

**‘... as if this burden disguised as honour did
not weigh heavily on her heart’:
Blackwomen, Struggle Iconography and
Nation in South African Literature**

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[W]hat is body and instinctual is by definition dumb and inarticulate. As it does not itself signify, or signify coherently, it may be freely occupied, scrutinized, analyzed, resignified. This representation carries complete authority; the Other cannot gainsay it. The body of the Other can represent only its own physicality, its own strangeness (Boehmer 1992:270).

The inevitable heterogeneity of all human clusters means that there is an endlessly large spectrum of possibilities through which members of that group can inhabit any experiential positioning. It is in light of this that representations which fix members of a group into set series of behaviours and characteristics, in other words stereotype them, are problematic. It therefore is quite clear why historic representations of Blackwomen subjects and characters as hypersexualised or long suffering mother figures is unacceptable. Much research has shown the direct correlation between the stereotyping of Blackwomen and their oppression under changing historical eras. The circulation of stereotypes therefore is neither coincidental nor arbitrary but contributes directly to knowledge production on those groups typecast. It occludes the heterogeneity present in the human clusters

concerned replacing it with an imposed homogeneity which makes control and subjugation easier.

Indeed, it is only '[b]y taking these differences seriously [that] we can better understand the ways race influences identity, motivation, and experiences as well as the impact of stereotypes' (Aaron & Oyserman 2001: 22). The circulation of stereotypical images of any group work to hinder this understanding. Indeed, the pervasive typecasting of any oppressed group cannot be seen independently of the identity formation processes by which other groups, in the same society, construct cohesion.

Stuart Hall's work (1997) has demonstrated powerfully the manner in which representation works to create because nothing exists outside of discourse. Discourse provides meaning and is always ideological, and available only through the symbolic categories made available through society. Further, 'discourse itself is the actual combination of facts and meanings which gives to it the aspect of a *specific* structure of meaning that permits us to identify it as a product of one kind of historical consciousness rather than another' (White 1978:107).

Various feminist and womanist scholars have analysed the symbolic meanings of Blackwomen in South African literature written in English, as well as in the representational politics of the liberation movement. This corpus has uncovered the highly metaphorised appearances of the category 'Blackwomen' in ways which work to erase the heterogeneity which characterises the experiences of Blackwomen subjectivities. This erasure works through the limited representations of Blackwomen subjects and characters, which trap her in facile tropes. The precise manifestations of these derive from the mythologisation of oppression in the national liberation movement, shaped by a long trajectory of activism and theorisation of oppression as clustering primarily around race. Here, ideology is both resultant from and constitutive of historical and social contexts. In a country with various systems of white supremacist terror flowing from each other—slavery, colonialism, apartheid—perhaps this focus on racism should not come as a surprise.

Examinations of the discourse of the liberation movements, most extensively the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), have linked this ambiguous positioning of Blackwomen to the masculinist language of emancipatory politics. In an interview on the gender politics of the early

BCM, Mamphela Ramphele has opined the sexist language of Black Consciousness (BC), 'didn't have space for women because it was a language borrowed from a culture, English culture, which never accepted women really as full citizens' (in Yates & Gqola 1998:92).

BC discourse has indeed betrayed some unease around differences among Black subjects. A reading of BC literature reveals an explicit largely uninterrogated masculinist bias. This is a direct consequence of the high esteem in which Black unity was held within the ranks of the movement. Having identified as key the toppling of the apartheid state, and the momentous liberation of oppressed people in South Africa, Black unity took on an unprecedented importance. This celebration of unity not only pertained to the ranks of the BCM alone, but is evident in the refusal of BC activists to criticise other aspects of the broader liberation movement. This remained the case even as several misreadings of BC labelled it as in line with the apartheid policies of the day. Black solidarity was paramount and non-negotiable for BC activists and writers (see Gqola 2001a). The *South African Students Organisation (SASO) Newsletter*, 2.1, spoke eloquently to this valuation of Black solidarity:

[w]ith the political climate as it is today SASO expects the various political groups that operate outside the system to speak with a united voice against the present regime but not to waste time discrediting their fellow Black brothers and sisters (4).

While much can be said in defence of the stress on Black solidarity, there are numerous problematics which ensure from ensue from precisely such an accent on unity. To the extent that unity of purpose was seen as self-evident, it also meant that certain ways of inhabiting Blackness were prioritised over others. For example the variety of what gets defined as Black experience is reduced to a specific, usually urban, young and male Black experience. This can possibly be attributed to the location and education levels of the activists at the forefront of the movement (see Ramphele 1991b). It also meant that performances of Blackness were regulated, and allegations of white-emulation could be levelled against those who did not exhibit recognised 'authentic' forms of behaviour. More significantly for the purposes of this paper, this stress on unity, that conflated one-ness with similarity, which is

to say, homogeneity, ignored differentiated locations which characterised the ranks of Black oppressed subjects under apartheid. Discursively, it made it easier to assume that a select Black male experiential situation could be used to generalise about Black South African experience. Thus, 'the Black man' is used, after the 'generic male' default in English, to refer simultaneously to Black men and to Black society. The ambiguity about which is of these is meant, and when, worked to occlude patriarchal and other stratifications. For example, the BC rallying cry 'Black man, you are on your own' illustrated these ambiguities because the 'Black man' was seen to refer to Black people generally at the same time that BC relied on masculinist discourse which addressed itself to the experiential location of specific Black men.

