

“Senses of Silence”: Historical Trauma in *To Every Birth Its Blood*

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Summary

The critical reception of Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) has over the years been muted and unbalanced in appreciating the novel as a work of great depth. In this article I argue that a significant aspect that has been overlooked in the study of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is the presence of historical trauma in the novel and how it in turn shapes the novel's textuality. Through a rereading of the text, I argue that only in understanding the significance of memory and historical trauma might one arrive at a truer reflection on the novel. This intertwinement revolves around the manner in which oppressive laws have rendered South Africa (un)homely for the black population, expressing a sense of dislocation and alienation and a lack of self-worth in the novel's key characters, which change as a new mood and dynamic overwhelm the forlorn atmosphere of the early section to a point at which resistance is posited as the only alternative. Crucially, I will demonstrate that rather than being a novel of disjuncture, the novel is part of a continual process of Serote's project of rendering visible the horrors of apartheid.

Opsomming

Die kritiese ontvangs van Mongane Serote se *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) is oor die jare heen gedemp en ongebalanseerd in die waardering van die roman as 'n diepgaande werk. In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat die teenwoordigheid van historiese trauma en hoe dit die tekstualiteit van *To Every Birth Its Blood* beïnvloed, 'n belangrike element is wat oor die hoof gesien is by die bestudering van die roman. Deur middel van 'n herlees van die teks, voer ek aan dat slegs wanneer mens die belangrikheid van herinnering en historiese trauma begryp, jy 'n duideliker prentjie van die roman kan kry. Hierdie ineengeweeftheid berus op die manier waarop onderdrukkende wette Suid-Afrika (on)huislik gemaak het vir die swart bevolking en 'n sin van ontwrigting en vervreemding sowel as 'n gebrek aan eiewaarde in die sleutelkarakters van die roman uitdruk, wat verander soos 'n nuwe stemming en dinamiek die wanhopige atmosfeer van die vroeë afdeling oorheers totdat 'n punt bereik word waar weerstand as die enigste alternatief voorgestel word. Dis van kardinale belang dat ek demonstreef dat in plaas daarvan dat dit 'n disjunkte roman is, dit deel uitmaak van die voortgesette proses van Serote se projek om die gruwels van apartheid bloot te lê.

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The birds flutter to rest in my tree,
 and I think I have heard them saying,
 "It is not that there are no other men
 But we like this fellow the best,
 But however we long to speak
 He cannot know of our sorrows."

"Unmoving Cloud" (Tao-Yuan Ming)

With the demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa entered a period of attempting to come to terms with its traumatic past. The official mechanism introduced by the government to try and direct the process of healing and reconciliation was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), based on the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No. 34 of 1995, which allowed the victims of gross human rights violations to face their tormentors and for the perpetrators to admit culpability and, hopefully, be granted amnesty. It was a long process which was fully captured by the media and which engaged South Africans as the truths of detentions and narratives of trauma poured out. With the publication of the TRC final report, the process was brought to a close. The erstwhile victims and those perpetrators who had admitted culpability got on with their lives. Yet every so often in post-apartheid South Africa, it is not surprising to view documentaries of former detainees finding it difficult to articulate the experiences of having been detained, and what they underwent in detention. Instead, they often break down in tears, and the cameras pan away from their faces. It is the memory of torture that renders them unable to talk about those experiences. If the only way to deal with trauma is to give testimony (Bast 2011: 1070), then the scenes of victims breaking down and the televised documentaries of former detainees being unable to put into words what they experienced, show how near impossible it is for these experiences to be finally laid to rest. These memories are part of the historical trauma that has not been excised from their lives, and the televised breakdowns demonstrate how they live with this. This article rereads Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) against the backdrop of this inability to articulate these experiences.

In the years since it was initially published by Ravan Press, the novel has engaged and challenged readers and critics in how to interpret its complex narrative strands. It has been described as lacking a centre of intelligence (Coetzee quoted in Attwell 1993), as two novels masquerading as one (Visser 1987), inadequate (Trump 1990), as well as having two different forms of logic (Sole 1991). The intention of this article, without necessarily engaging the past criticism, is to discuss the novel in relation to historical trauma and how that affects the manner in which the characters mould themselves and perceive themselves first as victims and later as actors. Rarely has a novel that falls squarely within what we now recognise as

“trauma fiction” and of such depth been as neglected as this one. The reasons are partly historical, partly ideological. While the foregoing criticisms might be valid, the novel’s intention to paint the true colours of apartheid (Gagiano 2008) is not adequately addressed and as such the authorial foregrounding of trauma, and how it lives in memory, is under-researched.

Quite a different reception to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) as a trauma narrative emerges. Morrison’s critics appreciate how she approaches the interiority of the characters’ lives in dealing with the trauma of slavery in ways that Serote’s own critics avoid doing (see for instance Bast 2011, Jeskova 2009, Mobley 1993, Ramadanovic 2008). Both novels deal with this aspect affecting black people, yet it is the valorisation of Morrison’s book with its narrative of filicide that has accrued to the novel far greater cultural currency and capital than Serote’s own text. While not subtracting from Morrison’s artistic strengths, this article is concerned with how one text from one part of the world can be valorised and another allowed to fall into obscurity since, for South Africa, *To Every Birth Its Blood* is as much a “formative text in trauma studies” as *Beloved* is for the United States (paraphrased from Bast 2011: 1069).

