

Remembering the Self: Fragmented Bodies, Fragmented Narratives Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat*¹

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Summary

This article explores the significance of the motif of bodies in fragments in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1999) and *Agaat* (2006). It argues that van Niekerk's protagonists "speak" of their trauma primarily through their wounded bodies. The correlation between corporeal and narrative fragmentation is explored to determine whether remembering (or re-membering) can prove salutary. In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, it is only when characters are faced with the irrefutable evidence of trauma as wrought upon one another's bodies that they are forced to reckon with the truth of their familial narratives. Their fragmented bodies belie any "saving perspective" (van Niekerk 1999: 175), which might gloss over such horror. While Louise Bethlehem proposes that the scar is the "amanuensis of violence" (2006: 83), this article seeks to investigate whether there is anything potentially empowering in the revelation of scars, regardless of their origin. It considers how intimate relationships are implicated in working through the embodied experience of trauma and whether recognition might provide an alternative narrative of healing to the confessional mode. Van Niekerk's novels present neither easy solutions to the experience of trauma nor a false sense of closure. Nevertheless, the texts insist that trauma must be confronted, and that such a confrontation is possible only via the medium of the body. Finally, this piece considers whether Maurice Blanchot's account of the liberating potential of the fragment might provide pertinent insight into the absence of a coherent narrative of the healed body.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word die belang van die gefragmenteerde liggaam as motief in Marlene van Niekerk se *Triomf* (1999) en *Agaat* (2006) ondersoek. Die artikel voer aan dat Van Niekerk se protagoniste primêr vanuit hulle gewonde liggame van hulle trauma "praat". Die verband tussen liggaamlike en narratiewe fragmentasie word ondersoek om vas te stel of om te onthou (ook om ledemate of fragmente weer aan te heg, om te "re-member"), beskou kan word as 'n vorm van genesing. In beide

1. I would like to thank Merle Williams and John Masterson for their constructive and valuable feedback on an earlier version of this article.

Triomf en *Agaat* is dit eers wanneer karakters met die onmiskenbare bewyse van trauma op hulle liggame gekonfronteer word, dat hulle gedwing word om die waarheid van hulle familienarratiewe te konfronteer. Met sulke gefragmenteerde liggame is daar nie sprake van enige "reddende perspektief" (Van Niekerk 1999: 175) wat die afgryslikheid kan verbloem nie. Louise Bethlehem voer aan dat die letsel die "*amanuensis* van geweld" is (2006: 83), en gevolglik poog hierdie artikel om te bepaal of daar iets is wat potensieel bemagtigend is in die toon van letsels ongeag hoe hulle toegedien is. Hoe intieme verhoudinge betrek word by die verwerking van die lyflike belewenis van trauma, en of herkenning, eerder as belydenis, kan dien as 'n alternatiewe vorm van genesing word bekyk. Van Niekerk se romans bied nie 'n maklike oplossing vir die ervaring van trauma of 'n vals gevoel van afsluiting nie. Ten spyte hiervan dring die tekste daarop aan dat trauma gekonfronteer word en dat konfrontasie slegs moontlik is deur die liggaam as medium. Ten slotte bepaal hierdie artikel of Maurice Blanchot se verslag van die fragment se bevrydende potensiaal insig hierin kan bied by gebrek aan 'n samehangende narratief van die geneesde liggaam.

Marlene van Niekerk's work has been critically lauded, both domestically and internationally. However, the centrality of corporeality in her oeuvre warrants closer attention than it has thus far received in the existing scholarly literature. In this article, I explore the significance of the motif of bodies in fragments in van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1999) and *Agaat* (2006).² All van Niekerk's protagonists experience a degree of physical or psychological trauma; their bodies are presented as fragmented, and this mirrors their fragmented narratives of self. I will argue that the causal narrative of testimony and healing, as illustrated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), proves insufficient in attempting to understand the embodied experience of trauma and attempts at healing as represented in these texts. The protagonists of these novels prove incapable of telling their stories, and the narratives they do have recourse to remain fragmentary. In this regard, I attempt to formulate an alternative understanding of healing and "mending wounds" that is not necessarily predicated on attaining narrative coherence, but rather on recognition.

The problem of definition is a recurring issue in trauma studies and there seems to be little consensus regarding the limits of the term itself. For the purposes of this article, I have adopted Eva Hoffman's gloss of trauma as: "suffering in excess of what the psyche can absorb, a suffering that twists the soul until it can no longer straighten itself out, and so piercingly sharp that it fragments the wholeness of the self" (Hoffman 2005: 54). I am interested in analysing the impact and representation of trauma on the embodied self and maintain that anatomical and psychological experiences

2. This article refers to the English translations of van Niekerk's two novels by Leon de Kock and Michiel Heyns respectively. For a critical analysis of translation in South African literature, and of *Triomf* in particular, see de Kock (2009).

of trauma are not mutually exclusive.³ Toni Morrison describes memory as “what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared” (1990: 305) or as Mae Henderson phrases it, “memory as thought and memory as material inscription” (Henderson 1999: 85). I thus argue that traumatic memory should be considered as both material and psychological.