Further, numerous feminist and womanist studies have paid attention to the paucity of female activists at the forefront of BCM, and have interrogated the conservative politics of gender within BC organisations (see Driver 1989; Gqola 2000; Gqola 2001a; Lewis 1999; Moodley 1991; Ramphela 1991b; Walker 1982). Accompanying the masculinist, and urban-biased revolutionary politics of BCM was a stress on a certain kind of political mixing. BC activists valued the ability of cultural and artistic modes to be used in the service of liberation. They rejected the conventional separation between explicitly political activity and works of the imagination. Consequently, in addition to *Black Viewpoints*, *Black Review* and *SASO Newsletter*, which were the official publications of BCM, there was a flourish of literary magazines and artist communities. Art that claims direct connection to BC thought forms the largest single body of literature written in English in South Africa's history. Part of the desire and commitment to use imaginative arts as a tool for the struggle resulted often in the explicit connection of the artist with BC doctrine.

The magazine *Staffrider* credited itself as the literary mouthpiece of the BCM. To gauge the scope of influence of this magazine, it suffices to point to the association of the bulk of South Africa's living, public writers with this era. Writers like Boitumelo (Mofokeng), Miriam Tlali, Gcina Mhlophe (as Nokugcina Sigwili), Nise Malange, Mafika Gwala, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Don Mattera, Chris van Wyk, Mbulelo Mzamane, Mongane Wally Serote and James Matthews, are among some of the more prominent writers who explicitly associated themselves and their writing with this movement. All of them, and many others, published in *Staffrider*. Ravan

Press later developed an imprint, the Staffrider series, under which a series of books by some of the above were published. I list their names here simply to reinforce the sheer magnitude of 'the staffrider school'.

The staffrider writers reflected, in the main, the biases of the movement they so closely allied themselves with. This remains a valid point regardless of whether the writers were influenced by BCM literature, or helped shape it, a distinction that the poet James Matthews flags as important in his letter on the back page of *Chimurenga* 3 (2002). I have argued elsewhere that there was no recognition within the language of the staffrider school of Blackwomen's agency. Processes of reduction and distortion work discursively to contribute to the creation of partial and sanctioned realities. This is highlighted by the absence of any female staffriders, precisely because within the literary magazine a staffrider is always a Blackman who resists, and is cast as the figure to emulate. In the absence of similar revolutionary characterisation to follow for women readers, female staffriders are precluded from entry into public politics even as this belies the experiences of Blackwomen activists and readers of the magazine (see Gqola 2001b).

In an earlier study of BC creative literature published in the first five years of the magazine, *Staffrider*, it emerged that, with the exception of a handful of stories and poems, representations of Blackwomen were trapped in two stereotypes: the long-suffering, stoic mother who supports her son and/or husband in activism against apartheid; and the hyper-sexualised female character in short stories who is inscribed with gendered violence for her refusal (or failure) to conform to the previous mould of regulated sexuality. Out of the literature surveyed, approximately two hundred short stories and poems, fewer than twenty deviated from both these tropes (see Gqola 2000).

However, the liberation movement was not made up exclusively of BC activists and artists, and as such then, an engagement with representations of Blackwomen in struggle iconography needs to uncover some of the similar masculinist biases in other parts of the liberation movement.

In a December 1984 article published in the African National Congress's *Sechaba*, Phyllis Jordan chastises the rampant patriarchal attitudes within the ANC allied, and/or led, anti-apartheid movement. She notes,

[i]t is one of the ironies of history that the most pervasive and total oppression, the oppression of women, has been to a large extent neglected by scholars within the ranks of the movement. This can be explained, in part, by the male chauvinism which has been the bane of colonial liberation movements and also the imprecise ways in which we discuss the future socio-economic order we envisage for a free South Africa (Jordan 1984: 4).

What Jordan outlines above, and what she continues to critique in detail in her essay, stems from caginess within the liberation movement regarding the challenges posed by feminism for the operation and structuring of the larger anti-apartheid struggle. While movements which fought to topple apartheid addressed themselves explicitly to the liberation of all oppressed under apartheid, the privileging of race, without a mindfulness of the ways in which racism intersected with other power differentials, left much outside the conceptualisation of this freedom. Given that, as Jordan goes on to show, '[i]n its treatment of Black women, White racism as not even bothered to try pretending' (Jordan 1984: 4), the resistance to the incorporation of gender as a lens through which to make sense of how oppression played itself out on Black South Africans lives weakened the larger analyses of oppression. It also meant that other systems of oppression remained unchecked within the ranks of the liberation movement.

Defences against incorporating feminist tenets in order to critique how patriarchy shaped Black masculinities and femininities focused on the racist tendencies of branches of the global feminist movement. However, this too is not a valid defence, because

the reactionary nature of White bourgeois feminism should not be allowed to detract from the sound principles of women's emancipation, any more than Botha's calling himself a 'nationalist' tarnishes the image of nationalism in general (Jordan 1984: 15).