Trauma studies is a relatively recent field in social sciences. In her monograph, Marinella Rodi-Risberg (2010: 8) notes how, until 1980, the understanding of much research into trauma had mainly focused on the effects suffered by combat veterans, i.e., adult males. The focus on trauma in the early 1980s marked the birth of contemporary trauma studies with the acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association in their official *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*. The groundbreaking work in the shift in perspective was made by Judith Herman, who in her book *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), brought together hitherto separate experiences of trauma caused by domestic and sexual violence, war, and terrorism in her quest for a more inclusive and general approach to trauma. The women’s symptoms came to be understood too in connection with PTSD. Rodi-Risberg notes that the development by which trauma studies came to impact on literary studies led to growing importance of the relationships between literature and trauma. Only in the 1990s does trauma emerge in literary studies as a possibility for the integration of, first, the concern in literary criticism at the time with poststructuralist and Lacanian abstract, and second “the real” in terms of the traumatic event and its socio-historical, political, cultural and ethical meanings and functions (Rodi-Risberg 2010: 11, 13). This may account in part for the muted reception and distortions of the characterisation of Serote’s novel, which in turn is the main argument of this article.

A key feature of Serote’s novel that undergirds the narrative is the consistent appearance of silence to denote the levels at which trauma is a functioning metaphor highlighting the figurative language of traumatic

experiences. This form of writing, first described by Geoffrey Hartman (1995) as “perpetual troping”, denotes the repeated usage of tropes in the light of the fact that no other rendition of the traumatic event is possible as it constitutes a “separate world, because it is outside of everyday experience and thus outside of ordinary language” (Winslow quoted in Bast 2011: 1071). Through the various moments at which Serote perpetually tropes the silence between and in characters to display the sorts of symptoms that the real-life detainees display on television being rendered mute, since they seem to be unable to recapture the original experiences coherently, Serote reaches for another dimension of referentiality in what might be seen as evasion. As Winslow opines, in this instance trauma fiction thus brings into being new ways of conceptualising the metaphors used as a “whole way of thinking, and [these] metaphors serve to indicate the literalness of new-thought, uncommon conceptualisation[s]”. And Serote is not alone in this uncommon conceptualisation. Njabulo S. Ndebele’s short story, “Death of a Son” ([1996]2008) ably demonstrates the perpetual troping of silence in a similar fashion to Serote in that the main characters are rendered mute by a (racialised) traumatic event that they experience.

As a construct in social sciences, trauma has many interpretations and deployments. For the purpose of this article, it is useful to think of trauma in the terms laid out by Aaron Denham when he observes that

[t]rauma, as a construct in social sciences, has questionable value due to the numerous and often ambiguous definitions spread throughout various disciplines (Erikson, 1995); Leyderdorff, Dawson, Burchardt & Ashplant, 1999). The term trauma is Greek in origin, meaning to physically wound, disturb or pierce the corporeal boundaries (Garland, 1998; Leyderdorff *et al.* 1999). Sources generally define trauma according to an acute event or insult against a person’s body or psyche. Today, its meaning is expanded to incorporate the emotional insult or shock to the mind resulting in physical and/or emotional injury. Currently, it is recognized that psychic trauma can have an etiology in multiple experiences, as the accumulation of mild stresses over time, or a single traumatic event.

(Denham 2008: 395)

Denham holds that a traumatic experience cannot affect two people in the same manner, nor can their reactions to that experience be the same. Trauma can result from social, political, personal or national events. Within this article “historical trauma” is defined as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over a lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences (Denham 2008: 396). It is my contention, using the construct, that Serote’s text minutely documents how historical trauma affects a community and how it debilitates some members of that community while others eventually manage to live with its contradictions. More importantly, it is the results of that trauma which account for the

listlessness, restlessness and other social ills that the characters exhibit. Commenting on the consequences of historical trauma, Denham further observes that

[a]ttempts to document the consequences of historical trauma on future generations have been extensive. Specifically, across multiple cultural groups, researchers and clinicians, using an array of methods, have observed characteristics such as higher levels of depression, withdrawal, various forms of anxiety, suicidal ideation and behavior, substance abuse, anger, violence, guilt behavior and a victim identity. Researchers have also noted that descendants may have difficulty in interpersonal relationships, reduced energy, pathological expression of isolation, exaggerated dependency or independence, concerns over betraying ancestors for being excluded from the suffering (a sort of intergenerational survivor guilt), an obligation to share ancestral pain and a collection of other problems that are often classified as simply various other psychological or mental disorders.

(Denham 2008: 396)

The above observations make the rereading of *To Every Birth Its Blood* necessary precisely because very few critics have thought of the characters in the manner of people who have suffered historical trauma, although the South African version of colonialism and later apartheid were massive traumatic experiences rarely seen elsewhere.

