“The Myth of the Lying Woman”:

An Analysis of Testimony in Contemporary South African Fiction

Sima Meghdadi

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By: Sima Meghdadi

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_____ Examiner
Jill Didur

_____ Examiner
Jill Didur

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)
Jesse Arseneault

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)
Jesse Arseneault

Approved by _____
Kevin Pask Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

_____
Pascale Sicotte
Dean Faculty

ABSTRACT

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This paper focuses on the notion that the social narratives that circulate around the topic of sexual violence have harmful effects, ultimately perpetuating rape-tolerant culture. With South Africa as the country on which my research is centred, I argue that these narratives dissuade rape survivors from coming forward and sharing their stories, which are frequently met with disbelief and a lack of seriousness. Moreover, I offer an analysis of Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, one of this paper's primary texts, and attend to the complexities of effecting reconciliation. I maintain that the novel refuses the idea that with speaking comes healing and that past and present can be detached from one another. Dangor's aforementioned text and Kagiso Lesego Molope's *This Book Betrays My Brother* will inform the following analysis about rape-tolerant culture and survivor believability and help me draw attention to changes that need to be made.

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> No matter what happens to our bodies in our lifetimes […], they remain ours.
> —Maggie Nelson
>
> Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.
> —Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

1. Introduction: A Justified Reluctance to Speak

When author Roxane Gay was just twelve years old, she was gang-raped in the woods "by a group of boys with the dangerous intentions of bad men" (Gay ix). At the age of seventeen, Sohaila Abdulali, who had just graduated from high school, was forced up a mountain by four armed men who raped her. Michelle Hattingh was at a beach in South Africa celebrating the completion of her honours thesis in psychology when she and her friend were robbed, beaten, and raped by two men who repeatedly threatened to kill them. We know about these women's experiences of sexual violence because they have recounted them in their respective books, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*, and *I'm the Girl Who Was Raped*. Many rape survivors do not share their stories, though, for, as explains Abdulali in a passage that encapsulates one of the prominent thematic concerns of this paper, "telling doesn't always come with a reward: comfort, closure, justice. Sometimes, women tell but everyone acts as if they said nothing at all" (18). Examples of questions people oftentimes ask themselves upon finding out about a rape incident include, "why wasn't she more careful?" and "why did she make herself so vulnerable?" (Mclellan v). That said, when Gay, Abdulali, and Hattingh published their works in which they share such intimate parts of themselves, they understood, as reveal their texts, the stakes of telling one's story. Commonly disseminated rape myths undermine survivors' stories and produce responses such as, "the victim is as guilty as her rapists … can one hand clap? I don't think so" (qtd. in Abdulali 30). In her 1971 essay, "Rape:

The All-American Crime", Susan Griffin states that, "rape is a form of mass terrorism, for the victims are chosen indiscriminately, but the propagandists for male supremacy broadcast that it is women who cause rape by being unchaste or in the wrong place at the wrong time—in essence, by behaving as though they were free" (35).

I mention these commentaries because they illustrate a central problematic about rape-tolerant culture, namely the way that social narratives of survivors of sexual violence circulate in ways that generate harm. These narratives, in turn, compromise any potential recovery from rape that might come from survivors telling their stories and, in fact, might lead to further harm. This project points to the ways in which not only rape, but also the social narratives that circulate about it are part of the structure of harm that rape-tolerant culture perpetuates. It should be noted that this project does not constitute an effort to dissuade survivors from telling their stories; rather, it seeks to draw attention to and work against the social pressures that prevent them from doing so or might cause harm to those who do. With that, Morrison's words, cited in this paper's epigraph, speak to this project, emphasizing the need for a better world, one in which rape survivors can tell their stories without violent repercussions. Nelson's citation inspires this paper as well, indicating ownership over our bodies, which this project's focus on survivor testimony aims to reinforce. While there is no control over one's testimony, which, in the case of South Africa's Truth Commission, became part of the project of nation building, this project insists that our own bodies must always remain ours to control. The themes illustrated by the above statements map neatly onto the two primary texts this paper later explores, both of which are by South African authors, Kagiso Lesego Molope's *This Book Betrays My Brother* and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*. Each of these texts dramatizes the stakes of voicing testimony about sexual violence. I turn to texts from South Africa because the country has often been described as the rape capital of the world. According to official data released in 2021, 9,556 rape cases were reported between July and September, the majority of which took place either at the victim's house or the rapist's (Isilow). Figures also indicate that at least 10,818 rape cases were reported

during the first three months of 2022, “an increase of 13.7% over the same period in 2021” (Davies). These numbers, termed a “disgrace” by Minister of Police Bheki Cele (qtd. in Isilow), tell one story of sexual violence in that location, but I turn in this project to narrative. In doing so, this project’s geographically specific analysis explores its central texts as a way to foreground problems about rape-tolerant culture that arguably circulate globally.