Cheryl Walker (1982) has noted that the discourses used across the liberation movement cast Blackwomen in a supportive and nurturing mould, and rarely represented as active participants in the struggle to end apartheid. This was not accidental, but this trope of supportive woman was reified as

the safest position for the re-emasculatation of Blackmen. Indeed, far from being a role exclusively prescribed by men into which women were then forcibly confined, it is a function that some women's organisations put forward as a way to access the politics of liberation. For example, *Black Review* 1975/6 (143) quotes the Preamble to the Constitution of Allied Black Women's Federation to read:

1. Black women are basically responsible for the survival and maintenance of their families and largely the socialisation of the youth for the transmission of the Black cultural heritage.
2. The need to present a unified front and redirect the status of motherhood toward the fulfilment of the Black people's social, cultural, economic and political aspirations.

The representation of those women who are activists as exceptional served to further enshrine this stereotypical imagining of Blackwomen subjects. Many of these women who are activists are typecast as incomparable through their masculinisation (Lewis 1994:162), a tendency Ramphele has spoken of as the bestowal of honorary male status (Ramphele 1991b; Yates & Gqola 1998). This remained the case even for those women who actively challenged their exceptionalisation.

Writing later of representations of Black masculinities and femininities, Gabeba Baderoon (2002) would note the importance of uncovering the complex ways of engaging with representations of Blackness, and assert that Black people need to go beyond the mere calling for 'positive images' in BC style. This would move away from the usual counter-romanticisation of Black fictional and historic characters which has historically been seen as antidote to the explicit stereotypes coming out of colonialism and slavery. What is necessary is not a replacement of one set of limited representations with another series deemed more 'positive' but an engagement with the already always present heterogeneity in the cluster under study. Black people, then, need to uncover those images of Blackness which engender environments where it is possible to 'create new positions from which to view Blackness, as it is to generate work which emerges from Black experience' (Baderoon 2002).

In this paper, I examine the various engagements with the histories

of this typecasting of the category 'Blackwomen' in contemporary South African narratives concerned with memorialising of the anti-apartheid struggle. Predictably, the old stereotypes emerge in some of the narratives analysed. At the same time some creative endeavours demonstrate an assortment of angles from and devices through which to deconstruct this legacy of typecasting. Neither the paper nor the refreshing departures from Blackwomen iconography analysed here offer and set alternative, more 'positive' ways to represent Blackwomen characters. As Gloria Anzaldua has shown, stereotypes work because they highlight 'the narrow spectrum of reality that [the dominant] select or choose to perceive and/or what their culture "selects" for them to "see"' (Anzaldua 1990:xxi). Departures from this history of oppressive representation, by definition, then, succeed only when they debunk the myth of this selective reality exposing some of the heterogeneity open for representation. By definition, heterogeneity cannot be captured conclusively and can only be revealed through a series of deconstructive manoeuvres.

Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* is one of the narratives which grapples with the historical imaging of the category 'Blackwomen' in liberation movement discourses and the creative literature they influenced. The protagonist, David, is perturbed by the well-informed comrade sent by the UDF to address an audience of predominantly older people. Upon first meeting Dulcie,

David hesitated, savouring for a moment the memory of the UDF representative. They'd sent a woman, a young woman, for heaven's sake, in trousers and an oversized jersey and ugly brown shoes like the old fashioned walkers worn by nurses. Not someone who'd have the respect of the elders. But she said none of that (Wicomb 2000: 126).

She is both expected to look more familiar, and disapproved of here for appearing as though she does not prize the same aesthetics as he. Because of her dress and age, he doubts her ability to conduct politics, and, interestingly, this evaluation is rendered prior to any demonstration of her capacity. As it turns out, she is quite adept at winning the trust and admiration of the elders. She and David also remain life long friends.

However, the first impression cited above is important for it demonstrates the double-bind which characterises this young activist's positioning: she is expected to confirm conservative ideas about femininity at the same time that she is recognised as a revolutionary. David's irritation also stems from the fact that the UDF sends a woman in the first place.

In a piece from *Sechaba* September 1969, "Three Angry Young Women Speak to *Sechaba*", the fury is that of three activists. Mary, an MK combatant, positions herself within various revolutionary trajectories and, as she does this, it is clear that she does not see herself as an exceptional woman. Indeed, Mary is able to list a variety of prominent women combatants not only from Southern Africa, but also from various other global liberation struggles. The second is an Australian citizen, Elizabeth Aitken, an activist for the ANC in exile, whose response letter to the South African Minister of Defence defiantly declares that she is honoured to be considered a threat to the apartheid state. The third activist, Miss DN, launches an indictment against the apartheid state for the deaths of activists due to police brutality and torture, thereby rejecting the explanations of suicide which were backed by apartheid courts. Importantly, this piece appeared decades prior to Jordan's analysis on the need to re-examine the sense-making of women's participation in the liberation movement. Similarly, there were ongoing varied discussions on the role of women writer-activists on the pages of the magazine, *Staffrider*, at the same time that these tropes retained prominence. This highlights how contradictory impulses can co-exist. Writers like Manoko Nchwe, Miriam Tlali and Boitumelo directly challenged the limited prescribed roles set for women in nationalist politics as well as in imaginative renderings. The endurance of the relegation of these voices to exceptional women reinforces Desiree Lewis' and Mamphela Ramphele's points above.