A further clarification is to distinguish between *structural trauma* and historical trauma, though the two concepts may become intertwined. According to van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela (2007), structural trauma may be defined as a pattern of continual and continuing traumas (Denham 2008: 396). Structural trauma emanates from "deep memory" engendered by historical trauma, and it should be apparent that the two concepts are mutually inclusive.

In the context of South Africa, the historical trauma occasioned by colonialism brought about emotional and psychological scars that were perpetuated by ruthless suppression over many years, land dispossession and the proletarianisation of whole communities as the country underwent rapid modernisation, the historical event of colonisation was thus compounded by the issue of race and the application of various daily humiliations over generations. This bred a sense of disenfranchised grief in the oppressed communities, and constant infliction of structural trauma as a pattern added to the sense of the historical trauma. In such instances it would be impractical to seek to uncouple the two concepts, as Frank Seeburger recognises in trying to draw a clear distinction between the two:

The way I'd put it is by using Freud's notion of "screen memory". I'd say the "historical" event is traumatic precisely because and only insofar as it functions as "screen" for the underlying structural trauma. And I'd insist on a *double* sense of screening: first, the sense, to the fore by Freud, of *masking*,

disassembling, covering-over; but also, second, the sense of being a *projection surface*, as in the movie screen for filmed images ... “structural” trauma must and can *take place* (literally) only by *screening* (i.e., maskingly projecting) itself as a specific image-screening itself, in short, *as* “historical trauma. In turn “historical” trauma is not a *kind* of trauma distinct from “structural” trauma. Rather, it is the *taking place of* structural trauma itself. So it is better to speak, perhaps, of the historical and structural “faces” of trauma

(Seeburger; italics in original)

As might be seen from the above, once an initial historical trauma is undergone, the resultant structural trauma occasions remembrance of the initial one. Structural trauma in itself re-enacts the historical one. For instance, the singular event of June 1976 cannot be seen in isolation from the historical event occasioned by colonialism and which affected generations of the disenfranchised leading to the event itself. Seeburger’s use of “screening” is useful in this regard for what started as student protests against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction quickly deteriorated to encompass the history of overall black grievances. So the event was in a sense a “screen” for the projection of the original historical trauma seen in the myriad placards that students had fashioned to air their anger and frustrations. And if we look at other examples of issue-driven traumatic events such as the Vaal Rent Boycotts in the early 1980s, we discover that the initial occasion of the plans to increase rent quickly turned into a full-scale confrontation of the community and the authorities which replayed the initial cause of the resentment with the increases that spanned a considerable time and led to the declaration of the State of Emergency in 1985. Oppressive rule brought on the collective emotional psychological injury of being colonised subjects, as structural trauma projecting itself as historical trauma.

While the above examples may seem far-fetched, two examples of structural trauma as a screening image of historical trauma are sufficient for this argument: the cases of Martin Luther King Jr., and Rodney King. Martin Luther King lived with a sense of a single event that was likely to end his life given the repeated, traumatising threats on his life as he campaigned for the civil rights movement. At his autopsy, for instance, the coroner who examined him was surprised to see that his thirty-nine-year-old heart had the wear and tear of a man who had seen sixty years – at that time an advanced age for a black man (Dyson 2008: 97). Evidence exists that the Federal Bureau of Investigation under J. Edgar Hoover knew of these threats but refused to pass such information to King, even at the time when he was eventually shot to death on April 4, 1968 in Memphis at the Lorraine Motel (Dyson 2008: 59). So here was an individual battling with the perceived threat of a structural trauma to his being, who nevertheless persevered in his activities of bringing justice to a nation’s blighted soul. Much as he battled with and put death aside, he could not do so indefinitely

and the strain must have been terrible. On that fateful day, Dyson notes, “[a] single bullet slammed him backward to the concrete floor, shattered his jaw, severed his spinal cord, rolled his eyes to the back of his head, and ushered him into the infinitely vast region of interpretation that he had already conjured in his mournful meditations on death” (pp. 43-44). Hence a single traumatic event to one individual and the body politic was the act that aroused in that body the *deep memory* of *historical trauma* when 110 American cities convulsed in rioting upon news of his death. And what the natives of these cities were up in arms for was because, as Dyson readily opines, King’s death was no ordinary death but had to be seen

in the light of a tradition of black death, from the first drowning on the first passage, the starvation, depredation, and complete annihilation of those who had any fight in them in the years of state-sanctioned slave-trading and owning, to the lynchings, shootings, stabbings, burnings, castrations, bombings, and assassinations that followed in the red wake of the Civil war – a train of mortal meanings carrying a message of intimidation and fear to black folk. Lynching under Jim Crow was meant to prove the power of white supremacy. It was a highly visible way to keep Negroes in place by swinging black bodies into submission, hanging black bodies to hell, and burning black bodies into the black imagination and mainstream memory. The dead bodies of black folk were handed up as ample evidence that white folk were in control of every aspect of black life, and irrefutable proof that the issues of black life and death hung in the balance of white desire, permission, and power. As Billie Holliday memorably sang, black bodies were “strange fruit” on Southern trees.