Writing about South African literature and trauma, one is always working in the shadow of the TRC as a response to the “trauma of apartheid” (Bethlehem 2006: 8). Dirk Kloppe concludes that “[b]y virtue of its linear teleology, the TRC narrative seeks to bring about a transcendence of the fragmented body of the South African body politic and, as a logical consequence, the attainment of a unified humanity, conceived of as both the individual made whole and the nation reconciled in unity” (Kloppe 2001: 470). Healing the individual and healing the nation are inextricably connected in this formulation (See Kloppe 2001: 464 & Bethlehem 2006: 78). In Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s opening address, he referred to this founding logic of the TRC which considered “the nation as a physical body” (Bethlehem 2006: 78). However, Bethlehem argues, in the course of the Commission’s work, and in terms of its legacy, ironically, by attempting to anchor the trauma of apartheid in the wounded body, and have that body function as a metonym for the nation, individual traumas were converted to collective traumas, and concrete traumas became abstract (pp. 77-91). The trauma of the individual and the specifically embodied experience of trauma were thus elided as the metaphor of the body replaces the matter of the body. Kloppe agrees, quoting Steve Robins when he contends that “the rewriting of personal memory as national narrative “reconfigures and erases the fragmented character and silences of embodied experiences of violence”” (Kloppe 2001: 463).

Confession is not the panacea the TRC needed, or hoped, it to be (cf. Graham 2008 & Hoffman 2004: 173). Bethlehem suggests that of greater solace to those who testified, was the physical support and contact provided by those who acted as “comforters”: “*Closer to hand* than the interpreter, it is the comforter who transmits the somatic justice of the TRC as the *errance* which is only true when it is *besides itself*” (Bethlehem 2006: 91; italics in original).⁴ This relationship context is also central for Hoffman, who speaks of the important role played by “recognition” in the recovery from trauma: “to acknowledge, turn, bend towards the victims rather than away from them. There can be no other recompense, no other closure” (p. 233).

3. See Grosz (1994: 210) for a definition of embodied subjectivity which resists the binarism of mind/body and also Murray for a discussion of “the embodiment of psychic and physical trauma” in the work of Antjie Krog and Yvonne Vera (2010: 492).

4. See also Jessica Murray (2010) for a discussion of the healing potential of touch.

Adopting Hoffman's concept of recognition and Bethlehem's "somatic justice", I read van Niekerk's two novels as proposing alternative means of healing to the confessional mode. I consider whether wounds can be mended by assuring the protagonists that, to paraphrase Judith Butler, their "bodies matter" (1993: xxiv).

My reason for exploring the correlation between corporeal and narrative fragmentation in van Niekerk's novels is to determine whether remembering (or re-membering) the embodied narrative of self can prove salutary. The act of remembering is potentially revolutionary as it creates fertile ground for imagining alternative future narratives of cultural identity (see van Niekerk 1992: 141). Conversely, these new narratives necessitate the re-visiting of the past. In this regard, I refer to Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" and consider the anatomical implications of re-membering the body.

In Morrison's *Beloved*,⁵ (1987) the protagonist, Sethe, considers "re-memories" as "pictures" which seem to exist simultaneously in both the past and the present (see Morrison 1987: 35-36). Sethe's challenge, then, is to reorder these pictures to claim authorship of the narrative of her life. Mae Henderson explains, "Sethe uses the memory of personal experience and what Collingwood calls the 'constructive imagination' as a means of re-membering a dis-membered past, dis-membered family, and community" (1999: 90). That supposition can be extended with reference to the structure of the word "remember", which also encourages a play on words: it implies a "re-membering" of the body.⁶ In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs emphasises the embodied experience of trauma and the concomitant embodied experience of healing: "[I]n this here place, we flesh, flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh" (p. 88). The past is obsessively revisited in both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, and I argue that in van Niekerk's novels, bodily fragmentation and gaps in the historiographic archive (both personal and national) are inextricably – lexically – linked.

Triomf is a dark comedy relating the lives of the Benades, an incestuous, and impoverished Afrikaans family, whose narrative trajectory – the journey from the farm to the railways to the "newly created" suburb of Triomf, built

5. Morrison championed the release of *Agaat* in the United States, and her praise adorns the front cover of the American edition of the novel. Although not the focus of this paper, there is more to be said regarding the parallel themes and tropes in *Beloved* and *Agaat*.

6. This is a key theme in Russell Hoban's quirky novel, *Kleinzeit*, in which the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is the main intertext: once Orpheus returns to "the place of his dismemberment", *Kleinzeit*, the protagonist, realises: "He's found his members He's remembered himself" (1974: 143, 144).

atop the ruins of Sophiatown⁷ – aligns with that of the so-called “poor whites” (in the National Party’s parlance). Mol, Pop and Treppie Benade are siblings, and Lambert is the product of their incestuous relationship. It is never revealed whether Pop or Treppie is Lambert’s father and all his life, Lambert has been told that Pop is “a distant Benade from the Cape” (van Niekerk 1999: 174)⁸ and is his father. This story was concocted by Treppie as a “saving perspective”; it exists as an alternate myth of origins and, although false, allows them all to live with the repercussions of their past actions: it “[kept them] alive” (*T* 175). The three men have all had sex with Mol, but despite the toxicity of their relationship, the Benades are intimately bound together: “what makes people go rotten is loneliness” (*T* 153).