In the specific case of South Africa, pervasive distrust of survivors embedded in social narratives of sexual violence runs counter to the ethic of testimony enshrined in national consciousness following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It was on April 27, 1994 that South Africa held its first democratic elections after which point Mandela became the country’s first Black president on May 10 of that year. The subaltern position to which Black lives had been relegated under the apartheid regime was attended to by the TRC whose members affirmed a well-known Xhosa hymn, *Lizalise idinga lakho*, which translates to, “the forgiveness of sins makes a person whole” (Krog 37). Archbishop Desmond Tutu earnestly pleaded that South Africans “bless this Truth and Reconciliation Commission […] as a body which seeks to redress the wounds in the minds and the bodies of those who suffered” (37). During the lengthy proceedings—which mimicked the format of a judicial courtroom format—victims were taken “into the very heart of darkness” (275), coming face-to-face with their perpetrators, and spoke about the times they were “beaten, given electric shocks, suffocated, kept naked, and repeatedly raped with a police baton” (192). I provide this backdrop not only because Dangor’s text is embedded in the specific context of South Africa’s TRC, but also because the Commission promulgated the notion that telling one’s story brings about a kind of easy redemption, which both novels dealt with in this paper, as I will show, contest.

At the heart of Molope’s text is a weighty critique levelled against a system, closely interconnected with the legal-bureaucratic structure and social narratives that circulate at a communal level, that inspires distrust of rape survivors. The novel’s narrative is set in the post-apartheid era and follows the confession of a young girl, Naledi, also the narrator, who witnesses

her brother, Basi, rape his girlfriend, Moipone. Naledi has difficulty coming to terms with the fact that Basi, whom she has always looked up to and admired, has committed such an abhorrent crime, so she attempts to convince herself that the whole thing was a simple misunderstanding, thinking, "*but my brother is not one of those guys*" (Molope 164). In the end, Basi is not prosecuted, nor does he lose the support of the members in his community. Instead, Moipone becomes a persona non grata, referred to as a liar, shamed for having tried to traduce him. Naledi, who ultimately vouches for Moipone, also becomes the recipient of social aggression as everyone in her milieu deems her disloyal to her brother who has done nothing but support her.

Dangor's text brings to the forefront of discussion the reality that Tutu and Mandela's "heroic ethical project" (Atwell & Harlow 3) generated polarizing responses as it was replete with moral and political ambiguities. The novel is divided into three parts: memory, confession, and retribution, which Dangor "counterposes against the three steps laid out by the TRC—speak, grieve, and heal" (Frenkel 159). The plot is set in 1998, an important year as women's hearings are taking place. Lydia, Michael, and Silas, the three main characters, are in the midst of what the narrator refers to as "a twilight period, an interregnum between the old country and the new" (255). Even though momentous changes are taking place, the event around which the plot orientates occurred in December 1978, during which newlyweds Lydia and Silas are caught in a violent police roundup where an Afrikaans officer, François Du Boise, rapes Lydia in a police van. Silas, who has been severely battered, is forced to listen, unable to do anything but bang despairingly on the vehicle's sides. The silence that surrounds Lydia's rape for two decades is suddenly broken when Silas runs into Du Boise one evening. He tells her about it, though she wishes he had not, and encourages her to put forth a testimony at the hearings, an idea she vehemently rejects. Lydia's son, Michael, discovers, through some of his mother's journal entries, that his biological father is not Silas; rather, he is the product of the rape, which he also finds out about via those entries. In the end, he murders his mother's rapist, an amnesty applicant.

With all this in mind, these two novels will inform the analysis that follows, which focuses on South Africa's TRC and the skepticism that is oftentimes tied to survivors' testimonies of rape.