(Dyson 2008: 97)

The single event that led to Rodney King’s brutal beating by four white policemen is far removed from the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., certainly, but only because, at this point African Americans thought, perhaps erroneously, that they too were part of the “promised land” postulated in the latter’s speeches. When the vicious beating was videotaped and went viral in the greater Los Angeles area, that traumatic event brought to the fore the same kinds of memories Dyson sights above. With one difference: in the case of Rodney King, the riots only occurred after the acquittal of his four assailants, perhaps pointing to how the community initially believed in the justice system. But when the police officers were acquitted, the act touched a nerve composed of separate strands of stubborn structural issues like chronic unemployment, racial profiling, educational inequity, radical poverty, gross overimprisonment, and the enduring reluctance to hire black men (Dyson 2008: 57). The issue here is that even as time had gone by, not much had been done to address the core issues affecting the poor that Martin Luther King campaigned for, and Rodney King was the victim that brought all forms of discontent, predicated on the historical trauma of slavery, to the boiling surface. For this writer, therefore, historical and

structural traumas tend to be self-reinforcing and thus intricately intertwined, be it at an individual or a communal basis.

2

In Serote's text, the opening section is heavily laden with characters who live under the weight of structural and historical traumas. The withdrawn main character, Tsietsi Molohe, exhibits various symptoms of these traumas and the first-person narrative allows the reader to perceive how in his observations of the setting, Alexandra and its inhabitants, he sees how multi-layered the whole experience is to the community as a whole. In her study Judith Herman (1992: 42), for instance, cites the inability of the victims to articulate their truer feelings about their experiences thus:

Because reliving a traumatic experience provokes such intense emotional distress, traumatized people go to great lengths to avoid it. The efforts to ward off intrusive symptoms, though self-protective in intent, further aggravates the post-traumatic syndrome, for the attempt to avoid reliving the trauma too often results in a narrowing of consciousness, a withdrawal from engagement with others, and an impoverished life.

(Herman 1992: 42)

A striking feature, therefore, in Tsi Molohe's presentation is his innate withdrawal, an inability to express himself and his feelings and an observant and questioning gaze on all around him, including his father, who is described as "strangely quiet" (Serote 1981: 61).¹ Mr. Molohe comes across as "defeated", old, and even his eye movements are described as being "an admonishment" (*Birth* 63). Tsi actually realises that, apart from what his mother told them about his father's struggles, he hardly knows anything of his past life (*Birth* 62). These old people, as Tsi observes, tried to build a future for their children "but everything was against it", hence the bent shoulders, the ever-present silence signalling defeat (*Birth* 62-63), a defeat that lies in the moment of being forced to give up their home in Sophiatown.

The perpetual troping of silence in the text demonstrates the fact that no other rendition of traumatic events is possible as it constitutes a "separate world, because it is outside of everyday experience and thus outside of ordinary language".² The consistent frequency of silence in the text mimics

1. Subsequent references to *To Every Birth Its Blood* (Serote 1981) are indicated by *Birth* and the page number(s).

2. Adapted from Bast, "Seeing Red", 1071. Bast credits Hartman (1995: 537-563) with coining of the phrase in his often-cited article "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies".

repetition compulsion without attempting in vain to simply retell through language a primary experience which can never be recaptured (Bast 2011: 1071). The silence in the text becomes part of Tsi even in the most cacophonous environment, for it is embedded deep within him. This revelation dawns on him when he has left journalism behind and struggles to adjust to his present state and shows that he has been aware of this phenomenon that is not his burden in others. He notes:

Whenever I had been before, I had seen something similar to *what I was becoming*. I did not believe it, there was no way that I could, until one day I saw it in my father's face. He became silent. I heard the silence in me. When I sat in a shebeen, or kept talking to Lily, I heard the silence. It was tangible, it had colour, it had smell, it was familiar; there was no way I could not recognize it, it had been with me while I was learning how to hold my cock and pee. It was with me now ... this is not easy to find. It is heavy.

(*Birth* 136-137; my italics)

Tsi's experience of this silence is recognition of historical trauma prior to his torture and detention, and the coupling of that with his own structural traumatic experience. But since he was more an observer than a participant, Tsi would still be aware of the silence, since he could see it wherever he had been before, only now the impact is more immediate. It now becomes, as Denham postulates, intergenerational, passed from father to son. Significantly, he notes how it had been there since his childhood, and with the forced removals had become part of him before his adult self assimilated and recognised it. At the time of the forced removals Tsi was a small child, but the trauma of that moment imprints itself on his memory and he is thus not separated from the inhibitive concerns of the adult world. He observes: "I was small then ... I had feared, cried, and *wondered with them* about all that was happening" (*B* 60; my italics). From these cries he learns the silence of the home as being a symptom of the unspeakable problems and experiences of the family. Thus even the loss of his family home becomes part of Tsi's psyche. The home is suddenly rendered (un)homely and this forms a lasting impression on him. In an earlier article, Annie Gagiano notes that when the narrative unfolds,

Tsi's parental home isn't a place of simple belonging either – his eldest brother Fix is imprisoned on the island and the police continue to harass the family, which itself is a strain; dreadful tensions are caused in his brother Ndo's family by Ndo's fierce bitterness and drinking bouts (20-21); Tsi is harshly reprimanded by both his wife and his parents for his inconsiderate ways [and his] increasing awareness concerning his own "house, room" where he spent four years has a wider counterpart in his vision of the whole of Alexandra as "... a makeshift place, a township".

