* imaginary, but are not *only* imaginary; yet the idea of a 'story' always suggests the imaginary and thus implicates the real in the imaginary. This implication is very much present

in the TRC victims' hearings. As Ndebele observes, 'the horror of day-to-day life under apartheid often outdid the efforts of the imagination to reduce it to metaphor'; hence, the testimonies of victims may sound like fables. Moreover, dependent on memory, the stories related to the TRC could only achieve form through tropes or figuration. While some criticise the TRC for managing the testimonies towards the construction of narrative truth as a basis for reconciliation, Ndebele draws attention to the management of the testimonies through the very demands of narrative, in part because they are dependent on memory. Ndebele acknowledges the achievements of the TRC process as 'a lifting of the veil of secrecy and state-induced blindness' (Ndebele 1998: 20). Where the official mandate of the TRC posits the 'lifting of the veil of secrecy' as an end, however, Ndebele sees the real challenge in the wake of the stories as being in 'the search for meaning': 'While some key elements of the intrigue are emerging, I believe we have yet to find meaning.' Such a project, namely the search for meanings in the stories of the TRC, he argues, 'may trigger off more narratives' (Ndebele 1998: 20). Unlike the singular narrative truth envisaged by the TRC, Ndebele conceives of multiple narratives built from the search for meanings. This reading of the possibilities of the TRC provides a useful frame for reading the ending of *Death of a Son*.

Although the narrator of Ndebele's text begins with a desire to distance herself from the brutal reality of Black African life under apartheid, she ends her narrative by embracing motherhood as inscriptive of the possibility of agency. An urbanite, she is what Kondlo characterises as a purveyor of testimony in the public sphere of the city hall. Whereas Brenda Fassie sought to make her voice heard in the public sphere by airing her 'dirty laundry', the narrator represents the women who gave testimony in the hallowed atmosphere of the city hall. Yet the arrival at the city hall is not exactly an arrival at home. It is thus worth noting that the narrator ends her narrative in part with considerations of home. The dramatic irony of the narrator's statement about her home as the site of aspiration to material well-being becomes clear when teargas from a police patrol forces her and her mother out of the house a few days before the funeral. Although she has seen police patrols of this kind in townships, and although her own son was killed during such a raid, it is this direct experience that finally opens her eyes to the harsh reality of their lived experience: 'So, this is how our child was killed?' (153). It then strikes her that the child was, in fact, killed in their own home. She asks herself rhetorically: 'And this was our home? It couldn't be. It had to be a little bird's nest waiting to be plundered by a predator bird' (153). That rhetorical question is the analytical comment that explodes the vacuous notion of home to which she and her husband had subscribed amidst the brutal reality of Black African experience. The narrator needs this moment of critical understanding to move towards ultimately embracing the possibility of her development as subject. Significantly,

when Buntu comes home that night and sees what has happened, he breaks down in tears. In fact, here, Buntu's breaking down in tears overshadows the return of Sarah Baartman to her home and the possibility of the project of reconciliation to the South African nation.

The central metaphor through which the narrator reinvents herself is that of the fish and chips scattered like boats stranded on a dry riverbed on a particular Saturday. As has already been noted, she extends this metaphor to characterise the death of the language of love between her and Buntu. When they finally begin grieving for their child, she asks herself: 'How much did we have to cry to refloat stranded boats? I was sure they would float again' (153). Finally, after the funeral, she begins to menstruate. She feels that what she and her husband had buried inside her on that Saturday (the first time they consummated their relationship) had floated away 'on the surge'. What she and Buntu had buried was the secret of Buntu's impotence, which is symbolic even as it is threateningly physical. The floating away of what they had buried in the narrator's body suggests that she carried Buntu's burden. Like Nosipho, who refuses to carry Zamani's burden in *Fools*, the narrator of *Death of a Son* realises that she is not obligated to carry Buntu's burden, so she lets him find his own way through the crisis of their son's death. In other words, by the time that which they had buried floats on the river of her menstrual blood, the narrator is no longer the surrogate for Buntu's burden. Rather, by dislodging what they had buried, the narrator posits herself as subject at the same time that she embraces the possibility of becoming a mother again. The burden is that of conception as a remaking of the self. Having lost one son, the narrator embraces motherhood without the kind of illusion that ruled her sense of self after that Saturday. This is the point at which metaphor becomes the building block of self as subject. As the narrator says, the river of menstrual blood will refloat the stranded boats.

Ndebele's tribute to Brenda Fassie shows the need to place the life and work of this popular icon as a critical text in South African cultural studies. Like her cry of *Memeza*, her controversial claims about her sexual prowess highlight the problems of the movement of Black African women from the domestic to the public sphere. If the TRC stands out as a moment when previously unheard voices were finally ushered into the public sphere, then songs such as 'Good Black Woman' illustrate that testimonies about the apartheid past among Black African women predate any institutionalised witnessing to the past.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter has posited Fassie's claims and person as signposts towards a critical reading of Ndebele's *Death of a Son*. As the chapter has shown, the migration of Black African women from the domestic to the public sphere is fraught with problems. The narrator of the story manages to overcome these difficulties by embracing motherhood not as burden but as part of her very self. Kristeva's attempts to rescue motherhood from the apolitical pedestal of the Virgin Mary in *Stabat Mater* illustrate the need to engage the casting of the mother as avatar of strength as a critical project towards a more articulate feminism. Kristeva's struggles with the Stabat Mater as a symbol of womanhood offer a basis for an equally incisive interrogation of traditional African societies' elevation of mother to the carrier of everyone's burden. This chapter places the reading of *Death of a Son* in the context of the discussion of the TRC hearings, suggesting that the story fundamentally anticipates the problem of how to read women's TRC testimonies. Finally, this reading of *Death of a Son* is also a pre-reading of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. The story suggests the need for further contextualisation of Ndebele's engagements with Brenda Fassie and Winnie Mandela. Ndebele's intertwined interrogations of the two iconic figures of Black African womanhood in South Africa suggest possibilities for a broader discussion of South African experiences from postcolonial perspectives.

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