

Rehearsing Trauma: The Reader as Interrogator in Prison Narratives

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Summary

Accounts of detention survivors exert pressure on the theoretical framework that reserves a role for the reader in a post-Freudian hermeneutics of catharsis. In analysing the prison narratives of Ruth First and Emma Mashinini, I explore the position of the imagined reader in the complex dynamic at work when writing emerges from a position of woundedness. A reappraisal of the role of the imagined reader is warranted, in order to accommodate both the formative communality that operates in these texts and the complexity of a political context where “the public” is both ally and adversary, simultaneously enabling and complicating a survivor’s self construction. The task of asserting a new self in writing, to contest the criminalising “vocabulary” of the state security system, is both undermined and made all the more urgent by the overwhelming selfdoubt which that system induces. Narrative self-construction can be thought of as an *appeal* as much as an *assertion* of self. The paradigm of trauma studies potentially enables attentiveness to the anxiety and vulnerability of detention survival. However, that attentiveness is undermined by theoretical abstractions that locate catharsis deep within individualised subjects and by attempts to imagine human connectedness across a generalised conceptualisation of trauma.

Opsomming

Die verhale van oorlewendes van gevangenhouding plaas druk op die teoretiese raamwerk wat vir die leser 'n rol reserveer volgens 'n post-Freudiaanse hermeneutiek van katarsis. In 'n analise van die tronknarratiewe van Ruth First en Emma Mashinini ondersoek hierdie artikel die posisie van die verbeelde leser in die komplekse dinamika wat in werking tree wanneer daar vanuit 'n posisie van verwonding geskryf word. 'n Herwaardering van die rol van die verbeelde leser is noodsaaklik om reg te laat geskied aan die vormende gemeenskaplikheid in hierdie tekste sowel as aan die kompleksiteit van die politieke konteks. Hierin is “die publiek” beide bondgenoot en teenstander omdat dit die oorlewende se self konstruksie moontlik maak en terselfdertyd kompliseer. Die taak om deur te skryf 'n nuwe self te laat geld en die kriminaliserende “woordeskat” van die staatsveiligheidstelsel te betwis word ondermyn en raak al hoe dringender weens die oorweldigende selftwyfel wat hierdie sisteem teweegbring. Narratiewe self-konstruksie kan beskou word as 'n *aanspooring* van die self sowel as 'n poging om

die self te laat *geld*. Die paradigma van traumastudie het die potensiaal om 'n sensitiwiteit vir die angs en kwesbaarheid van gevangehouingoorlewendes moontlik te maak. Hierdie sensitiwiteit word egter ondermyn deur enersyds teoretiese abstraksies wat katarsis diep binne geïndividualiseerde subjekte vind, en andersyds pogings om onderlinge menslike verbondenheid in 'n veralgemeende opvatting van trauma te verbeel.

The effect of trauma studies within literary studies can be felt in scholarship that ascribes to the reader the role of witness and interlocutor in a putatively therapeutic relationship. But what are the implications for the politics of representation when the (imagined) reader is thought of as witness to trauma and the relationship between writer and reader is imagined as therapeutic, in a post-Freudian hermeneutics of catharsis? That the field has enabled a deeper engagement with literature is evident in the growing prominence of trauma studies and its interaction with fields such as postcolonial studies, for example.¹ Even so, the theoretical abstraction that reserves a role for the reader in the survivor's healing, and assumes an imperative to rehearse trauma on the part of the writer, is worth testing through careful reading of the narratives of specific survivors.

In the discussion that follows, I explore the position of the reader in the complex dynamic at work when writing emerges from a place of woundedness. The prison narratives of South African women writing during apartheid offer an opportunity to reflect on the place of an interlocutor in enabling, and complicating, a survivor's self-construction. Narrative accounts by survivors of detention without trial and interrogation invite a reconsideration of the politics of listening in the textual rehearsal of trauma.