(Gagiano 1989: 85)

Tsi later realises that South Africa at that moment is a tumour, a strange land that constantly exercises his mind to a point where he is an “observer rather than a participant” (*Birth* 71). More pertinently, as Gagiano again observes in a later article, “Serote’s subtle and delicately networked deployment of this image of homelessness must rank as one of the great achievements of South African writing” (Gagiano 2008: 119).

Because he is constantly on a quest, Tsi pays close attention to his father and reaches a moment of epiphany as to why his father looks ever so defeated. Reflecting on the road on which he and Boykie met a convoy and were thereafter detained and tortured – his moment of personal trauma – he asks himself how his father would have reacted and how he would have rationalised the whole matter (*Birth* 102). In that moment, he simply realises that his father is a stranger since he cannot place him in a similar set of circumstances, and yet he reaches an understanding of the man before him:

My father was a stranger to me, his son, as he sat there chewing. How did he make his journey? I began to understand why he never wanted me to talk to him about the streets, or the city, or the police stations ... I realised what his eyes were saying, with their ever-weary, bloodshot look. I began to understand why his shoulders were so bent, why his movement, as if carrying an unbearable load, seemed to creak, I began to understand.

(*Birth* 102-103)

As Tsi contemplates his new understanding, he also realises, equally, that he cannot speak to his own father about his traumatic moments in detention: “There was nothing I could talk to him about, I could not talk to him about what had happened to me in the past seven days” (*Birth* 103). We are only left to surmise why the father figure, so venerated in any home, can hold such secrets as to weary him to a point where he completely withdraws from the family at times. This lack of communication between father and son is itself a problem for it allows Tsi to absorb the “unspoken”. Denham’s research findings come up with this factor regarding trauma transference:

The transmission of trauma is frequently noted in reference to untreated or unspoken survivor trauma. A frequently cited transmission mechanism of historical trauma is known as the “conspiracy of silence” (Danieli, 1998). This explicit or unstated taboo forbids the asking about or discussion of trauma. As a result of the conspiracy of silence and the difficulty survivors have in communicating their trauma experience, children will only receive information in fragments that are cast in mystery, thus perpetuating a narrative void surrounding the subject or experience.

(Denham 2008: 397-398)

Thus the Molope household is in effect surrounded by this conspiracy of silence that Tsi knowingly absorbs. Yet it is the same father who, while unable to talk directly to his own son about his personal experiences, is

equally enchanted by a fanciful dream of salvation from African leaders such as Nyerere, Kaunda and Nkrumah, holding steadfast to the belief that they would liberate South Africa from the tyranny of the present. He holds these figures in Godlike awe, refusing to see if this dream may be unrealistic and gets angry with Tsi when he tries to show his father that it may actually be flawed (*Birth* 104). It is such a forlorn, sad dream of an aged man which, in itself, was replicated in the younger generation with their veneration of Gaddafi, Castro and so forth. These dreams, in themselves, reveal how the traumatised section of the South African polity hoped for liberation from outside, whereas Serote later shows that liberation has to be fought from within. I shall return to this point later.

A sharp contrast is drawn, early in the text, between the older generation's responses to the lives they lead, in the character of the old man Zola, whom Tsi meets as he visits his grandparents' graves one morning. He is described minutely as an old man with a weary, tired face, reflecting both defiance and fear, with a bright smile which is soon followed by a sad shadow. Significantly, however, his eyes are "cold like marble" (*Birth* 15). Old man Zola had been friends with Tsi's father, and they had held long discussions: "We used to talk for a long time ... and then go away and sleep" (*Birth* 14). If it is in the nature of these old men to talk as they do, one assumes that even the oppressive system of apartheid, even Nazism, formed part of their discussions. What is important is that while they both struggled hard, old man Zola was eventually detained and spent thirteen months in solitary confinement. When he is released his wife lasts only two weeks with him and then dies (*Birth* 15). It is these diametrically opposed reactions to their oppressive state that form an immediate contrast to how people react to historical trauma, with either defiance or obedience. This becomes an important narratorial hook to the second part of the text, where the observer in Tsi is replaced by a commitment from other characters who, knowing the dangers of activism, nevertheless carry on being activists even to the point of death. Old man Zola, himself a former detainee, cannot articulate to Tsi what it is like to be in detention or jail, the precise observation made earlier that a victim of trauma finds talking of the experience difficult, much like Tsi later on: "No, leave that alone, leave it alone, I will tell you about it one day" (*Birth* 16). The retelling of his traumatic experience of incarceration is forcefully withheld by old man Zola, perhaps never to be spoken of even as, when they part, Tsi expresses a need to see him once more. All the old man is prepared to say is how defeat remains painful (*Birth* 17). It is old man Zola, significantly, who points out that while Tsi's brother, Fix, is recently detained, he has to find the strength to resist his jailers (*Birth* 16). Thus, if the trauma experienced by this community were constant, it follows that it would be some members of the same community who would choose to fight their oppression. Old man Zola's incarceration provides the context within which to view Fix's present time on the island, an understanding to what

might lie in the prisoner's future, in his silences later on. The old man thus serves as an important precursor early on in the text able to grasp what must surely befall Fix on the island.