2. Molope and Dangor: Believability and Redemption (Or Lack Thereof)

This paper's critical discussion of literary depictions of sexual violence against women in contemporary South African fiction explores the aforementioned two novels, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* and Kagiso Lesego Molope's *This Book Betrays My Brother*. I maintain that the latter emphasizes the need for survivors' narratives to be believed, ultimately urging us to consider the importance of an assertion put forth by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman that, "the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story" (68; emphasis original). Their argument is directly applicable to the concerns raised by Molope's text since Moipone's isolation is exacerbated by the fact that no one believes her, resulting in her feeling shunned by and estranged from her community. The distrust of survivor narratives in the text, as I will show, responds critically to a culture of rape denialism within South Africa (a phenomenon I explore later), demonstrating that it renders those who have summoned the courage to come forward helpless and alienated. Moreover, while the novel does not overtly ask that we dismantle some of the "knowledge" that we have inherited about rape culture, it tacitly points to its surfeit of myths, such as that it is impossible to be raped by the person with whom you are in a relationship, that surround the culture of rape reportage in South Africa and the consequences they portend for survivors. Moreover, since Molope's text reminds us that few women who open up about having been raped are taken seriously, I will refer to Pumla Dineo Gqola's *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. This book will be central to my thinking as it grapples with questions of why certain rape survivors are more easily believed than others. Drawing on the work of political theorist Jane Bennett, Gqola argues the following regarding survivor testimony:

> The believability of a rape survivor depends on how closely her rape resembles her society's idea of what a rape looks like, who rapes, who can be raped, when and how. In

> other words, every time a woman says she has been raped, whether we believe her or not depends on what we believe about what rape looks like. The closer her story is to our preconceived ideas about what rape looks like, the more we are to believe she is telling the truth (29).

I intend to correlate this postulation to the context in which Moipone's assault occurs, which challenges the presumptions of the individuals in her vicinity as far as what an act of sexual violence supposedly looks like.

My analysis of Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* draws on literature that pertains to the attempts of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and others, to deal with the indignities of apartheid via the TRC's testimonial process, namely Fiona C. Ross' *Bearing Witness* and Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*. Both will be useful here for their detailed attention to testimonies made by apartheid survivors who were sexually violated and repeatedly threatened to be taken "to the verge of death" by several notorious figures (Krog 97), including Joe Mamasela and Jeffrey Benzien. I firstly contend that Dangor's text refutes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's assumption that "speaking is healing" (Mack 196), as is evidenced when the narrator asserts that, "nothing in any of their [Lydia's or her family's] lives would change because of a public confession of pain suffered" (156). Indeed, the TRC's central conceit affirms that breaking the silence that surrounds your trauma and engaging in "a Christian rhetoric of confession and forgiveness" are the only ways in which South Africans can move beyond the country's violent past (Gunne 173). The commission's maxim inspired much indignation, though, for some maintained that Mandela and Tutu "demonstrated a clear bias towards public goals at the expense of the private concerns of the majority of the victims" (Akpome 10) and that "forgiveness in the name of peace [had] been elevated above justice in the name of principle" (Atwell & Harlow 2).

The novel ultimately constitutes a frustrated response to the pronounced disconnect that exists between figures like Tutu, who showcased a strong willingness to grant rapists amnesty even though he will "never understand what it's like to be raped" (Dangor 16), and survivors of

sexual assault whose lives have been irrevocably altered. I wish to lend greater specificity to the latter two words, "irrevocably altered," by citing C. Fred Alford, who argues that trauma, regardless of the way in which it is induced, is oftentimes "the last narrative after which there can be no other, for there is no more meaning left in the world. Or at least that is how it seems to be experienced by the victim" (100). His assertion is germane to what we see happens to Lydia as she is tasked with dismantling the crushing memory of the night she was sexually violated by Du Boise and injecting meaning into her life, hoping that her sexuality will one day cease to be "defined by her status as a rape victim" (Dangor 119). That said, Abdulali's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape* attends to the idea that there are countries in which "the belief that it's better to die than be raped runs deep", adding that, in India, "victims are called *zinda laash*: living corpses" (30). This notion is troubling given that such beliefs define survivors exclusively in relation to their traumas in problematic ways that make them vulnerable to violence, as famously happened to Khwezi, a survivor whose story I will examine later in this analysis. I lastly contend that Molope and Dangor's respective novels are analogous in that they underscore that past and present are not separate entities; rather, they are intertwined since the characters persistently think about the presentness of the past. Specifically, Dangor's text resists attempts to render testimony a form of putting trauma to rest, or confining trauma to the past in favor of emerging into a post-traumatic present. It is because of this presentness of the past that I revive longstanding critiques of the TRC later in this analysis, since they serve as a useful point for thinking about myths on survivor testimony. Rape, as states Yvette Abrahams, "leaves its traces on the psyche" (9), which is why Lydia and Moipone's torturers, namely their rapists and all those who contribute to their silencing, unceasingly haunt them. Ultimately, it is not only the trauma of rape, but also the social narratives about it that contribute to this haunting.