The Benades experience a particularly disastrous Guy Fawkes Day celebration in which Lambert orders them to destroy all their belongings in a raging fire, a fire which they continue to feed out of fear of Lambert’s increasing mania and in an attempt to pacify him. Lambert suffers an epileptic fit at the height of this fiery destruction and is rendered unconscious. Pop, Mol and Treppie act together, as a family unit, in order to try to preserve a modicum of dignity (both their own, and Lambert’s) as Pop covers Lambert’s lower body with his own shirt and Treppie tries to save Lambert from swallowing his tongue in his fit. They are all rendered speechless, even loquacious Treppie (“Fuck ... Jirre, no, fuck it” (*T* 241) is all he can manage) who, at the sight of Lambert’s grotesque, badly burnt body, is reduced to tears for only the second time in the novel (the first being at their dog Gerty’s burial). The complete revelation of Lambert’s body acts as a catalyst for their undeniable recognition of the results of their incestuous relations and the harsh, irredeemable reality of their situation.

The impact of being reduced to an impotent witness to Lambert’s fury haunts Pop, even his speech is broken (*T* 243). Pop wonders whether the continued misery in his life can have a material impact (in addition to the impact it has on his elocution): “It feels like he’s got too many ribs. Can it be that he’s gotten more ribs from all the misery?” (*T* 243). During their recovery from this exhausting day, Mol watches over Pop as he sleeps: “she stares at all the bits of his body. He looks like his joints are too thin” (*T* 250). Pop’s body is perceived as a body-in-parts, a fragmented body. Although not scarred as such, it is a wounded and frail body, exhausted by the toll inflicted by years of economic deprivation as well as familial trauma.

For the first time, Mol is made aware of the fragility of Pop’s body and, by extension, the fragility of her relationship with him. This realisation causes Mol to believe that the “power of mercy” (*T* 250) is responsible for

7. See Buxbaum (2011) for an extended discussion of place in the novel and the parallel between landscape and skin as palimpsest.

8. Subsequent references to *Triomf* are indicated by *T* followed by page

anatomical cohesion, rather than frail muscles, tendons or ligaments: “she dare not look away, ’cause if she does, the mercy won’t hold any longer. And then Pop will break apart” (*T* 250). Mol’s merciful act of looking reflects a unity the Benades’ erstwhile broken mirror cannot provide; the mirror merely reflects the harsh, unforgiving reality, undiluted by affection or empathy. Mol’s motivation stems not only from a selfless affection for Pop but also a selfish fear that without him, she would be lost; that is, she “keeps” him whole, but needs her relationship with him to feel complete. Without Pop to comfort her, Mol is reduced to a hole, the gaping abyss of a mouth, to which no one listens, as reflected in her mirror (see *T* 149). The implication is that an intimate connection with another human being can prevent one’s embodied subjectivity from fracturing – intimacy can potentially overcome the tenuousness of anatomy, of socio-economic as well as psychological insecurity and can overwrite the mirrored reflection.⁹

Pop is oblivious that Mol believed “she would’ve been the only one who could’ve kept him together just by looking” (*T* 250). However, he returns the compassion that evening after their bath, when he stares lovingly at her and tenderly dries her naked, scarred body (pp. 264-265). Overwhelmed by his actions and the sight of Mol’s abused body, Pop “pushes his head into the hollow of her hip” and cries (*T* 266). Mol, realising the futility of attempting to cheer him up with platitudes, comforts him the only way she knows how: “She joins in, nothing to be done, she’ll maar cry with him a little. She goes and sits flat on her backside, next to him, there on the cold cement floor” (*T* 267).¹⁰

The suggestion that the power of mercy can have healing physical effects is echoed in Mol and Pop’s reaction to Treppie’s trauma. On the eve of Lambert’s birthday, a confrontation about the appropriate apportioning of blame for their situation occurs between Mol’s brothers. Treppie takes umbrage at Pop’s suggestion that there are certain moral dictums – such as honouring one’s parents – which demand adherence. Treppie responds by revealing his scarred abdomen. The scars are the result of the beating he received as a child from his father, Old Pop, when the latter discovered the sexual activities of his children:

Honour, for what should I *honour* [Old Pop], all that’s left of me is a drop of blood, a wet spot with some skin around it struggling for breath. A lump of

9. This is also suggested in *Agaat*, when Milla comforts the young Agaat, whose one arm is severely disfigured by saying: “Together we make up a whole person with two strong hands” (van Niekerk 2000: 572). The fact that these ephemeral moments of intimacy existed between Milla and Agaat, makes Milla’s betrayal of Agaat all the more traumatic.

10. See also Buxbaum (2012), for a discussion of the healing potential of crying with another’s tears.

scar-tissue with a heart in the middle Then [Mol] saw how terribly those blows had set into Treppie's skin. She hadn't known. She thought people outgrew things like that. Treppie's stomach and hips were covered with nicks and grooves, as if he'd been tied up with ropes and beaten over and over again "Marked for life!" he said, prodding his finger into the nicks and scars on his skin.