Nor does this tendency seem to be confined to South African race politics. Black feminists from elsewhere have pointed to similar tendencies. The poet, Grace Nichols' persona in her 'Of course when they ask for Poems about the "Realities of Black women"', asserts that, for different Black nationalist and conservative white feminist groups, what is expected is

A mother-of-sufferer
trampled, oppressed

they want a little black blood
undressed
and validation
for the abused stereotype
already in their heads (Nichols 1990:2-11).

This is the representation that scholars of African literature long ago named 'the mother Africa trope', which gets circulated through nationalist liberation movements and the creative literature they inform (see Dubey 1994; Gaidzanwa 1985; Stratton 1994).

memorialising Blackwomen

The above traces some of the histories which attach to representations of Blackwomen in relation to the liberation struggle. With South Africa's transition to a democracy, some of these have maintained currency. In one of the most celebrated, and controversial, renderings of the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Antjie Krog chooses to engage in similar representational politics when faced with Blackwomen subjects. For her coverage, serialised by the South African *Mail and Guardian* and the British *The Guardian*, under the name Antjie Samuels, she had received the Thomas Pringle award for journalism. The book version of these proceedings, *Country of my Skull*, won her the Olive Schreiner prose prize.

Both the serialised and the book versions participate in the rehashing of the trope outlined above. In *Country of my Skull*, this is evident when she writes of Blackwomen appearing in front of the commission. Indeed, with the sole exception of her narrative on Winnie Mandela and Christine Qunta she repeatedly casts Blackwomen subjects stereotypically. Further, Krog's Blackwoman at the TRC is one

[w]ho cares endlessly ... dressed in a beret or kopdoek and dressed in her Sunday best, everybody recognises her. Truth has become woman. Her voice distorted behind her rough hand has undermined man as the source of truth. And yet nobody knows her (Krog 1998: 67).

Krog's mythical woman is the long-suffering, unknowable character of

nationalist literature. In other words, faced with a diversity of Blackwomen historical subjects Krog resorts to an older, readily-packaged metaphor of the category 'Blackwomen'. It should be unsurprising for this trope to surface here given the manner in which the TRC worked to memorialise the anti-apartheid movement. The above characterisation of Blackwomen subjects has been questioned by various South African feminist scholars. Wicomb (1999) traces it to Krog's earlier coverage of the TRC, where the visual image of the trope described above, usually in tears, was used as accompaniment for Krog's *Mail and Guardian/ The Guardian* coverage of the TRC. The same visual accompaniment would grace the non-South African issues of Krog's book later. The problematics with both the visual and verbal representation of Blackwomen in Krog's work are underlined in Wicomb's essay. Further, as Wicomb notes, Krog's casting of Blackwomen subjects in terms of the mother Africa trope was especially evident since visibly pained Blackwomen were metaphors also stood in for non-Blackwomen suffering and pain. This is a particularly disturbing trend given the extensive critiquing of this positioning of Blackwomen characters/subjects as fountains of suffering, individually unknowable, but made to function as vessels through which societal suffering can be contained. The question that needs asking, for Wicomb, pertains to why this stereotype continues to function in this way so that this long suffering woman is used as short-hand for everybody's, the nation's pain, except her own, or that of ordinary Blackwomen subjects. It is precisely because of the already accessible meanings which it carries that this stereotype can be used both extensively and uncritically within nationalist narratives of memory-making.

Additionally, Nthabiseng Motsemme has commented on the pervasive circulation of such stereotypes throughout the discourse of the TRC. When the commissioners responded to women's painful stories through a reinsertion of the long-suffering stereotype such 'an instrumentalising of female trauma was strategically used to construct a woman borne out of tears' (Motsemme 2002:3). Motsemme proceeds to ask questions about Krog's large women who cry constantly, punctuated by a white farmer Krog quotes as saying: 'If I see another black woman crying, then I remember two Afrikaans expressions from my youth, "cry like a *meid*" and to be "scared as a *meid*"' (Krog 1998: 190). While Krog cannot be held

responsible for the general stereotypes of Blackwomen in South African society (and beyond), the high level at which crying, suffering Blackwomen feature in her text raises several problems. The prominence of such figures when examined at face value is puzzling especially given many non-Blackwomen subjects cried at the TRC, coupled with the low numbers of Blackwomen who testified in front of the commission. The presence of this ever-crying Blackwoman in Krog's narrative is convenient and works as a ready, familiar stereotype available to readers of her narrative, repeatedly authorised at the TRC through the interventions of commissioners. In the absence of any critique in Krog's narrative it amounts to the re-circulation of an old stereotype in the service of nation-making. The pervasiveness of this symbolic, iconoclastic Blackwoman figure occludes the variety of ways in which Blackwomen subjects position themselves in relation to circulating and emergent national discourses. Rather, as a pattern it works 'to fix black women's positionalities making it difficult for her to speak through them in her own terms' (Motsemme 2002:4). Further, if this trope is used as 'truth' in Krog's representation, what kind of truth does it contribute to? And what kind does it erase?