3. South African Attitudes and Rape Myths

Molope's novel reflects entrenched attitudes in South African cultural spheres that undermine the believability of survivors' stories. In February 2000, for instance, American

television correspondent Bob Simon interviewed South Africa's Minister of Justice, Penuell Maduna, and the country's Minister of Safety and Security, Steve Tshwete, both of whom facetiously asked the host, '"you have been here for more than twenty-six seconds; have you seen anyone raped in that time?' in [crass] reference to a much-quoted statistic that a woman is raped in South Africa every 26 seconds" (qtd. in du Toit 254). Further, in April 2000, the Commissioner of Police, Jackie Selebi, stated that, "most South African women who report rape are lying" (qtd. in du Toit 254). A magistrate from Pretoria, roughly two years later, passed a shockingly mild sentence on an eighteen-year-old rapist who had assaulted a five-year-old girl. They justified their decision by stating that, "firstly […] the young man [has] his whole life in front of him (!), and secondly, the five-year-old was no longer a virgin when she was raped, which must cast some doubt on her character" (du Toit 255; emphasis original). Their frame of thought raises several challenges, namely, how does the "character" of a five-year-old get called into question? How does one even begin to apply the concept of consent to someone as young as that? Wherein lies the logic in telling a rape survivor that their not being a virgin renders what they say questionable when the very thing that supposedly makes them credible was violently taken away from them? I will put forth one final example and state that Charlene Smith, author of *Proud of Me: Speaking Out Against Sexual Violence and HIV*, mentions, in her book, that, "after writing about a woman gang raped in front of her children and who now has HIV, a number of male callers to the *Mail and Guardian* insinuated that my writings about rape suggested I had a boring life and just needed a good fuck" (201).

With all this in mind, one of the questions Molope's novel foregrounds is: how can a woman possibly feel compelled to come forward when those who once did were abashed and "expected to just get over it" (Gqola 5)? Shailja Patel, Kenyan author and political activist, pointedly remarks that if "you want to understand how power works in any society, watch who is carrying the shame and who is doing the shaming" (qtd. in Gqola 38). Gqola adds to her contention, which she deems is "spot on," affirming that, "shame is a function of oppression; it

has everything to do with who is valued and who is invisibilised in any society. Although logically, it would seem to follow that those who have something to be ashamed of, that those who behave badly should feel ashamed of themselves, the opposite is true" (38). In *This Book Betrays My Brother*, Moipone's integrity and honesty are undermined and her story discredited, even though she tells the truth about her rape, which echoes the ways the structure of rape-tolerant culture is built to support perpetrators of sexual violence. Charnelle van der Bijl and Philip N.S. Rumney attend to this reality, asserting that, "research suggests that some South African police officers actively seek out evidence regarding the reputation of rape complainants, and rape allegations involving people in relationships sometimes will not even be investigated" (832-3). They add that some victims have claimed that police officers "exhibit disbelieving attitudes" and encourage those who come forward to "withdraw their allegation" (833). One of the essays in Roxane Gay's anthology, *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, also touches upon this. Nora Salem, the speaker in "The Life Ruiner" states, "The Life Ruiner [her rapist] alone didn't ruin me. The world that made him did—the place that continues to manufacture replicas of him and continues to create the circumstances in which he and his replicas thrive" (153). Salem's assertion merits attention for it reminds us of the power that the misconceptions entrenched in social narratives carry. When we make excuses for perpetrators of sexual violence, for example, by commenting upon how a victim was dressed when she got raped, we insulate them in such a way that ultimately absolves them.

The remarks the members in Moipone's community make after finding out about her allegations against Basi foreground the notion that a complainant and rapist's social statuses are taken into account when it comes to assessing the truthfulness of their declarations. Aus' Joyce, Naledi's neighbor, for instance, exclaims, "You should feel lucky! Raped by Basimane? You should have said thank you" (166). Moipone is ultimately up against a person whom the world deems is "as special as raindrops on dying crops" (Molope 10) and who is "made of everything strong and beautiful and promising" (10). With that said, the grand question circulating within the

novel's community is, why would Basi have wasted his time going after someone as "ordinary" as Moipone when he could essentially have had anyone he wanted? "Who is she to be raped by Basi?" and "why would someone like him need someone like her for sex?" (Molope 186) are a few examples of questions that make their rounds in the community.