A Complex Scene of Address

The prison confession itself, extracted under interrogation, may be understood to provide the form for the reassertion of self in prison writing, as J.U. Jacobs has argued.² In his discussion of Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Mark Sanders remarks that "the relationship between detainee and interrogator functions as an allegory for

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1. The *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* in 2011 featured a number of articles exploring the mutually challenging possibilities for postcolonial and trauma studies, notably in journal issues that were not specifically dedicated to trauma studies. See, for example, Baxter (2011), Collins (2011), and Visser (2011).
 2. J.U. Jacobs argues that "the compulsions to confess provide the very means of restructuring the self, and the interrogator's devices for destroying the language of the victim become the victim's strategies for self-creation" (1992: 125).

the book as a whole” (2002: 135). Certainly, echoes of prison interrogation are perceptible in the self-questioning and self-disclosure of prison narrative, though the contexts differ dramatically in other ways. Even when the production of an account of oneself is ostensibly self-chosen, as in the writing of a prison narrative, the structure of address entails elements of the interrogatory dynamic. The basis of the “conversation” between writer and reader is constrained by a submission to “the truth”. Writing mimics interrogation in that what constitutes “the truth” must be negotiated in a context that is fraught with anxiety, the writing itself engaging the writer at a node of anxiety. Jacobs’s (1992) use of the term “confession” to refer to the narrative structure of prison narrative calls attention to the interrogatory pressure exerted by the imagined reader without conflating the reader crudely with the disciplinary structure of the prison system. It usefully points to the insidiousness of the juridical and religious model structuring the mode of address under interrogation, and casting its pall over later scenes of truth-telling. In this rehearsal of detention’s trauma, where the reader could be said to “detain” the speaker and elicit the “truth”, the reader is an ambiguous figure, part interrogator, part accomplice, in an uneasy scene of address.

The difficulty in the slippage from “interrogation” (in prison) to the “confession” (at the scene of writing) lies in the too-easy conceptualisation of the (imagined) reader as a key figure in enabling recovery. There are troubling implications that flow from this understanding of the hypothetical reader – that is, the anticipated reader(s) whom Stephen Clingman (1984) calls the writer’s “listening public”. Whether imagined as sympathetic interlocutor, accomplice, or internalised adjudicator or censor, the imagined reader attests to the truth of the self and could be thought to facilitate a restoration of sorts. Yet, in the slippage between more and less sympathetic versions of the reader, the figure of the reader is inevitably ambiguous and shifty, protected from view and at least *potentially* threatening. Theoretically informed affirmations of the therapeutic role of the hypothetical (and, by implication, actual) reader risk producing ahistorical and misplaced readings of complex scenes of representation.

Ruth First’s *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law* demonstrates that “the truth” in apartheid prison narratives is ambiguous and anxiety-inducing and the imagined reader is potentially both an ally and a threat in the endeavour of self-authorisation after the trauma of detention. Her narrative invites us to consider whether the complex relationship set up between writer and imagined reader in the rehearsal of trauma might be thought of as producing new constraints, new ordeals, in its revisiting of the first, traumatic interrogation. The notion of catharsis, in this instance, might be misplaced. Emma Mashinini’s account of her imprisonment under apartheid in *Strikes Have Followed Me All of My Life: A South African Autobiography*

demonstrates the poverty of the therapeutic model often applied to narratives of survival. These particular narratives call for a reappraisal of the role of the imagined reader in order to accommodate the formative communality that operates in these texts and the complexity of a political context where “the public” is ally and adversary simultaneously.

Sophie Croisy has railed against what she sees as a fundamental limitation of trauma studies, a paradigm rooted in a Western psychoanalytical framework: “The field of trauma studies has to open itself up to the consideration and analysis of forgotten traumas, and it has to recognise its own delinquencies, its own colonial tradition. Moreover, it should stop pretending to draw universal conclusions as to the ‘nature’ and effects of trauma, and begin dealing with local traumatic events and their specific characteristics and repercussions” (2007-2008: 133). Croisy’s critique of the field within which her own work is situated is, itself, too generalised. Yet it usefully points to the dangers of careless abstraction and the risk of universalising particular historical instances of violation, rendering suffering at once too individualised and too universal. Maurice Samuels is similarly sceptical about the usefulness of the rubric of “trauma” as a mode of analysis, given what he sees as its ahistorical lens: “the notion of trauma provides an illusion of working historically while in reality avoiding history” in favour of “deconstructive and psychoanalytical modes of analysis” (2010: 120). Theory’s imaginings of a readerly connection across a state of woundedness become sentimentalised and emptied of political penetration when “trauma” is invoked as a generalised phenomenon. I see evidence of this tendency when Cathy Caruth’s writing loses its precision and efficacy as a critique of power as she articulates the possibility that “a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma*” enable a “connection across cultures” in an age she describes as “catastrophic”:

This speaking and this listening – a speaking and a listening from the site of trauma – does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don’t yet know of our traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken of ourselves.