Addressing the meeting of truth and representations of Blackwomen in Krog's text from a different angle, Jo-Anne Prins finds Krog's interpretations of women's testimonies at times excessively simplistic, and in other instances, irresponsible. Referring to Rita Mazibuko's testimony to the TRC concerning her experience of rape in ANC camps, and Krog's writing of that moment, Prins opines:

[Krog's] words 'Nothing more than an ordinary prostitute' carry the danger of trivialising the victim's experience and that of any prostitute. One is tempted to ask: 'What is ordinary about being a prostitute?' These words are indicative of a judgement being passed on the memory of Mazibuko's experience. The truth as told by the woman is not supported, nor her courage to speak and voice the pain she experienced in the way she could best describe it. Instead of immediately referring to her pain and suffering, her sexual history is questioned (Prins 2002:367).

The treatment Prins critiques above is reflective of both the hearings

themselves, as well as of Krog's narrative. Prins demonstrates through various citations from Krog that ultimately the only entry points for Blackwomen are as either patriarchally reified or reviled. In choosing to be party to the unproblematised circulation of these stereotypes outlined by Wicomb, Motsemme and Prins, Krog's narration of Mazibuko acts alongside '[w]hite supremacist and sexist constructions of black women as prone to sexual promiscuity [and the forums wherein they] are publicly "confirmed" or alluded to in certain ways' (West 1999:24). Krog's 'impeccable credentials', to borrow Wicomb's (1999) formulation, do not equip her with a desire to represent Blackwomen in a nuanced fashion. Her representations of Christine Qunta and Winnie Mandela, two women who enter the TRC space for highly varied ends, as threatening and despicable in precisely the same way demonstrates the extent to which Krog is unprepared for Blackwomen she can cast in neither 'safe' long suffering mould, nor as dismissable because 'sexually promiscuous'.

A refreshing departure from and deconstruction of the working of the mother Africa trope in the case of South African literature is obvious from the manner in which Wicomb chooses to cast female comrades in her novel *David's Story*. Because of the pervasiveness of the long suffering, rather than activist, Blackwoman character in South African narratives of the struggle, Wicomb peppers her narrative with various manifestations of female comrades. She uses these to destabilise any possibility that there is a singular authoritative truth about the location of, or inclinations of Blackwomen's presences in the struggle movement. In Wicomb's text the constant suggestion that there are an infinite possible ways through which the identity 'Blackwoman' in apartheid South Africa can be inhabited illustrates an unwillingness to posit a fixed, 'counter' narrative which nonetheless remains trapped in the same binaries of 'negative' or 'positive' renderings of Blackwomen activists.

The character Rachel in this novel realises that after her marriage she is expected to fit into the mould of the respectable, controlled Blackwoman instead of the defiant activist she had been until that point. Faced with this realisation, she muses disapprovingly that,

[d]ignity, it seemed, meant a bundle of dreary things for a woman: she had to keep her head covered at all times, was not to throw it

back and roar with laughter even in private, and above all, was not to venture outdoors after sunset without an escort (Wicomb 2000:49).

She realises that this dignity, like the safety in Krog's crying, recognisable women, is nothing but a form of control. These problems linger even when we remain mindful that,

[a] critical part of setting up the TRC, was to facilitate the project of nation-building in South Africa. So the tears and blood spilled in the liberation struggle present a powerful imagery critical for the making of a masculine nation, free from any form of emasculation (Motsemme 2002:3).

Indeed, the crisis of representation in Krog's text stems precisely from a resistance to thinking about the relationality of identities: about how her construction of herself, and fleeing home to the family-farm intersects with discursive identities for the subjects she writes about. It is only when Krog opens up an engagement with how white (Afrikaner) femininity is constructed through the constant transmission of Black female stereotypes, as well as how these serve to buttress harmful Black masculinities that she can present more dynamic and varied Blackwomen subjects. For, as long as they work as instrumentalisation, and prevent or protect her from having to interrogate her own identity processes, these stereotypes remain useful for her project of avoidance.

Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies' (1996) joint submission to the TRC draws on a variety of locations where Blackwomen have made themselves heard in relating experiences under apartheid. Among the many sources they highlight are the numerous autobiographies and other publicly available creative writing penned by activist women. Their submission highlights what was down played by the TRC process: the *ongoing effects* of institutionalised white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal and heteronormative oppression. This comes across throughout the lengthy submission, where, as they demonstrate, different narratives of women's experiences were being left out. Goldblatt and Meintjies pointed to the rich variety in the narratives which speak to what remains in nationalist discourses a homogenised experience, flagged repeatedly through lazy stereotypes.

Cautioning against the emptying out of Blackwomen's highly varied realities from official apartheid memorial narratives, they point out that there is a myriad of reasons why women stayed away from the TRC. Goldblatt and Meintjies' submission also highlights the urgency of making a concerted effort to uncover the grounds underlying the paucity of women's testimonies on their own account. This contributed to the fallacy that the struggle against apartheid was waged by men. For Goldblatt and Meintjies, it is paramount that women activists not be locked in discourses of exceptionalism.

In *David's Story*, Wicomb addresses discourses on the exceptionality of Blackwomen activists differently. Irritated with David's casting of his female comrades as exceptional Blackwomen, David's biographer suggests that it is precisely the construction of these women activists as unusual which needs interrogation. Indeed the numbers of female comrades present in Wicomb's text undermine this exceptionality, a point which is even more interesting given that it is David who tells the story which includes these women at the same time that he continues to see each, but especially Dulcie, as exceptional. The biographer in the novel lashes out at David's illogic thus:

As with the preservation of all prejudices, he will no doubt go on clocking exceptions rather than questioning the stereotype and its rules. How many exceptions does an intelligent person have to come across before he sees that it is the definition of the category itself that is wanting? (Wicomb 2000: 80).