The gendered hierarchy Moipone is subject to recalls the Jacob Zuma rape trial, during which public opinion of the trial frequently rallied support around Zuma. Indeed, his supporters referred to those who sided with the complainant, Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo, also known as Khwezi, as "dogs" and "counter-revolutionaries" (qtd. in Gqola 69). Not only that, but they burnt pictures of her outside the courtroom all the while chanting, "burn the bitch" (68). These violent demonstrations were "reminiscent," Vanessa Ludwig remarks, "of the days of witch-burning in Europe and North America in days gone by" (174). Harrowed by the unremitting abuse, which ultimately caused her to seek state protection, and resentful of Judge Willem van der Merwe for having acquitted Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, the then-31-year old Khwezi and her mother fled to the Netherlands where the complainant wrote her poignant poem, "I am Khanga," which she performed at an exhibition on September 26, 2008. The significance of the wraparound garment she references in the title lies in that she proclaimed, during the legal proceedings, that she wore one to bed the night she was allegedly raped by Zuma, whom she regarded as a father-figure and guardian whose job was to look after and protect her. This dynamic was expressed through the deferential term *malume*, father's brother, which she used during her testimony. The following is an excerpt of the poem, which I am including as it evinces the extent to which she felt betrayed by Zuma and South Africa's broken political system:

> He said I wanted it
> That my khanga said it
> That with it I lured him to my bed
> That with it I want you is what I said
> […]
> My world is a world where fathers protect and don't rape
> My world is a world where a woman can speak out
> Without fear for her safety

Gqola asserts that, “much that transpired inside and outside the court was instructive of how we deal with rape, why rape survivors make certain choices, and the fraught ways in which the legal system responds to and treats rape complainants. What was simultaneously brought into focus was why we are losing the battle against rape” (101). Vanessa Ludwig also adds that, while the verdict of the rape case was expected, it revealed that the legal system is “guilty of being hostile to women, Black women in particular; it is guilty of its refusal to protect us” (174), a disquieting reality Molope’s text emulates. Rather than lend Moipone a longed-for listening ear, the members in her community vehemently insist that getting raped by Basi does not constitute “an absolute violation” but “an honour” (Molope 186), ultimately “seeing Moipone, and not the rape, as being beneath [him]” (186). That said, the novel dramatizes the consequences of survivors’ testimonies circulating within a field of unsympathetic listeners and carries some social lessons as far as how to deal with them. In that the reader is sympathetically aligned with Moipone via Naledi’s narration, the text exposes the consequences of the disbelief with which her confession is met, namely that she is rendered utterly isolated.

Molope’s *This Book Betrays My Brother* condemns not only individuals who accept and disseminate rape myths without questioning them, but also the very system that produces and supports the utterances of these individuals for it recognizes that they “are at the heart of what is keeping rape culture intact” (Gqola 170). Here, I examine some of these specific myths, ones that are present in Molope’s text, and discuss how the novel responds to them.

Molope’s novel challenges the notion that perpetrators are “easy to spot,” so to speak, because they are abusive at all times, as it is Basi, a revered son, brother, and friend who rapes in the story. The fact that it is *he* who rapes underscores the idea that anyone, even a beloved person in our immediate vicinity, can be an abuser. Here is Pumla Dineo Gqola on the common misbelief that perpetrators are incapable of being anything other than reprehensible monsters:

> This is an expectation that many people have, and consequently one of the most enduring rape myths. It rears its head often when a survivor’s narrative is being questioned. Rapists

> and abusers are normal people. They can be very loving and gentle to those close to them. […] There is no consensus on what characteristics are to be found in someone who is likely to rape or be abusive in any other way. The only thing rapists have in common is the refusal to accept no" (144).