While some members might choose to resist, others, like Ndo and Tsi, become listless, and in this Serote minutely documents especially Tsi's dejection. While earlier reviewers have simply described Tsi as a "feckless drunkard" (Barboure 1984: 174), it is important to view him as labouring under the tormented moments of historical and structural traumas brought on by his recent detention and torture. A seemingly innocuous scene of Tsi and Anka returning from the rehearsals of the Takalani Theatre group has more depth than when one initially reads it, but may become more meaningful when seen in the light of Herman's reading. As Herman explains in her study, some of the symptoms that denote post-traumatic stress disorder include intrusion and hyperarousal (Herman 1992: 35). In the case of intrusion, she explains that "trauma repeatedly interrupts ... small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event" (p. 37). So, while walking with Anka, Tsi's mind increasingly wanders and as he comments on Monday evening, the smoke emanating from the chimneys, the crowds in the streets, he suddenly feels ill:

I felt as if I was going to choke, any minute. My mind could not focus on one thing, it wandered about, like a moth, a fly, briefly stopping on one point to take off to another. It was as if all the houses, squatting like that in those different yards, were closing in on me, were right next to my nose, eyes, lips, face. The smell of the dirty water in the streets – the water, full of shit and all imaginable rubbish – felt as though it had become my saliva.

(*Birth* 32)

What brings about this disassociative state in Tsi and the angst that accompanies it (such as when he feels like voiding) are the images of seeming disorder that the night life presents to him, coupled with the intensity of the rehearsals from which he has come, such that the apparent chaos outside of him intrudes into the chaos within him. The chaotic disorder of his thoughts prior to his feeling ill seems incomprehensible, yet these may be explained in a similar fashion to those of Sethe, Paul D. and Denver in *Beloved*. Vincent O' Keefe opines that

[the] traumatic memories of Sethe, Paul D. and Denver are fragmentary, circular, and revisionary bits that readers struggle to piece together. The ambiguity compels readers to cross conceptual boundaries and attempt to reinhabit the characters' psychological processes, as opposed to registering passively their thoughts and memories as finished products.

(O' Keefe quoted in Bast 2011: 1070)

In another context, Joanna Jeskova notes how, since the memories which assail the survivor have no way of being comprehended by the psyche, they appear as pieces of random images, leading to bodily sensations. The thoughts remain incoherent and yet powerful because of their clarity. The recurring vivid images and memories have “a life of their own” because they invade the survivor’s present, and can overwhelm his/her will (Jeskova 2009: 20). For the reader, the disjointed images and thoughts of Tsi at that moment remain difficult to decipher if they are seen as disconnected from those resulting from the trauma he had experienced. It is a similar scene to his mind wandering explicitly to his grandmother at the moment when he, with Boykie, is severely tortured some time ago in the narrative (*Birth* 88). The insertion of a childhood memory at the precise moment of trauma shows Tsi’s attempt to block the intense pain he is feeling and acts as a defence mechanism. The poetic language reminds the reader that trauma is tied to literary language and witnessing. Here a figurative and emotional representation of a traumatic experience displaces referential truth (Rosi-Risberg, 12).³ Even a simple act of entering a theatre to see a performance of the ever-present structuring of trauma leaves him drained, and the persistent presence of silence connotes the constant state of his mindset to a point where he feels “naked” (*Birth* 135). As Lily, his wife, observes, the work of reporting for a newspaper at the time of such strife has exposed him to the wrath of South Africa, the situation he has earlier described as a tumour (*Birth* 147). Barboure opines that “[f]rom an epistemological viewpoint, what is captured here is the psychological response to a battering external world: it is the way in which the environment acts upon and damages individuals that is explored” (Barboure 1984: 174). The sensitivity that Serote displays reveals just how far-sighted he was in recognising how literary language can be deployed to address what may seem unrepresentable.

The transition for Tsi from a listless state of being to a more responsible adult occurs when he gains employment at MacLean Tutorial College because he realises that he cannot persist in the way that he has been doing. And yet this does not mean that he is out of the cold as it were. The menacing presence of the security police and his taunting interrogation by Captain Botha, the reminder that his brother is incarcerated for a long time

3. Another way of describing this moment would be to think of it as “traumatic hysteria” in line with Freud and Breuer’s theorising. Rodi-Risberg (2010: 5) quotes Freud and Breuer describing “traumatic hysteria” as a memory disorder: “[T]he causal relation between the determining psychical trauma and the hysterical phenomenon is not of a kind implying that the trauma merely acts as an agent provocateur in releasing the symptom, which thereafter leads an independent existence” but “the psychical trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts as a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work”.

and that the state is watchful unsettles the seeming tranquility of his suburban life. His parents' visits to his brother Fix actually give them a sense of hope, and for the first time his father articulates a more positive outlook when he observes: "When people's minds are made up, nothing can stop them" (*Birth* 162). And yet, as if to underscore the challenges and the difficulties ahead, the observation is followed by the silence as though they were contemplating the cost of that decision of people to free themselves. But here it is a silence of knowing just how traumatic the future will be, what it will exact out of those who become active participants. And it is a significantly more pregnant silence than an earlier one when, at a time of deep despair, Tsi observes: "There was a strange silence in the house now, as if something was going to snap" (*Birth* 63). These changes in the different moods of silences are what link the first part and the second one.