(T 381-382)

Mol's reaction to Treppie's wounds is one of shock. She is confused by the discovery that his "punishment" has been inscribed on his body and exists, not as a mere memory, but as a permanent physical reminder of the torture he suffered at his father's hands. As Louise Bethlehem insists: "The scar is the *amanuensis* of violence ... Moreover it casts itself as the truthful amanuensis of violence, since the truth of its writing is validated by the ontology of the body" (2006: 83). However, in retracing the nicks and scars with his own finger, Treppie succeeds in "uttering [his] wounds" and thus "negates" the silencing which his father attempted to impose on him (Boehmer 1993: 272). Boehmer argues that the task of the postcolonial writer is one of transfiguration: "transfiguration, in effect becomes the recuperation of the body by way of narrative" (p. 273). In her discussion of strategies of transfiguration, Boehmer invokes a bodily permutation of the "talking cure": "Ideally speaking this is a process not of reclamation only, but importantly of self-articulation, healing through speaking one's condition, as with the hysteric" (p. 272). Treppie is incapable of retelling the story of his abuse, his trauma resists "narrative recuperation" but he does achieve a degree of "self-articulation" (p. 272) previously impossible. In this moment, Treppie affirms his belief that subjectivity is always embodied (Burger 2000: 7) – as Willie Burger concludes: "Dit is die realiteit geanker in die persoonlike ervaring. Geen verhaal kan dit beter maak, anders laat lyk, of wegneem nie. Dit sal 'n ontkenning van die pyn en werklikheid van die lewe wees" [It is the reality anchored in the personal experience. No story can make it look better, look different or take it away. That would be a denial of the pain and reality of life] (p. 13). Treppie's "bodiography"¹¹ (Nuttall 2004) has been told, shorn of any "saving perspective". His fragmented, wounded body belies any coherent narrative which would gloss over such trauma; narratives dissemble, but bodies cannot.

Treppie's subjectivity has been reduced to a body fragment; he exists as a barely beating heart. And yet, his revelation prompts expressions of concern, solace and comfort from his family; his scars exist as incontrovertible proof of his continued physical and emotional suffering and

11. Sarah Nuttall coins the term "bodiographies" to describe "narratives of the self centred on the lived body in which the body is figured less as an object inscribed with the social and the political than as a subject actively contributing to the production of meaning" (2004: 39).

yet, by presenting them to his siblings, he initiates a healing, or possibly a reckoning, process. Mol and Pop attempt to soothe his pain by emphasising his place in the family – “As it was, they were little more than skin and bone, but without Treppie they wouldn’t even have cast a shadow” (T 387) – they try to repair Treppie’s fractured subjectivity; to act as a salve for his wounds, a glue for his body-in-parts. Although Pop uses language to attempt to help him work through his trauma, he relies on an embodied metaphor.

Finally, I wish to make a few closing remarks concerning Lambert, who symbolically discovers the “key to his existence” (T 454) on election day, 27 April 1994. While the house is being repainted, “whitewashed” (T 453), the painters hand Lambert the key to a drawer in the sideboard where his parents hide all their important papers. In that drawer he discovers Mol, Treppie and Pop’s IDs as well as the only existing family photograph. It is on reading Old Pop’s (Mol, Pop and Treppie’s father’s) inscription on the back of the photo, and recognising a young Pop in the family photo that Lambert realises the truth of the circumstances surrounding his birth:

They’re all the fucken same, the whole lot of them! It feels like he can’t get enough air He feels like something that’s already dead He feels like he’s fucking out from the inside. Things that have been said, pieces of stories, falling inwards from his head ... he feels like he wants to burst out of his seams as the truth plunges down into him.

(T 461-462)

The impact of this shameful history is experienced as a physical implosion and explosion. The truth, which shatters the story of his origins, is embodied and acts as a centrifugal force.¹² Reading Old Pop’s suicide letter confirms his worst fears: “*Only a monster will be born from this sort of thing*” (T 463; italics in original). The various fragments of stories he has heard over the years suddenly fall into place and in the very instant that the gaps in his autobiography are filled, he is made aware of the monstrosity of his body for the very first time:

Slowly he folds the letter up again. He looks at his hands. Skew, full of knobs. He looks down at his legs and his feet Now he sees his large knees, his hollow shins, his knobbly, swollen, monster-ankles, his skew, monster-feet, and his monster-toes He feels his face. A monster. A devil-monster. No wonder! No fucken wonder he’s such a fuck-up!

(T 463)

12. In a related vein, Murray argues that Yvonne Vera “conveys the experience of trauma as a kind of fragmentation of the body which, in turn, reflects the disintegration of the victim’s world” (2010: 492).

At this point, and considering the historical significance of the date of Lambert's discovery, it is worth referring to Boehmer's contention that "where a national narrative begins to fragment, so too does the iconography of the body" (1996: 274). At a time when the political focus is on the creation of a new, unified national narrative, *Triomf* prominently displays the simultaneous splintering of foundational narratives and the iconography of the body. The painful truth of Lambert's history has finally been exposed, and in the light of this new knowledge he sees his body not as a complete, classical, unified body; but rather he is made aware that the *whole* of his body is composed of monstrous, ill-fitting parts. His anger is expressed in the diabolic act of breaking a drawer over Pop's head as he sleeps, which results in Pop's death. Mol, Treppie and Lambert are also injured in the ensuing melee. Although, for the sake of a new "saving perspective", Pop's death is ruled an accident and the family exists in an uneasy peace. The remaining Benades are all scarred from their violent confrontation and Lambert is wheelchair-bound, yet their familial wounds have, to a degree, been mended. Treppie and Lambert no longer abuse Mol, "[t]hey've learnt by now to leave her alone" (T 473).¹³