Basi *is*, in fact, affectionate towards his loved ones, which Naledi indexes when she mentions that her brother's "room and words and arms had always spelt safety for [her]" (Molope 139). While she "manage[s] a sizeable and convincing grin on a daily basis, though, repeatedly telling herself that, "*nothing strange is going on here*" (142), she is cognizant that his action merits severe legal punishment. Basi, too, is aware that what he did is wrong for, when Naledi untruthfully tells him, "it happened to me too, you know" (180), he indignantly exclaims, "What? When? Why didn't you tell? […] I'll kill him! Who was it? I'll find out and—" (181). Moreover, he insists that his sister simply does not "understand," what he means, but when she asks that he tell her what she fails to comprehend, he is unable to formulate a lucid and coherent response, stating, "it just…it wasn't…I would never, never…even as a young man…she was my girlfriend and…she knew…she exp—" (182), after which point he "presse[s] his palm against his forehead and wipe[s] off the beads of sweat that had accumulated around his hairline" (182), which attests to his failure to explain away what he did. Rather than calling into question survivor narratives, the novel's focus on the incoherence of Basi's response at the possibility of having committed a violent act engenders a confrontation of perpetrator narratives.

Molope's text parallels existing narratives of sexual violence, which are evident in an interview that aired on South African TV many years ago, one referred to by the opening lines of Gqola's text. During this interview, a journalist asks a few self-admitted rapists if they believed that what they had done had induced trauma, a question to which they instantly respond "no." Gqola remarks that, "none of them wanted to admit that it was violence that had far-reaching effects, that they could ruin women's lives, and that rape traumatizes" (2). When asked, however, how they would feel if a woman they loved, for example a sister or a niece, got raped, they all,

similarly to Basi, displayed anger and swore to hurt anyone who would dare do such a thing. With this reaction in mind, Gqola affirms that, "clearly, these men were not ignorant of the effects of their actions. They raped because they could, and in this decision was the implicit statement that some women did not matter. Therefore, violating them is permissible" (3). Basi, too, is aware that he can get away with his crime because "the whole system is designed to help [him] get away with it" (Abdulali 48). As mentions Naledi, "he will always be cocooned in the loyalty of his parents, his friends, and the women who love him, whatever he does" (187). With all this in mind, Molope's commentary ultimately draws attention to the social narratives and myths that surround the topic of sexual violence, emphasizing that they have the capacity to discredit women and render their testimonies questionable.

This Book Betrays My Brother rebukes the widespread idea, bought into and recited by many, that women sometimes dress and/or act in ways that invite rape. This misbelief comes into play when one of Naledi's neighbours, Aus' Johanna, earnestly proclaims that she fails to grasp how Moipone "could have gone there [Basi's house] in a short skirt and a sexy top and lain on his bed and expected us to believe she didn't know what was going to happen" (Molope 174). The novel echoes Gqola's insistence that, "there is no correlation between how a woman dresses and her ability to escape rape. Rape is about power not seduction, and men are not helpless children but adults with the power to self-control. Women should be free to dress as they please without being blamed for what might be done to them" (149). Comments women have regrettably gotten used to hearing include, "she asked for it", "she obviously wanted it", and "she encouraged him, led him on, and then changed her mind" (Mclellan vii). This pervasive myth is therefore harmful as it may cause a survivor to question whether her experience "validly amounts to rape" (Smythe 87) because she may feel as though she failed to "adequately convey that she did not want to have sex" (88). This, in turn, can dissuade her from coming forward and having the courage to call the rape what it is. The myriad of deep-rooted misbeliefs in social and legal-bureaucratic frameworks

is, I re-emphasize, inimical to a survivor's integrity and willingness to trust the system whose job is to protect them.

4. *Bitter Fruit* and the Truth Commission

Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* warns against the dangers of romanticizing South Africa's Truth Commission, emphasizing, as have done Elaine Scarry and Lawrence Langer, that, "some kinds of experiences stand outside language's redemptive possibilities" (Ross 27). I turn now to this novel and its critiques of the TRC precisely because it gives insight into the way that approaches to survivor testimony have been shaped in the mythology of the "New" South Africa, those whose consequences I examined above in the context of Molope's novel. Lydia, as was stated earlier, opts not to participate in the Commission's testimonial process for she avidly maintains that speaking about trauma before an audience constitutes a futile act since it ultimately changes nothing. What is more, Shane Graham, who borrows from Roberta Culbertson and Charlotte Delbo, mentions that, "the psychological truth of the event [the rape in Lydia's case] cannot be captured by the conventions of narrative" (16). In a passage that echoes the way in which she feels about the TRC's ethos, the narrator asserts that, "nothing could be undone, you could not withdraw a rape; it was an irrevocable act, like murder. Once that violating penis, that vile *cock* had been inside you, it could not be withdrawn, not by an act of remorse or vengeance, not even by justice" (Dangor 156; emphasis original). Having said that, Dangor's novel invites readers to reflect upon what Cheryl Glenn has affirmed, namely, at times, "silence is an absence with a function" (4). Though Silas, who had been "trained to find consensus, even if it meant not acknowledging the 'truth' in all its unflattering nakedness" (Dangor 63), insists that she put forth a testimony at the hearings, the root of her refusal lies in the notion that she cannot accept the widely disseminated conceit of a man, Archbishop Tutu, whom she claims will never understand what it is like to be "fucked up his arse against his will" (16). Her acrimony manifests itself further when she adds that he does not know "what it's like to be raped, to be mocked while he's being raped, to feel inside of him the hot knife—that piece of useless flesh you [men] call a