David's biographer is unwavering in her certainty that casting people as exceptions in the face of evidence to the contrary works in aid of oppression, and forecloses on the recognition of a larger landscape of possibilities and contributions from the stereotyped group. Meaningful recognition of heterogeneity is only possible when ways of looking are themselves opened up in order to excavate new sites of meaning. Wicomb's novel as well as Goldblatt and Meintjies' submission participate in this project.

Goldblatt and Meintjies' submission highlights feasible routes to remedy this 'absence' of women and to ensure that women's participation in the liberation movement is acknowledged as part of the official depot of the nation's memory under apartheid. Pointing to the convention of Black-

women's autobiographies in the 1980s, they suggest that some of the experiences outlined therein need to form part of the TRC report, as do white women's narratives of activism from the same era, because prevalent circumstances in South African society belie the TRC's claim of offering a safe space for the narration of certain experiences. The consequences of this absence would collude with patriarchal tendencies to recite struggle history as that sustained by women through their support of the men who were the sole active agents.

The submission cited above led to the holding of special women's hearings at the TRC. It included interviews with women activists whose collective, and individual, narratives variously challenged the overall thrust of the TRC text then in formation. These women pointed to ruptures which would destabilise prevalent notions of 'comradely' interactions between men and women engaged in the fight against apartheid. Given the public nature of the testimony, it also called for women to testify at the TRC about the sexualised brutalisation they encountered in the hands of the state as well as from male comrades. Wicomb's Sally encounters one such memory,

Sally did not know she was afraid of water. She loved paddling and took some pleasure in feeling the resistance of water, but required to swim at one of the training camps, she found it impossible to put her face in it and how poorly she performed, unable to confess her terror. He said, as they made their way gingerly across the burning sand, A fuck, that's what you need, and she saw his bulging shorts and knew that her time had come, as she had known it would come sooner or later, this unspoken part of a girl's training (Wicomb 2000:123).

And the lawyer-activist Wendy Isaack points to another,

in black communities, homosexuality is still seen as a white phenomenon, unAfrican, unChristian, an attack on black culture and tradition. The black lesbian must be viewed within this paradigm. Homophobia leads to the perpetuation of myths and stereotypes about lesbians and gay people. More importantly, it leads to the creation of an environment in which black lesbians feel vulnerable and unsafe (Isaack 2003:1f).

The broadcasting of these kinds of memories presents problems for a narrative which seeks to affirm patriarchal Black masculinities. It points to the ruptures within the hypervisibility of Blackwomen through tropes which belie the ways processes of typecasting work to objectify. To objectify is, after all, to de-humanise and render fully knowable. It allows created images, stereotypes created about the marginalised, here heterogeneous Blackwomen subjects, to function as short hand. Thus '[t]he actual being is then denied speech; denied self-definition, self-realization; and overall this, denied self-hood—which is after all the point of objectification' (Cliff 1990:272). Given the fallacy of complete access to Blackwomen, their knowable aspects, narratives of trauma around sexuality are one way to complicate the masculinist national narrative which is comfortably rehearsed in spaces like the TRC.

Further, given the inappropriate categories of perpetrator or victimised, Blackwomen's entry into this discourse already traps them in old stereotypes that many struggle against in their daily lives. Testimonies of sexual violation by fellow comrades, or agents of the state, in addition to being in themselves traumatic experiences, can hardly be performed in live broadcasts to the country. South Africa's media record of not believing women who go public with their stories of rape does not do much to advance the benefits of breaking the silence¹.

¹ The most visible cases which demonstrate this were ANC MP Nomboniso Gasa and Nomangezi Mathokazi. Both women chose to go public about their rapes, the former on Robben Island in 1997, and the latter by Makhaya Ntini in East London in 1998. See Zubeida Jaffer's discussion of the media responses to Gasa's press statement, in the *AGI Newsletter*, 11 (2002), archived at <http://web.uct.ac.za/org/agi/pubs/newsletters/vol11/woman.htm>, and Anthea Garman's analysis of the same published in *Rhodes Journalism Review* 16 (1998), archived at http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjr16/what_just_do_with_it.php. See also the report of the SAPS's improper conduct in the investigation of Gasa's rape archived at <http://www.icd.gov.za/reports/robberisland.htm>. For Mathokazi's coverage, see the *Sunday Times* 25 April 1999, for an interview with her.

deserting exceptionality

And there are black women
considered so dangerous
in South Africa
they prison them away (Nichols 1990:53-56).