Toward the close of the novel, Mol describes her family as follows: "Pieced together and panel beaten, not to mention screwed together, from scrap. Throw-away pieces, leftover rags, waste wool, old wives' tales, hearsay" (T 467). Their current impasse is a seemingly inevitable result of their history, of (possible) intermarriage but also of disfiguring ideological myths or narratives. Metaphorically, their bodies and their histories are intermingled and interconnected; they are also fragmented and resist reincorporation and coherence. The metaphor describing the Benades as "things that get thrown away" (T 467) could also refer to the elision of their stories, their narratives and their grotesque bodies from the official Afrikaner nationalist narrative and indeed from the unifying "rainbow nation" narrative and "body politic" of the transition and after. I wonder whether appropriating the title of Michiel Heyns's (2008) novel, *Bodies Politic*, instead of the singular "body politic" might ensure that these individuals, whose bodies are deemed "not to matter", are not ignored in the politically expedient need for the "transcendence of the fragmented South African body politic" (Klopper 2001: 470). The plural term, "bodies politic", exposes the impossibility, and perhaps even undesirability, of a unitary body politic whose fractures and fissures have been rendered invisible. Following this logic, there can be no one "body" that comes to represent the whole.¹⁴ In this sense, the attempt to "recuperate" the Benades'

13. For a more detailed discussion of the end of *Triomf*, see Buxbaum (2012).

14. The fallacy of a simple representational relation of the ostensibly gender-neutral body and society is outlined by Elizabeth Grosz (1998: 45-46).

bodies in narrative (to use Boehmer's phrase (1993: 273)), and to represent their trauma can be read as an attempt at (a different kind of) "transfiguration" by van Niekerk. By inserting them into the South African post-apartheid "bodies politic", she disrupts and troubles any anodyne national narrative which attempts to gloss over the past as well as political fissures in the present.

In this context, Maurice Blanchot's reading of the fragment is illuminating in that he celebrates the fragmentary (1992 & 1993), suggesting in a reading of René Char's poem: "We must try to recognise in this '*shattering*' or '*dislocation*' a value that is not one of negation" (1993: 308; italics in original). Blanchot maintains that the fragment need not be read in relation to any previous or future desired unity (1993: 308 & 1992: 40). Lycette Nelson contends that Blanchot's reading of the fragment should be considered in relation to his desire "to find a language that is truly multiple and that does not attempt to achieve closure" (1992: v). It seems van Niekerk's texts could be read as illustrative of a similar desire for such a language, as the novels engender multiple readings and evade definitive closure. The reader's challenge then is to "animat[e] the multiplicity of crossing routes" rather than to attempt to "reconstitut[e] a new totality" (Blanchot 1992: 50). This challenge to the reader is apparent in *Agaat* and in trying to understand Agaat and Jakkie's attempts at remembering.

At the beginning of *Agaat*, van Niekerk's monumental second novel, the protagonist Milla de Wet is bedridden and rendered mute as she is in the final stages of motor neuron disease. Milla can only communicate by blinking. Although the eponymous Agaat – whom she "adopted" (van Niekerk 2006: 653)¹⁵ as a young girl and then transformed into a servant and ultimately body nurse – and Milla have an intimate understanding of each other, and have always communicated using the "language of the eyes" (*A* 514), Milla struggles to convey to Agaat that her entire body is itchy (*A* 301-309). Perhaps the challenge of representing psychological trauma is similar – by looking at a person one cannot tell that they have been traumatised as one cannot tell that they are itching. If the person is incapable of speaking about their trauma, or of testifying to it, how then is this trauma represented? Even if the sufferer can vocalise their itching, there is no reason for the listener to believe it, to accept the itch as real. The adoption of the first-person narrative voice, made possible in fiction, facilitates this representation and encourages the reader to believe the itch or, in the context of this metaphor, that the trauma exists.

However, Agaat's narrative is never revealed from her own perspective. Drawing on van den Berg's explication of the parallels between trauma theory and postcolonial theory, in which he argues that the problem of

15. Subsequent references to *Agaat* (van Niekerk 2006) are indicated by *A* followed by page number(s)

representation applies similarly to trauma and the Other (2011: 34), one could say that Agaat's trauma and her subjectivity remain unspoken and defy representation. Although each chapter of the novel is divided into four narrative sections (diary entries, first-person present-tense narration, stream-of-consciousness and second-person past-tense narration), all of these sections are told from Milla's unreliable perspective. Thus, the reader is made aware of Milla's struggle to come to terms with her and Agaat's relationship and the trauma she has inflicted on Agaat. Milla is simultaneously aware that "[i]t would be fatal not to seek reconciliation" (*A* 552) but is incapable of doing so. Hoffman argues that a future direction for trauma studies should foster greater understanding of "the perpetrator mentality" (2005: 271). There is certainly more to be said regarding the extent to which Milla, as perpetrator of trauma, also suffers from trauma – as a result of her past actions and her present debilitating illness – and of her attempts, and failure, to "remember" her narrative coherently: "always there are more contents to be ordered into coherence" (*A* 163; also see Burger 2009: 9). Nevertheless, in the remainder of this article, I focus on Milla's son Jakkie and Agaat's trauma.