cock—turning into a torture instrument" (16). Ultimately, her silence, which is *not* imposed upon her, constitutes an act of protest that "calls into question the allegedly therapeutic and ontological effects of public speech that motivate the commission's effort" (Mack 206). It is a "capacious and consequential rhetoric" (196) in that it foregrounds that narrating your experience of torture to an audience whose members are mere strangers will do little—if anything—to bring about healing.

Lydia's characterization of the TRC critiques its orientation toward forgiveness over justice for victims and survivors. Among victims of abuse testifying at the TRC, one of the criticisms that frequently came up was that Mandela and Tutu could forgive because they "lead vindicated lives" (qtd. in Krog 141). Charity Kondile, a mother whose son was killed by Dirk Coetzee, stated, in an interview that took place after she had refused to forgive him, "In my life nothing, not a single thing, has changed since my son was burnt by barbarians…nothing. Therefore I cannot forgive" (141). South African activist Shirley Gunn echoes her words, stating, "it is easy for Mandela to forgive—his life has changed; but for the woman in the shack, it is not possible" (146). This idea that it is staggeringly difficult for a person whose life has not improved to put the past behind them is depicted in Dangor's text when Lydia's sister states, "Ja, they call us apartheid's astronauts trapped in this damn twilight world. Let Mr. Mandela come and live here, and then tell me about his miracle" (82). Her reservations and overall unease about the Commission parallel Dangor's own, which he expressed in an interview conducted by Elaine Young. During this exchange in 2002, he asserted that, "if there was any ideological starting point at all, it is probably my feeling that in wanting to forgive and forget so quickly, we swept a lot of things under the carpet—we didn't deal with a lot of issues and they've festered there" (57). He maintains that the Truth Commission dealt with the past superficially, which ultimately signifies that nothing was *truly* resolved. In fact, one self-confessed torturer, whom a victim in Krog's text mentions, proclaimed, "they can give me amnesty a thousand times. Even if God and everyone else forgives me a thousand times—I have to live with this hell. The problem is in my head, my conscience. There is only one way to be free of it. Blow my own brains out. Because that's where

my hell is" (195). This confession is telling as far as the TRC's limitations in helping participants put the past to rest, showcasing that, while it may have reconciled some victims and perpetrators, it did not itself do away with the traumatic effects of violence on the psyche.

Several scholarly and public commentators also criticize the TRC for its shortcomings and limitations. For example, Mahmood Mamdani questioned "at what point reconciliation becomes an embrace of evil" (Ross 11). South African poet Ingrid de Kok also stated that, "nobody believes that the TRC will or can produce the full 'truth' in all its detail, for all time" (61) despite its well-established goal to depict "as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature and extent of the gross violations of human rights" (TRC 55). Moreover, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) maintained, according to a published statement, that, "the combination of amnesty, compensation, and truth finding is a recipe for great evil. People will say anything to get money and amnesty" (Krog 133), which may just have been what Du Boise—whom we do not see repent—was after prior to being killed.

Others, conversely, deemed the Commission's work indispensable. In one letter, Tim, an apartheid survivor, discusses the good it generated, stating, "It's as if I have been freed from a prison that I've been in for eighteen years. At the same time, it's as if my family have also been freed—my brother is all of a sudden much softer, more human, more able to talk to me (qtd. in Krog 192). Moreover, in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt asserts that, "acknowledgement is an affirmation that a person's pain is real and worthy of attention. It is thus central to the restoration of the dignity of the victims" (114). While her argument was not originally addressed to the members of the Truth Commission, the correlation is palpable. Nora Salem echoes her thoughts as regards the importance of recognizing someone's pain, stating the following:

> Why tell this story at all? Why contribute to the compendium of stories about girls being used? Why ask all these questions that don't have answers? It's hard to admit, but part of it has to do with the need for an audience. […] When you're lost in the terror of your own memories, or when your actions occasionally prove their loathsome hold on you, the

> antidote to losing your mind is to have a handful of people around you who know your wound and will verify its existence (152-3).