In her 'Two Sides of the Story', Gertrude Fester (2000) explores a range of emotions from the perspective of two Blackwomen lovers, one imprisoned under Section 29, and the other anxious on the outside not knowing whether her beloved is alive or dead. Fester juxtaposes the diary entries of the two women, and through this medium is able to explore a variety of dimensions of the inner workings of the two women. Set in the late 1980s, it begins with Sandra declaring half-tongue in cheek, 'What a bizarre sense of relief! No more being on the run, no more moving house every third or fourth day' (Day 1, 18 May 1987). Defying categorisation as exceptional because of the high level of political involvement both women have, combined with being lesbians, there are suggestions of other lesbians in the movement. This is revealed to be a preoccupation of the security officer who interrogates Sandra, suggesting its un-exceptional status. This is further reinforced when Sandra counts the other women she knows who are currently in detention under different sections.

Fester's piece like others in the anthology of Blackwomen writers *Ink@Boiling Point*, through the 'reconfiguration' of genres that they partake in, invite rethinking of identities and borders. In her 'Forward' to the anthology, Desirée Lewis suggests that these nuances show 'how the creative impulse can shift conventional barriers and create new ways of seeing, new ways of writing, and, for readers, new ways of thinking about their world' (Lewis 2000:i). Indeed, Fester's piece especially highlights those aspects and experiences leading up to a democracy that might not have not been part of the memorialising process because 'both memory and identity are rooted in contested ground' (Majaj 2001:118). Given the traditions of representing Blackwomen outlined above, such interventions offer insightful departures from the stereotypical authorising tropes. They enlarge the project of memorialising the struggle to topple apartheid, at the same time that they point to contradictions that have not miraculously

disappeared with the end of apartheid. Fester's characters experience a range of emotions: fear, anger, delirium, amusement, isolation and desperation. Each emotion is uncovered whether it is Sandra or Madge experiencing the contradictions of their lives, the rejection of their politics and sexual orientation by family.

The reminder of unfinished business is one that links to Goldblatt and Meintjies' problematisation of the past's transition from memory to the terrain of history, and the power dynamics that inevitably get omitted from the larger nationalist narrative that the TRC was such a central part of. The submission by Goldblatt and Meintjies shows how gendered violence, in physical and epistemic forms, continues to haunt Blackwomen in South Africa. This is incontestable. However, the important intervention that they make pertains to the implications which ensue from this recognition: gendered violence makes it impossible for women to partake in their new democracy.

Their submission then, more than calling for additional hearings, important though these were, also challenges the terms under which South Africans can participate in the memory terrain. The gross levels of violence against women, but highest and most varied for Black lesbians, should continue to remind us of the everpresence of various systems of oppressive violence which make it impossible for all South Africans to access freedom to the same extent. A key reminder comes from Wendy Isaack (2003:1) who declares,

Black lesbians in South African townships face violence at home, in schools, communities, in clubs and in the streets. For many of us this violence has become a way of life. It hurts our bodies, our minds and our families. This violence hurts because it is kept invisible.

The danger of the hypervisibility of Blackwomen through the tropes discussed above in national narratives of the truth reconciliation and memory-making lies in its paradoxical effects. It invisibilises the experiences of trauma for Blackwomen, especially for those who are lesbian. Because the suffering of (older) Blackwomen becomes one of the most 'naturalised' way to conceive of Black female subjectivity, this colludes to mask the variety of ways in which Blackwomen continue to be terrorised by (white supremacist) heteropatriarchy.

Fester and Isaack above also highlight the importance of being attentive to a variety of articulations. The TRC privileged the public telling of stories, so that after Motsemme, the nation could be made from those narratives of tears and blood. However, 'in privileging speech we need to be aware that those who are the most marginalized have often used invisibility and silence as a means to protect themselves' (Motsemme 2002:1), and to express experience in alternative spaces and forms.

The explorations of the various *achievable* ways of making meaning is one of the challenges that Zoë Wicomb's novel, *David's Story* grapples with. Set in the post-apartheid moment, it invites and engages the question of how to write a history that is neither totalising, nor trite for leaving out too much. The writing subject of Wicomb's text, David's biographer, examines ways of writing a Blackman's life story in ways which do not simply recycle old stereotypes about Black masculinity while effacing Blackwomen. The biographer is reminded constantly of how history's legacies continue to impact on how Blackwomen subjects are constructed.

Taking up the invitation to read differently appears an opportune moment to enter further into Wicomb's text. Shortly into the novel the reader is introduced as Ouma Sarie. This character is then used as a vehicle for drawing connections, some of which will be later unravelled, between the numerous constructions and participations of Black gendered identities under apartheid.

On the one hand, she notes 'the steek-my-weg location of unmistakably coloured country houses, the houses of farm labourers' which produced 'coloured girls; [who] wore the cut-off ends of stockings' and worked as labourers in the nearby hotel (Wicomb 2000:17). These coloured women are assumed to be safe by the owners of the hotel and indeed by the apartheid establishment. They do not appear to question much and although useful as labour, are invisible like their 'hidden' houses. However, Ouma Sarie's narrative suggests their unexpected subversive participation in liberation politics. This is foregrounded when she observes that '[t]heir tilted, stockinged heads were those of guerrillas deliberating over an operation' (Wicomb 2000:17).