(Caruth 1995: 11)

Caruth’s work has enabled the conceptualisation of empathic identification – affective connection, across history. However, the abandonment of history’s specificities in favour of the indeterminate “we” that emerges in this imagining of shared but unknown “traumatic pasts”, feeds a troubling politics of sentiment.

In reading the narratives of detention under apartheid within a framework provided by trauma studies, I have a sense of disquiet about the too-easy

attribution of therapeutic effects to language. Caruth's image of a "community" of mutual witnesses to suffering, witnesses whose "link" is attributable to unspecified "trauma" in a "catastrophic age", unwittingly sentimentalises and generalises trauma. It assumes that traumatic experience can be recognised through echoes of the listener's remembered suffering, however indistinct or far removed. There is no acknowledgement of how this assumption of mutual recognition serves the listener. In truth, bearing witness, or "listening from the site of trauma", as Caruth puts it, also works to affirm the humanity and significance of the *listener*. Geoffrey Hartman writes about the responsibility to develop "careful listening" in this way: it is this, "the risk of widening the sympathetic imagination", that lies at the heart of "what it means to be fully human" (2003: 274). Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer extrapolate from this that for Hartman "'true' hearing, 'true' listening, is then, by implication, a listening for the emotionally affective embodied truth of the witness's story" (2011: 402) beyond the narrow confines of a word-based hermeneutics. Whatever it might offer the survivor, the effect of such a scene of telling is to deepen the *listener's* "sympathetic imagination" and deepen the *listener's* experience of "what it means to be fully human".

Therapeutic Listening: The Case of Emma Mashinini

The problem with the articulations of therapeutic listening, above, is that the salutary shift is located even further within an individualised subject – "a listening for the emotionally affective embodied truth", as Hirsch and Spitzer put it (2011: 402). This formulation makes it hard to recognise the importance of communality for self-identification. Dependence on a sense of solidarity is plain to see in some survivors' accounts. For Emma Mashinini, for example, the treatment for post-traumatic stress she receives at a Danish clinic feels uncomfortably reminiscent of prison: she was isolated and stripped of a sense of community. Mashinini describes it as "again being in a sophisticated prison", for "I could not communicate with the people". It was a "solitary confinement" of sorts, demanding that she transcribe her experience in her psychologist's psychotherapeutic terms that positioned her as wounded victim in need of a form of therapy which cannot recognise the bonds that, for Mashinini, are self-sustaining. Dr Inge Genefke (who is not a psychotherapist) encourages Mashinini to be more self-interested. In response, Mashinini searches out instances as evidence that she has acted out of selfish need. Here the "accusation" is that Mashinini does not care enough for her "self": the procedure of interrogation is repeated in that Mashinini feels pressurised to point to external "facts" to support the story she has to produce to please her listener, in this case Genefke:

She would say, “You’ve got to be selfish about yourself.”

I was giving her examples to say that yes, I thought I was a selfish person. I said I was a person who could stand up and speak for herself. She said, “Give me one good example.” And I gave her an example

Well, I told her that example. But she said to me, “That’s not enough. That’s not being selfish. That is standing up for your rights.”

I tried everything to prove that I can be selfish, and I did not find one thing ... I left Denmark prematurely, I know. Inge felt I should stay longer, but I couldn’t. I was really longing to be out of hospital and to go back to my family.

(Mashinini 1989: 94-95)

It seems that in this final choice too Mashinini’s experience of hospitalisation mimics interrogation where the only way to protect herself is to opt for silence. Ultimately Mashinini chooses to leave the scene of examination, to withdraw to her own world where she is labelled neither “criminal” nor “patient”, and where her spoken identity is less likely to be judged according to its consistency with a preordained text from an ideology and culture alien to her.³

Dori Laub (1992) understands the role of witness as profoundly enabling. The “presence” of the witness creates the dynamic without which healing and freedom from the destructive impact of detention cannot occur. Without having an other to address, one is not able to address oneself. For survivors of the Holocaust, “there was no longer an other to which one could say ‘Thou’ in the hope of being heard, of being recognised as a subject, of being answered But when one cannot turn to a ‘you’ one cannot say ‘thou’ even to oneself” (Laub 1992: 82). However, there are conditions to be met. For Laub, the therapeutic possibility of the exchange depends on the quality of the listener’s presence and ability “truly” to listen: “If one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma – a re-experiencing of the event itself” (p. 67).