Jakkie's fragmentary stream of consciousness introduces and ends the novel as prologue and epilogue respectively. The novel opens as Jakkie begins the journey to the airport, in his adopted country Canada, to fly home to the farm Grootmoedersdrift¹⁶ and his dying mother: "And I. In two places at once, as always. Snow on my shoulder, but with the light of the Overberg haunting me, the wet black apparitions of winter, the mirages of summer" (*A* 1). These first few lines of this epic novel warrant brief discussion in order to consider two key motifs which have repercussions for my discussion of the fragmented body. Jakkie's subjectivity is "split" – "as always" – between the pastoral landscape of his youth and the metropolitan cityscape of his adulthood in exile. His experience of a psychic division is expressed in the metaphor of seasonal changes, as experienced by the body – the contrasting feel of freezing snow and warm sun; dark and light. This sense of disconnection and alienation is reinforced by the intertext of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro".¹⁷ Furthermore, the reception of the telegram informing him of his mother's impending death is likened to "an aperture in the skull", a hole bored into his brain from which "memories are a stream, unquenchable" (*A* 1). There is a correlation with Lambert's experience of reading the inscription on the back of the family photograph – unexpected knowledge is received as a physical trauma; memories are

16. Jakkie struggles to translate the name adequately: "Granny's Ford? Granny's Passion? ... named after my dreaded great-great-granny Spies on Ma's side And after the shallow crossing near the homestead" (*A* 6).

17. "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough" (Pound 1926: 251).

embodied, as Morrison insists (1990: 305). Jakkie subsequently reminisces about searching for the “purple emperor” butterfly with Agaat and recalls his emotional state: “blood shaking my heart. Leaking heart” (*A* 2). Van Niekerk’s characteristic use of somatic metaphors to describe emotions, the reduction of subjectivity to porous or fragile anatomical fragments, is in evidence in the very first pages of the novel.

Jakkie fled to Canada after the disillusionment of fighting the war in Angola and declaring to Agaat: “I puke of it, of this pathetic lot who tell themselves they’ve been placed here on the southernmost tip with a purpose and they represent something grandiose in the procession of nations” (*A* 590). His trauma is not the result of physical wounding; he bears no visible scars. Jakkie is psychologically traumatised as a result of his war experiences, his fraught family life and the disfiguring narrative of Afrikaner nationalism. He remains haunted by the past but dismisses “how [his contemporaries] elected to live after the foul-up in Angola. Attack and defence as always, one after the other of self-exculpating autobiographical writing” (*A* 5). He disparages the confessional mode as a means of assuaging one’s guilt and overcoming trauma, yet he cannot deny his own “compulsion to tell” (*A* 8).

In the epilogue, after his mother’s funeral, Jakkie navigates his way through Milla’s death chamber, gawking at the remnants of her and Agaat’s existence together. He declares:

I just want to cauterise it all neatly now. A dry white scar, une cicatrice. Perhaps still slightly sensitive during changes of season in the northern hemisphere. Mourning is a life-long occupation, says my therapist. That is what I must do then. Must learn to do.

(*A* 683)

This novel, which begins with the image of an “aperture in the skull”, ends with a cauterisation – Jakkie’s attempt to put an end to the bleeding; a closing of orifices. The story of Agaat and Milla is reduced to a scar, a wound which has been sutured over, but cannot be hidden and will continue to be “slightly sensitive”. The scar remains, as an emblem of this story, an anatomical reminder – a wounded body as metonym for a fragmented familial *and* national narrative.

Jakkie has the potential to heal, by mourning and thus “working through” trauma (LaCapra 1999: 713-714). As Hoffman suggests, mourning might be the “root ... of the reparative urge” and ultimately enable “healing and consolation” (2005: 190). Jakkie has access to Western psychological help, in the form of a therapist (*A* 683), and from the safe distance accorded him by his self-imposed exile, he can reflect on his past and perhaps find some consolation in his remembrances. Agaat has no such option. After Milla’s death, she will inherit the farm but her future remains uncertain: van der Walt imagines a utopian, more merciful and equitable end to Agaat’s story

(2009: 695-739);¹⁸ Milla believes it might signal “a new beginning” (*A* 539; cf. 244-249), but Jakkie’s predictions are more cynical – “Calloused, salted, brayed, the lessons of the masters engraved in her The promised land is hers already, her creator [Milla] is keeping remote control” (*A* 682).

Agaat has no access to a talking cure, although her actions suggest she has forgotten nothing, “Relentless, her memory” (*A* 64). In the present-tense narrative, Agaat nurses Milla, and her treatment mirrors the harsh treatment Milla meted out to her as a child. The space of the sickroom, what Milla terms “these chambered systems of retribution” (*A* 40), provides an opportunity for a final confrontation between her and Agaat or as Jakkie observes “a kangaroo court rather” (*A* 680).