One of the contentions advanced by Nick Visser about Serote's novel is that, as Serote was writing *To Every Birth Its Blood* he was overwhelmed by the events of the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and abandoned the initial novel to fictionally accommodate these events. He observes that

[w]hat disturbs the structure of *To Every Birth Its Blood* is not, ultimately, any formal experiments Serote might have had over his material. What disturbs the structure is what, *according to people who were close to him at the time*, profoundly disturbed Serote: the events of June 1976, the events that compelled him to abandon not just one fictional project for another but one kind of novel for another, and one kind of politics for another.

(Visser 1987: 72; my italics)

As observed above, Annie Gagiano has addressed this concern in another article (1989), as has Kelwyn Sole (1991). What one might observe further is that Visser does not provide any proof for his claims: he relies on informants to arrive at his conclusion. The contention that the events of June 1976 were unexpected is not really true: the accounts around the planning of the implementation of the state's intention to use Afrikaans as a medium of instruction were well advanced before that fateful month. Even the then Anglican Dean of Johannesburg, Desmond Tutu, had written to the then Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster, warning him of a likely conflagration were these plans not reversed, to no avail. Amongst his many observations, Tutu writes: "I am writing to you, Sir, because I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably. A people can take only so much and no more" (Tutu 1980: 202). Taking Tsi's words as a starting point that South Africa was a tumour and a traumatising place and placing them in the context of Tutu's observations, it is possible to see how the second part of the novel evolved. But more persuasive is Barboure's observation that the longer poems at the time were also part of his mindset then. She states that in

his next two works, the long epic poems *No Baby Must Weep* (1975) and *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978), Serote begins to explore the relationship between the individual who has suffered and the collective activity required to end that suffering – between “memory”, on the one hand, and the future on the other.

(Barboure 1984: 176)

In effect, Barboure hones in on the fact that these writing projects, *No Baby Must Weep*, *Behold Mama, Flowers* and *To Every Birth Its Blood* are inter-related,⁴ and that the first two followed closely on one another while the 1978 poem extended the themes of the novel itself. Why Visser ignored this factor is unclear. But what should be clear is that Serote’s representation of violence in the second part of the novel takes place *after* the fateful month of 1976, as in this instance: “Alexandra was a stage for a battle. Many people had gone. Now there was this silence which pretended that things were normal” (*Birth* 168). It is the silence that pretends precisely because, like the Molope family’s silence (*Birth* 163), it is only on the surface, much like the pregnant silence before a major storm. My contention here is that Serote *anticipates*, as in much of the poetry, a further rupture in the seeming calm of the situation.⁵ This anticipatory stance of a conflicted future is precisely because the traumatised people and individuals like John feel drawn to the struggle. By the time we reach the volatile period of the mid-1980s with the youthful activists declaring, in effect, *siya-inyova* (“we are messing things up”),⁶ we realise the prescience of the second part and therefore that “time has run out – period”. In effect, Serote’s writing anticipates a difficult and traumatic period – in characters such as Oupa, John, Dikeledi, Anka, Mandla and Mmaphefo – in much the same way that Chinua Achebe anticipated the Nigerian coup of 1966 in his novel, *A Man of the People* (1966). As Frielick notes in his article, the notion of an apocalypse is entrenched in *No Baby Must Weep* with lines such as: “I am the man you will never defeat/ I will be the one to plague you/ .../ I will be your shadow, to be with you always” (Frielick 1990: 11).

While the second part thus is centred on a sense of purpose – and much has been written on the depiction of the Movement – and the decentring of Tsi, it is rather in the denouement of the novel when this character re-

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4. A very careful reading of Serote’s conception of his poems and the uncertainty regarding the periods of writing these and the eventual publication is set out in Frielick (1990).
 5. Serote asserts, in an interview with Leon de Kock that even in the 1970s he was already steeped in Umkhonto we Sizwe (de Kock 2012).
 6. Lesego Rampolokeng speaks of these activists as “the ungovernable” and has written a poem in homage of them, titled “Writing the Ungovernable” (Rampolokeng 2012).

appears that I wish to conclude the article. Tsi's respectability, gained by working for MacLean's, is depicted in such a manner that the pretension of normalcy is extended to him as well. He lives well, in a three-bedroomed house, and as an expectant father his life seems sunny. And yet, because he chooses to be an observer rather than a participant, he is still part of the whole and thus the battering external world impinges on his tranquil life. After his interrogation by Captain Botha he is clearly not as untouchable as he would have thought. When his nephew Oupa is incarcerated, tortured and killed (*Birth* 306-312), he is forced to flee South Africa after again being picked by the police and asked to explain his eulogy at Oupa's funeral: "I had to leave in a terrible hurry" (*Birth* 343). But he had by then developed a mindset that was in consonance with the mood permeating the country in a way that was absent from his earlier listless self:

The country had gone mad. By "country", I meant the government, those who protected it, those who lubricated it with money, wealth, oppression, violence and their lives. *They had no choice but to go mad. We had no choice but to stop the madness.*

(*Birth* 344; my italics)

Tsi demonstrates the transition that there can be no dialogue between the government, its supporters, and those it oppresses. For someone who was as traumatised as he was, who was dejected and so impoverished, he realises the futility of hedging his views and the occasion of a life sacrificed. Oupa's death, while traumatic to the family, also allows Tsi, much like his father earlier on, to accept the brutal reality of the situation. He is drawn out of his protective cocoon when he observes: "I felt ashamed that the madness had had to hit so close to me, to rage into my home before I realised fully that South Africa had gone mad (*Birth* 344)". This is remarkably similar to the reaction of the couple whose son is killed in Ndebele's "Death of a Son". In this short story, Buntu and his wife (the narrator) live a comfortable life, dreaming of the good life sold by glossy magazines such as *Femina*, *Fair Lady*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Home and Garden* and *Car*, completely untouched by the violence in their society as the townships are occupied. Crucially, they do not speak of the structural trauma they suffered when they were rudely pushed off the pavement by an Afrikaner family some three years ago. The narrator says of the event: "That day, Buntu and I began our silence" (Ndebele 2008: 72). The trauma they experience is not to be spoken of, but it kills the very language of love between them, and Buntu's emasculation is accentuated by his initial bravado and whimpering surrender. Three years down the line as the troops enter townships and shoot indiscriminately, their son is shot and killed by a stray bullet. Their initial trauma of helplessness is compounded by the fact that the troops, having killed the child, return to take the corpse and demand that the couple pay for its return. As Buntu fervently claims that he will not buy back his son and that this would

happen over his dead body, his utter helplessness and bewilderment at having their lives turned upside down connotes the revisitation and compounding of the initial trauma in the streets of the unnamed town. The couple's dreamworld is shattered by the death of their son and the absurd situation regarding the repossession of his body. His death brings home forcefully, as much as Oupa's death does for Tsi, that it is unrealistic to dare to have a normally functioning, even perfect family home in moments of heightened trauma occasioned by the occupation of the townships. Ndebele and Serote's recognition of structural and historical trauma, and as rendered through the perpetual troping of silence, is both remarkable and rare in South African literary studies.

Oupa's death frees Tsi from his "drunken escapism" and even as he speaks to the Captain he shows a new defiance by asking him why he does not kill him (*Birth* 346). Significantly, he plans his "journey" as he is being interrogated, distinguishing himself further from the earlier Tsi who wanted to know how his father would have reacted to the pressures of such an intimidating environment (*Birth* 102). Yet, once in exile, the problems he might have thought to escape plague his thoughts: Oupa's death and funeral, his sister Mary's grief and the nature of the numerous deaths that follow, together with the cruel joke played on the family by the security police in pretending to return the deceased's clothes by giving them a parcel filled with new ones, complete with price tags. At this point he reverts to an earlier stage of drunken brooding with Yaone. Yet external events carry the narrative forward. In his current abject state Tsi recognises that he is not outside the terror campaign of the apartheid state, and wonders if he too will be the victim of the bombing raids that befall the frontline states. Contemplating his current state, he muses: "Is that what I was then? A target for bombs?" (*Birth* 347). His mind, as in an earlier episode, dwells on many people and states of being: his mother, his wife, his sister, the pilots who fly the planes, and he ends up admonishing himself: "I am an idiot" (*Birth* 348). But the chaos of his mind is symptomatic of intrusion of the external world in his psyche and the constant uncertainty and angst of his existence which stands for that of the entire exile community and the hosting nations. And, the raids are carried out: "The planes arrive in Mozambique. Thunder. Fire. Smoke. Silence" (*Birth* 366).

At the very end, as Tsi gets half a loaf of bread for his wife and children, he is seemingly on his last legs as his knees are wobbly, but he forces himself to walk home (*Birth* 368), itself a temporary refuge of the perpetually homeless.

Serote's novel is a study in how to write in literary language the experiences of trauma, how to document the texture and feel of such experiences and their everlasting impact on the lives of the victims. There is nothing heroic about Tsietsi Molohe, and there is nothing that a reader might feel except profound pity, but his portrayal allows us to understand him

(Gagiano 2008: 129) as a representative figure of what black South Africans underwent even without physical torture and possible death. In this he is a quintessential metaphor of how trauma affects victims of apartheid. The power of Serote's novel lies precisely in how he is able to make the reader contemplate the true horrors of apartheid without being preachy, didactic or maudlin. This form of writing, which we may observe as "bind[ing] grammar to horror" (after the poet Ingrid de Kok), is the due recognition of historical and structural trauma. This novel is arguably the "formative trauma narrative" of apartheid from within.

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