In Mashinini’s account we can see how this need for a (sympathetic) addressee was true of her, although the particular dynamic of the Danish hospital did not make it a place of healing for her. Jacobs suggests that “Mashinini learned the value of self-interrogation as healing, and when she later approaches Dr Liz Floyd, friend of Neil Aggett, for assistance,

3. I had the opportunity of meeting Dr Genefke at a conference in Cape Town entitled “Caring for Survivors of Torture: Challenges for the Medical and Health Professionals” (15-17 November 1995). Dr Genefke spoke of her interaction with Mashinini, tacitly acknowledging its failure: “We are much cleverer now,” she said, in that they know not to confine torture survivors to hospital beds.

narrative is consciously perceived as therapy” (1991: 124). Mashinini describes it in this way:

When I went and told her about all my problems it was like a psychological release. I started emptying and talking, and it was a great relief. This was not a doctor and patient discussing. It was two friends who'd come from prison, and prison is not something you can leave behind.

(Mashinini 1989: 105)

This therapeutic exchange would seem to suggest that there *is* a role, then, in being a listener, although for Mashinini it was necessary that her listener be one who had shared something of her experience, or at least someone who was ideologically kin. Dr Genefke, who tries to persuade her that it need not be devastating to be called as a state witness, cannot play this role, for she does not understand the importance, for Mashinini, of her comrades' acceptance of her identity and existence. In describing the experience of being “rejected” by “the community” (there is only *one* community, in the context of the freedom struggle, as the singular, definitive article shows), the metaphor Mashinini uses is one of *death*:

This sent me totally berserk, to think of being a state witness. So I told her this, and she asked me, “Why are you so concerned or afraid of being a state witness?” And I said, “It's because the community can never accept you having been a state witness.” And she was educating me, saying, “You know that at times people are made state witnesses very much against their will, and they may have broken down, or there may be other very good reasons why they have eventually gone to become a state witness.” After all the trauma, to go back to the community and be rejected again. It means you are killing this person twice over.

(Mashinini 1989: 94)

To betray her community would be tantamount to a (second) annihilation of self.

Mashinini described to me how she began to write: “I thought I was not a writer” (1996: n.p.). She had a friend question her in order to facilitate her narrative, after which she would transcribe the conversation. She later dispensed with that, but the practice had worked: “I became a writer”. This recalls the parallel Jacobs draws between the interrogatory “devices” of the Security Police and the “victim's strategies” for self-expression (1992: 125). There are fundamental differences in the interrogatory exchange between prisoner and interrogator, on the one hand, and in the sympathetic dialogue Mashinini finds with friends, on the other. What we see in her account is that without a sympathetic addressee with whom she is able, first, to identify and, second, communicate, Mashinini cannot take up the pen.

Under Interrogation: The Case of Ruth First

An analysis of Ruth First's prison narrative also suggests that the position of the reader in the writer's project of restoration is not necessarily uncomplicatedly enabling or salutary. Writing in the mid-1960s, she is not able to trust the goodwill of her readership, and with good reason. Her account of her 117 days in detention offers an opportunity to reflect on the characterisation of the scene of "confession" in trauma studies.

To explore further the discomfiting doubledness of the position of the reader, I would like to return to the insights raised by Jacobs regarding the form of the prison narrative. For Jacobs, the prison confession itself provides the form for a restructuring and a reasserting of the self. There are significant similarities between prison confession and writing: autobiography involves a *self*-interrogation of sorts. There is a disclosure of the writer's "real" self to another, mimicking confession itself, where the all-important notion of "the truth" marks the specific value of the exchange. Using Dennis A. Foster (1987), Jacobs lays bare the parallels between autobiography's confessional stance and the scene of interrogation in prison, arguing that a confessional narrative "involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor" (Foster 1987: 2).⁴ Jacobs articulates it in this way:

In each of these South African prison memoirs the first-person narrator recounts the deconstruction of his own world and language by a whole range of physical and psychological stressors, up to the point where the compulsions to confess provide the very means of restructuring the self, and *the interrogator's devices for destroying the language of the victim become the victim's strategies for self-creation.*

(Jacobs 1992: 125; my italics)

Conceptualised in this way, the listener becomes all-important, but not necessarily in a benevolent sense. It is the listener, imagined at the moment of writing, who exacts the "truth". The listener has the power to accept the authenticity of the account and thereby to validate the emerging articulation of self. The writer is thus dependent on the (imagined) response of the listener, a listener to whom the writer is answerable.