There are key events in Agaat’s life which can be identified as traumatic: the abuse she experienced prior to her (forced) relocation to Grootmoedersdrift and the subsequent traumatic change in household position: from daughter-figure to servant. However, the “event model” of trauma cannot sufficiently account for Agaat’s suffering (cf. Rothberg 2008: 229, Craps & Buelens 2008: 3). It would be more appropriate to consider Agaat’s life under Milla’s tyrannical rein as a continued trauma. Agaat’s childhood abuse remains the unspeakable original trauma: her biological mother was beaten while pregnant, and as a child Agaat was subject to physical and probably sexual abuse from her father and brothers (*A* 656-666). The reader is made aware only of the physical impacts of this abuse: she cannot have children (*A* 166), and her arm and leg are severely disfigured. The novel reveals three different versions of “the beginning” (*A* 653): Jakkie’s recollection of the bedtime story Agaat told him as a child (*A* 684-691); Milla’s final second-person narrative, which could be considered a kind of confession (*A* 653-672), and Agaat’s fragmentary rapprochement of Milla when she displays the maps (*A* 402-407). Yet all three narratives remain incomplete and refer only to the trauma of displacement from Milla, whom she called “my Môme ... my only mother” (*A* 633) and her transformation from child to servant.

This bedtime story, Jakkie recollects and reproduces in the epilogue, is clearly a narrative of Agaat’s displacement in the genre of a fairy tale. However, Jakkie failed to interpret it as Agaat’s autobiography. Admitting his ignorance on his 21st birthday, he comments: “Perhaps she’ll be able to tell me at last ... where she came from and how she ended up here on Grootmoedersdrift” (*A* 608)). This story also fails to provide Agaat with the same kind of closure or healing that Sethe’s remembering of her narrative in

18. Van der Walt imagines this in the context of a discussion of the law and the meaning of mercy in post-apartheid South Africa. Although he admits his “story is all too obviously an apocryphal falsification of both law and literature” (2009: 739) he longs for an ending of *Agaat* that would provide Agaat with some emotional and legal recompense for her sacrifices, for enduring such trauma (*A* 695).

Beloved provides her – most importantly because Milla never hears this version of their life together and because it does not include the details of Agaat’s life after Jakkie has grown up.

It is also unlikely that this story would have its intended effect on Milla. When she views Agaat’s embroidery¹⁹ of a rainbow depicting life on the farm, Milla has a Blanchotesque epiphany:

The origin, the *fullness*, the foundation of all. What am I supposed to do with it all? It’s the wrong medicine. *Completeness*. The death of the song, of the small dusty tale *Perfection, purity, order*. Adversaries are they all, the devil’s own little helpers How my heart burns to tell her this! Now that I can see it. Now that it’s too late.

(A 219; my italics)

Completeness is exposed as a mere construct: the rainbow is an artistic expression stemming from Agaat’s loss when Jakkie went to school; it can signify nothing other than its origin in emptiness. Milla has realised that this actualisation of narrative unity is false and premature; it foreshortens: it causes “the death of the song ... the tale”. The song and the tale represent the story she is attempting to tell of her relationship with Agaat, but its complexity, tragedy and fragmentation cannot be captured within the geometric borders of Agaat’s rainbow or, by implication, the generic structure of a bedtime fairytale. This rainbow is merely another kind of “wallpaper” (cf. *Triomf*). When Agaat does confront Milla, she forces a recognition of her bodily trauma and fragmentary narrative. These fragments are a “truer” depiction of her suffering, and Milla’s response indicates an awareness of this.

The climax of Milla and Agaat’s final confrontation occurs when Agaat finally unravels the maps of Grootmoedersdrift to display them for Milla. What follows is a perverse parody of a geography lesson. Agaat attempts to fill in the “blind spots” on the provincial map and suggests “alternative spatial configurations” (Huggan 1989 118, 120). The places that Milla recognises in Agaat’s “lesson” represent at once inclusion and exclusion: whether one was welcomed into these places depended solely on the colour of one’s skin. The rereading of the map then becomes a re-enactment and revisiting of a battle, as Milla realises. It is her and Agaat’s personal battle, but the map also positions this battle within the broader context of South Africa’s historical geopolitical battles. Agaat finally devotes her attention to the map of the farmhouse which she employs as an aid in relating the most intimate details of her personal geography. Adopting the stance and mannerisms of a soldier, Agaat holds Milla accountable for all the acts of injustice against her. The map acts as a substitute for Milla’s body: “here

19. See also Burger (2006: 181-182) for a comparison of embroidery and storytelling and Milla’s response to Agaat’s embroidery on her burial cloth.

comes a finger pointing, at me, at the plan" (*A* 406). All that she cannot say to Milla is expressed in the force of her finger painfully bent against the map; her finger "speaks" of her anger, her frustration, her trauma. Agaat concludes her verbal assault on Milla with a description of her forced relocation to the outside room:

Skivvy-room! ...
Brown suitcase!
White cap! Heart buried!
Never told! Unlamented!
Good-my-arse!
Now-my-arse! Now's-the-Time!

(*A* 407)

Her body has been reduced to a few fragmentary symbols. Nevertheless, these symbols of Agaat's existence have been irremovably inscribed onto the maps, revealing an alternative cartographic narrative.²⁰ Agaat's re-naming of places constitutes a revolutionary act, an act of resistance: she is rewriting the geography of the country and the farm, reinscribing it with her memories of dispossession and maltreatment. The map, as well as her body, can be read as a locus of meaning, a site of conflict; both are inscribed by a traumatic history (cf. Graham 2008: 128). However, Agaat's body is not a passive site of inscription. In her "bodiography" it is "[figured] as a subject actively contributing to the production of meaning" (Nuttall 2004: 39).