As a sharp contrast to Krog's women who wear traditional wraps and suffer silently, Wicomb's coloured girls are masters of disguise. More importantly, the same disguise is used to a variety of specific ends. The

ingenuity of their gift is foregrounded precisely because Wicomb invests the *swirlkous*, the stocking used as part of the hair straightening process, as part of the disguise. This image jars with other discourses on these stockings: associations—with poverty, with aspiration to whiteness, and to rural upbringing. These links work only for those who permit themselves to be seen with their *swirlkouse* on their heads outside. Wicomb turns this object used as a way of derision on its head, when she invests it with revolutionary politics. Indeed, in *David's Story*, the stockinged head is so prevalent that soon the eighties are known as

the decade of brave baby girls with tightly bound guerrilla heads, which goes some way towards explaining the little-known fact that the Movement managed to recruit so many coloured women (Wicomb 2000:9).

Throughout the novel there is the suggestion that things are rarely as they seem at first, that women's participation in struggle, and contribution to history cannot be accessed through the 'usual' (read: masculinist) epistemological attempts. Another example with fascinating paradoxes is Sally.

Sally is at once the exquisitely feminised clerk at Garlicks and a guerrilla fighter. At her formal place of employment, it would be impossible to suspect her more subversive activities. There is a suggestion that these contradictions are not mere disguise, for Sally continues, for example, to straighten her hair after the struggle is over. The point, then, is not mere camouflage, but one which suggests that the lenses brought to bear on political, cultural and other activity be unwaveringly self-reflexive. In a fight with David, her former comrade and now spouse, Sally declares:

[s]o leave people like myself to straighten my hair if I want. Why should I not be able to cover my forehead with a fringe or a hair curling here, there, and she tugs brutally at the wisps in question. And it's not about aping white people; they don't straighten their hair (Wicomb 2000:29).

conclusion

This paper has shown that the high circulation of stereotypical representations of Blackwomen in the narration of the liberation movement during apartheid retains currency in the formal memorialising of that era. It draws and builds on substantial previous research which has demonstrated the pervasiveness of stereotyped Blackwomen characters in the creative literature stemming out of various arms of the broad liberation movement. These tropes which effect Blackwomen characters' paradoxical hypervisibility flow directly from discourses of national liberation movements which were not sufficiently sensitive to interlocking systems of oppression. To the extent that the post-apartheid memory process has been about storage of recollections of the past, it is inevitable that aspects of this consciousness will permeate the contemporary. This is illustrated through examples from interventions at the TRC and Krog's coverage of the TRC's proceedings.

While the rehashing of stereotypes which served the narrative of the masculinist liberation struggle are unsurprising, their repetition in texts which claim a critical engagement with the memory process is troubling. This is especially the case given their relentless critique by feminist scholars and activists in Southern Africa. The ongoing use value of these systems of representation attaches to the safety they afford those who instrumentalise them. For as long as Blackwomen subjectivities are unengaged with beyond the stereotypical representations as long suffering mothers, or hypersexualised whore, white femininities and all masculinities need not get deconstructed. Additionally, to the extent that the exceptionality discourse is used to read those who cannot safely be subsumed into one of the stereotypical sub-categories, a certain protection can be maintained for those uninterested in reading identities as the processual, relational entities that they are.

The imaging of Blackwomen in these stereotypes continues to have material implications for those trapped in these dyads. The encouraging representations which also exist, here in Wicomb's novel and Fester's short story, point to the validity of the memory process, and the need to be attentive to the destructive habits which ensure, for example, the state of siege under which Black lesbians continue to live.

Indeed, 'the search for truth—understood as shared memory, his-

tory—is important in providing a durable basis for a political community’ (Mamdani 1996). It requires an ongoing rigorous examination of the crevices wherein Blackwomen’s agency is reflected, and as Wicomb’s narrative suggests, also a commitment to uncovering new ways of looking, listening and interpreting what seems at first easy.

Fester’s short story too suggests the ongoing usefulness of shifts in imagination as a means through which to ‘disrupt what may be seen as taken for granted and natural, to reveal contradictions and to show connections between that which may seem distinct’ (de la Rey 1997:196). Whereas stereotypical representations provide false securities for those who profit from them, the excavation of new epistemes suggests contradictions, and gestures to no closure. Perhaps this is fitting for an opening up, which is to say, freeing of the imagination to more vital and interesting developments. The interventions made by Wicomb’s novel, Goldblatt and Meintjies’ submission, and Fester’s story, among others participate in this project of opening up the imagination, critically engaging with ways of seeing which are more conducive to synthesising the heterogeneity which has always characterised the lives of any human cluster. They unpack traditions of absencing Blackwomen’s varied agency by revealing this typecasting discourse as a fiction which requires constant re-interpretation and revision in order to free the events of the past from ‘the veil of prejudice and illusion that shroud them’ (Dubois 1998:38).

To see highly differentiated texts and sites as participants in a similar project is not the same as attributing false similarities between these sites. Rather, it stands as strong testimony to the disavowal of prescriptive representation necessary in order to unsettle the prestige of place accorded stereotypical representations of Blackwomen in narratives of the anti-apartheid struggle. The varied tools, angles and structures of these texts speak to the complexities highlighted in the deconstructive process necessary engage analytical tools which are attentive to the networks of repressive depiction since they are methodologically disposed to probe historical and social specificities of oppressive definitional structures. This is part of ensuring that ‘each new generation is heir, not only to more information about the past, but also to more adequate knowledge of our capacities to comprehend it’ (White 1978:118). This alternate storying is paramount as part of the memory process, and also as part of the freedom process.

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