What follows is an exploration of the positioning of the reader in the writer's project of giving her own account of herself, through an analysis of Ruth First's *117 Days* and its demonstration of the potentially harrowing pressure exerted by the "presence" of multiple listeners. At one point in

4. Because of the double meaning of "confessor" I have chosen to use the term "confessant" to indicate the speaker/writer, reserving "confessor" for the listener only. Foster uses the term "confessor" for both parties in the conversation.

First's interrogation, two distinct levels of interrogation become apparent, the first involving her Security Branch interrogators, the second, her readers. This double-telling is structured into her very sentences: an addendum appears after a comma or in parentheses to mark information she conspiratorially offers us, the readers, but withholds from the prison interrogators:

Who wrote articles in *Fighting Talk* under the pseudonym XXX, they wanted to know. I did, I said. (Though I had not.)

"What about sabotage?" I was not involved in sabotage and I could tell them nothing about it, nothing at all; this had been something in which I had not got involved.

Who had I met most frequently at meetings? A. and E. and L., I said. (All out of reach of the Security Branch.)

Where had I been to meetings: In my house, in my motor-car parked in some quiet place, in the home of D. (Long settled abroad.)

(First 1965: 121)

The security police are not blind to the rationale behind her choice of names, but are caught up nonetheless (as is the reader) in the game of uncovering the "truth" of her thinking as she reports on her experience. We may be privileged to know more than the interrogators, but information is withheld from us, too, as the capitalised initials signal. We, too, cannot be trusted in this game of secrets.

The structure of the telling communicates our potential complicity, even as it invites us into a circle of sharing secrets:

Viktor looked interested at this point only. I was engaged in the collection of information. For writing purposes. I needed to interview the veteran Congressmen with whom I was banned from communicating in normal circumstances, and I had made regular attempts to meet them at the underground headquarters and interview them about their lives of political struggle.

(First 1965: 121)

First is aware of what captures the interest and attention of her captors ("Viktor looked interested at this point only"), and of their suspicion that they are being taken for a cleverly thought-out ride. In her text, an added layer of intrigue is produced when First includes us as readers in her awareness and command of this game in a double address built into the structure of her sentences. We are privy not only to her reported answers, but also to her internal strategising, offered subtly as hints. A sentence fragment like "For writing purposes" appears to function quite simply as part of a report on what she said, but in fact it does more. It stages for us her process of constructing answers and reveals the spaces of scrambled thoughts, signalled by the full stops and the interjection of an incomplete

self-justification under the professional label of “writing”. This effect would not have been produced by a seamless, controlled sentence, “I was engaged in the collection of information for writing purposes”. We know she is deceiving them and working hard to conceal it.

When asked what she had been doing at Rivonia, First begins to report on her alleged activities (always keeping abreast of the interrogators, though, so as not to incriminate herself or any of her other comrades). Here, it is not clear whether her explanation of her activities is directed at the reader or the prison interrogators until attention is drawn to the conscientious presence of Swanepoel who “went on making notes all the while”, demonstrating to us, in this later “conversation” between writer and reader, her acute awareness of her audience.

Perhaps the most striking example of this double-voicedness, where First sets up the reader as yet another interrogator to whom she has to direct yet another truth, is found later in her account of the interrogation. The structure of address that First deploys in this recounting of her recounting, demonstrates the complexity of the position she occupies as autobiographer, even more so than as detainee, and renders the scene of articulation in the written text all the more fraught:

Why had I fled to Swaziland during the 1960 State of Emergency after Sharpeville? one of the detectives demanded to know. “Because you would have arrested me without preferring a charge or bringing me to trial, like you did to 1,800 others,” I said. The Security Branch knew very well that I had spent emergency months in Swaziland; they did not know that I had come back to live underground in Johannesburg during the second half of the emergency, and I did not tell them.