Importantly, the moment that Agaat challenges Milla's understanding of the maps – and by implication, her recollection of their shared past and the spatial dynamics of apartheid and power relations – is also the moment when Agaat sheds her shame and embarrassment and ceases to conceal her scarred, disfigured arm in the sleeve of her uniform. For the first time in the novel, Agaat appears to lose her self-control as well as any embarrassment about her "little arm" as evidence of her suppressed anger finally surfaces explicitly (*A* 403). Agaat's "bodiography" is at last told: her recitation of place names and events is fragmented, but it is recited nonetheless; her body is wounded and fragmented, but it is revealed nonetheless. The veneer of the "classic body" is shattered, as is the exclusionary spatial narrative Milla has clung to. Milla cannot deny the reality of the abuse which caused Agaat's physical disfigurement nor can she deny the mental anguish her own treatment of Agaat has caused. Their impact on Agaat's subjectivity can be understood only by reading her body.

This pivotal scene does allow Agaat a moment of self-articulation. However, its healing effect should not be overemphasised. In this instance, Agaat can be usefully contrasted with Morrison's *Sethe*. As Henderson

20. For a more detailed discussion of the connection between corporeality and spatiality in van Niekerk's fiction see Buxbaum (2011).

maintains, Sethe's challenge is "to learn to read herself – that is to configure the history of her body's text" (A 87). Agaat's authorial power remains severely constrained and her body is only ever read through the eyes of others. There is no indication that she comes to terms with the trauma of her own body, or finds a way to re-member it, apart from the fact that she is briefly liberated to "display" her disfigurement.

Milla's life concludes with a stream-of-consciousness narrative section in which she imagines dying "in my hand the hand of the small agaath" (A 674). Milla is soothed by an imagined touch, by the recollection of the caress of the young Agaath. In her adult life, however, Agaath is not afforded such relief or comfort, nor is there anyone to caress her after Milla's death. She is denied what Bethelam terms "somatic justice" (2006: 91).

In Agaath's past, the only reprieve was offered by Jakkie – who as a child was the only person to offer her affection after her eviction from Milla's house. For that reason it seems only apt to conclude this discussion of Jakkie and Agaath's contrasting means of dealing with trauma with a description of a scene which seems the archetype of "recognition", of "bending towards the other" (Hoffman 2005: 233). While it does not represent a trauma, it stands as a compassionate, unselfish means of moving beyond pain and finding forgiveness. It occurs after a fight between Jakkie and Agaath, on his eighth birthday, during which she embarrasses and bullies him and he bites her to escape. Milla spies on the two of them, and while she bears witness to this selfless, sincere act of forgiveness, she is forced to admit herself incapable of such compassion. Their exchange is mostly wordless; forgiveness is offered and accepted through the body:

Softly they spoke ... the cautious opening-up after the terrors of the day Jakkie pointed at her forearm. She rolled back the sleeve of her nightdress. Together they bent over the bite wound. He took a roll of plaster out of the top pocket of his pyjamas. No, it must remain open, Agaath explained. She bethought herself, took a pair of scissors out of her needlework basket, cut off a length and allowed him to stick it on her.

Suddenly Jakkie pressed his head against her body. His face distorted. Agaath pressed him closer to her with both arms. For a long time they sat like that

You [Milla] couldn't look any longer. The faces in the soft light of the fire. The confidence. The ease. The forgiveness, asked, given, sealed.

(At 26)

In exploring the potential for healing from trauma in *Triomf* and *Agaath*, I have argued that the emphasis on the creation of a unified body politic that stems from the TRC narrative is misplaced. Following Blanchot, in my readings of these novels I propose that healing might rather result from the recognition that coherence cannot be achieved, or should not be desired, that "It's the wrong medicine. Completeness" (A 219). Van Niekerk's

protagonists do not achieve closure, their futures are uncertain. Yet, in their attempts at remembering, they experience moments of compassion and solace and thus encourage a reconsideration of the fragmentary.

In both *Triomf* and *Agaat*, the revelation of a tortured past is mirrored by the exposure of the victims' fragmented bodies. It is only when characters are faced with the irrefutable evidence of trauma as wreaked on each other's bodies that they are forced to reckon with and recognise the truth of their familial and national narratives and perhaps initiate healing. The two novels do not "trivialise" or "allegorise" (cf. Hoffman 2005: 171 & Bethlehem 2006: 85) the individual traumas of the protagonists, nor the national narrative of the trauma of apartheid to which they relate. Van Niekerk's novels do not present any easy solutions to the experience of trauma or false senses of closure. Nevertheless, they insist that trauma must be confronted and this confrontation is possible only via the medium of the body and by disrupting any "saving perspectives".

The representation and attempts to work through trauma in these novels have implications for relationships in post-apartheid South Africa or in any political context following a national or communal trauma. They raise questions of how to consider embodied trauma suffered in intimate relationships. Perhaps if a reader is capable of responding to and being affected by imaginative renderings of trauma then this recognition might extend to the world beyond the literary, in the form of a merciful look or a comforting touch. If words fail, bodies can speak.

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