(First 1965: 125)

The split in address is staged performatively here: a question is posed, in (almost) direct speech, and an answer given within the clear demarcations of quotation marks. While this seems to offer us First’s putatively “direct” speech, the effect of the quotation marks is to place these words far off into the historical moment of the interrogation room. The sentence that slips in *after* the reported speech takes the place of the putatively “real” answer, to which we as readers are exclusively privileged: “I did not tell them” (First 1965: 125).

There is a certain thrill in discovering, as reader, that the information offered is privileged and that, even as we speak, as it were, the Security Branch does not know. This impression (as reader) of being party to a secret revealed under circumstances that increase its value mimics interrogation: the more clandestine and difficult to extort, the more alluring and interest-awakening is the tale. Although the reader is to some degree imagined as a sympathetic listener and an accomplice in the task of fighting the oppressive order of which the prison authorities are a part, the reader must nonetheless

be lured into sympathy by being offered privileged and intimate information. The writer cannot afford to be apathetic in convincing the reader of her bona fides. Her very identity rests on the reader's belief in her – and, at the same time, on her ability to keep abreast of the reader, at a remove.

No memoir makes this ambivalent relationship of writer to reader quite as disturbingly clear as Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. David Schalkwyk has demonstrated that Breytenbach explicitly acknowledges “the faceless addressee, shifting from ‘Mr Investigor’ [sic] through ‘Mr Investerrogor’, ‘Mr Interrogator’, Mr Confessor’, and ‘Mr Eye’ to the initialized ‘Mr I’ – the shifter of the first-person singular” (1994: 26). Schalkwyk recognises the disturbing implications this has for the South African reader/investigator who is positioned as an accomplice “in the master-slave dialectic writ large in South African society, and exemplified in the relationship between detainee and interrogator, the latter itself concealing and containing the ‘terrorist’ of the title” (p. 26). The unstable positioning of Breytenbach's narrator points to the reader's discomfiting complicity.

First, too, cannot trust her audience, although her text seems to include them as allies. In an interview with Jack Gould of the British Broadcasting Corporation, she acknowledges having removed a paragraph from *117 Days* listing the extent of her involvement for fear that it would “give something away” (First quoted in Pinnock 1993: 195). She is thus still compelled to conceal. Exposure to this hidden, diverse audience is (still) too risky. Her written text does not give away the extent of her knowledge at the time of her arrest:

When she was detained she knew, in her own admission, “a helluva lot, really an awful lot” about the underground movement She also knew beforehand about the closely guarded plans concerning the escape from prison of Harold Wolpe, Arthur Goldreich, Jassat Moolla and Mosie Moolla.

(Pinnock 1993: 194)

This is certainly not made explicit in her narrative. First seems to draw the conclusion that Harold Wolpe had escaped only when Anne-Marie Wolpe is brought into Marshall Square Prison: “If Anne-Marie had been taken, Harold must have got safely away” (First 1965: 20). Thereafter she immediately defers to an italicised third-person, retrospective account of the escape. Her narrative does suggest that she would not divulge anything she thought the Security Branch might not know, which implies that she was at least withholding some information. Although she does not, in fact, make her readers privy to this information, her narrative sets up her readers as allies in her bid to outwit her interrogators by trying to glean how much they knew of her involvements. What readers are not told, however, is the extent to which the Security Branch are correct in identifying her as a key potential

informer. In an interview with Walter Sisulu in September 1992, Donald Pinnock ascertains that it was “by pure chance” that First was not present at the Rivonia house when the raid took place:⁵

[As described by Sisulu,] she had been party to the decision to purchase the farm and other properties with funds from outside the country and was involved with the development of the underground movement which used the Rivonia house as its base. According to Joe Slovo she knew “almost everything”.

(Pinnock 1993: 174)

The interviews took place in 1992, almost 30 years after First’s detention, at a time when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the African National Congress (ANC) was unbanned. First’s text, however, was first published in 1965, a matter of months after her release from detention and decision to go into exile. For First, to write freely is dangerous and, in fact, impossible when her readership is not equally sympathetic.⁶

The Addressee

The “presence” of a reader (albeit imagined) at the scene of writing in response to whom the text is articulated has been explored by literary theorists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, M.M. Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida, who have argued that there is *no other way* of writing. The addressee is so integrally part of language as articulated that even when apparently addressing *herself* the writer does so “via” the other. Bakhtin concludes that “every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (1981: 279; italics in original). This “contradictory environment of alien words” or the expectation of an antipathetic and adversarial response is manifest not “in the object” (of the reader *him-/herself*) but in the “consciousness of the listener with his apperceptive background, pregnant with responses and objections”

5. The house, legally owned by Arthur Goldreich but bought with organisational funds, was used as a meeting place by leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) who were arrested and charged with treason in the famous “Rivonia Trial” of 1964.

6. At the time of the interviews the readership, of course, could not yet be imagined as sympathetic. Indeed, First was right not to feel safe. While in exile, she was assassinated after receiving a letter bomb in 1982, the work of the South African Security Police. In 2000, Craig Williamson was granted amnesty for her murder during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC’s) amnesty hearings.

(p. 281). It is the writer's awareness of a *potential* readership that is significant.

In the case of memoirs, one may ask whether the other need necessarily be considered present when the person being addressed is identical to the addressee. Jacques Derrida (1985) argues that even in cases where "the addresser is the addressee" one writes via an other, the listener. During a discussion printed in *The Ear of the Other*, Pierre Jacques asks about the notion of the "addressee": "What happens when Nietzsche writes, finally, to himself?" Derrida replies:

When he writes himself to himself, he *writes himself to the other* who is infinitely far away and who is supposed to send his signature back to him. He has no relation to himself that is not forced to defer itself by passing through the other When he writes himself to himself, he has no immediate presence of himself to himself. There is the necessity of this detour through the other ...

(Derrida 1985: 87; italics in original)

The place of the other, the listener, is of importance because the text is constituted and the identity of the autobiographer secured only with his/her agreement. However, it is important to stress that this "place" is not occupied by a *real* readership but rather an *imagined* one that has not yet (nor ever will) come into existence. Stephen Clingman (1984) has developed Sartre's notion of a "virtual public" (which Clingman calls a "listening public") in his discussion of Nadine Gordimer. Clingman's conception of audience is not dependent on a literal "potential reading public":

[Rather, it is] a kind of *listening* public, waiting in implicit silent judgement on everything the writer [writes]. It [is] a hitherto oppressed world against whose significance, causes and values the significance, causes and values of all writing now [has] to be measured. *Thus the virtual public can make silent, historic demands on the writer, becoming a presence and a problem he cannot ignore.*

(Clingman 1984: 170; second italics mine)

It is not a matter of the writer's writing "directly *for*" but rather "*towards* or *in favour of* her virtual public" (Clingman 1984: 170). In the case of texts of confession, as Jacobs describes prison testimonies, the "presence" of a confessor is perhaps more "real" and the moment of defending the "truth" that much more anxiety-inducing as the confessant finds herself exposed to the throbbing heat of the spotlight, while the identity of her confessor remains ever veiled, imagined, and protected from scrutiny.

Conclusion

It may be that for writers of prison texts the presence (albeit imagined) of a listening, judging public is especially vivid at the moment of articulation. It may be that the need to produce verification is that much more pressing and the sense of both the danger and the redemptive potential of the “confession” that much more intense, exerting a pressure that could as easily be understood to be inhibiting as enabling. The interrogatory presence of an other to whom the writer has to account, contributes to the selection of admissible facts in the production of self that is autobiography. For her text to warrant the epistemological standing of “autobiography”, with its promise of “truth”, the writer must offer an explanation and external, verifiable evidence. It is a high-stakes game. The task of asserting a new self, in writing, to contest the criminalising “vocabulary” of the state security system is both undermined and made all the more urgent by the overwhelming self-doubt which that system induces and which the act of taking up the pen does not necessarily remove.

Narrative self-construction involves a tricky negotiation, on the page, as it were. It is an *appeal* as much as it is an *assertion* of self. There can be no assurance – certainly not for the survivor – of the power of writing to undo the traumatic effects of detention. The paradigm of trauma studies potentially enables attentiveness to the anxiety and vulnerability of self-articulation that emerges after suffering. But that attentiveness is undermined by theoretical abstractions that locate catharsis deeply within individualised subjects and by attempts to imagine human connectedness across a generalised state of woundedness. This imputed mutual recognition offers to the interlocutors an experience of their own humanity and belonging, without attending to the complex politics of address at work in narratives written in the aftermath of detention.

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