These statements recall Felman and Laub's commentary regarding the importance of having that "addressable other" who will hear your pain and acknowledge that it is real. The above critiques suggest that, although speaking about the past does not alter it, having solicitous listeners can mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Despite Arendt and Salem's assertions, however, not all the women who took the stand were "consummate tellers" (Ross 35). Some, understandably, "found it less easy to convey the complex stories they told: the setting, so unlike traditional spaces of telling, was intimidating and the harm of which they spoke too great to bear easily in words" (35). Their disclosures regarding the malignities of South Africa's past regime were often, as evidence the transcriptions in Krog's text, interrupted by sobs, cries, and lengthy pauses. Many written testimonies include brackets that mention, for instance, "pause while she cries" (Ross 39), "voice breaks completely", "long silence", and "sighs audibly before continuing" (Krog 71 & 73), which attest to the emotionally taxing and onerous nature of speaking about trauma.

These bracketed interjections also demonstrate the limitations of language in attending to traumatic testimony, a claim central to this project's handling of survivor narrative. This problem is reinforced by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, clinical psychologist and former member of the Human Rights Violations Committee of the TRC, when she states that:

> There is a danger in laying too much emphasis on verbal languages in that it ignores other forms of communication that victims might inadvertently 'choose' when they find words inadequate. Body language is one. Silences are another. For example, when a [survivor] suddenly stops speaking, or starts to cry at a particular point in the testimony, or when their voice breaks, these are not just moments of absence of language but representational expressions (or 'acts') that may tell us more about what the traumatic experiences meant then, and means now, for the victim than words ever could (164).

Her commentary warrants contemplation for it encourages committee members to alter, in some sense, the way in which they listen to an aggrieved person, prompting them to look beyond what is merely stated and take into account a speaker's non-verbal cues, which, as she mentions, have the capacity to convey more pain than words. That being said, transcripts are limited accounts of testimony in that they do not often "record," as asserts Rosemary Jolly, "incoherent words spoken in extreme emotion, certain statements that are screamed in agony, rather than merely 'stated,' as well as the body language of the speaker," which "means that the verbal record of the testimony lends an artificial air of at least a structural coherence to the statement" (624). Transcriptions can therefore be deceitful for they occlude a testifier's affective responses—their raw emotions and reactions—without which the fullness of their testimony is concealed.

Responding to how strenuous a task it was to share your story at the hearings, Krog notes that those who worked for the Truth Commission were immensely sympathetic towards testifiers. She states, for instance, that everyone "realized what an immense price of pain each person must pay just to stammer out his own story" (132). In fact, apartheid survivor and former chairperson of the South African Gender Commission Thenjiwe Mthintso concluded her testimony with a few words that encapsulate how countless women felt about putting forth a public revelation, namely it does not bring about an easy redemption, stating, "while writing this speech, I realized how unready I am to talk about my experience in South African jails and ANC camps abroad. Even now, despite the general terms in which I have chosen to speak, I feel exposed and distraught" (qtd. in Krog 236). Furthermore, Shane Graham explains how the TRC rendered the process of speaking agonizing for some survivors, stating this regarding the weight of a perpetrator's word versus that of a victim's: "When Commissioners decide that an applicant has made full disclosure and is therefore eligible for amnesty, they accept the perpetrator's version of events, even when it directly contradicts the evidence given by his victims" (12).

This raises several questions, namely how are these "wise Commissioners" (Dangor 156), as Lydia sardonically calls them, contributing to the country's healing process if they allot more

weight to the testimony of an amnesty applicant than that of a survivor's? Moreover, how are the victims who take notice of this supposed to trust the TRC and subsequently *want* to partake in its process? While the Commission's goal was to "facilitate national reconciliation and individual catharsis" (Frenkel 157), Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* emphasizes that certain kinds of pain could have been dealt with more successfully "outside of the TRC" (163). Lydia, whose anger and suffering have "hardened her into something impenetrable" (Dangor 13), finds psychological release from the past without the Commission. She does not oscillate between speech within the realm of the TRC and silence; instead, as I showcase further below, she firmly rejects the former and liberates herself, to an extent, on her own terms.

The intensity of Lydia's suffering reveals that her painful memories cannot be left in the past—they come home with her, much as she does not want them to. Drawing on the warnings of commentators Thembinkosi Goniwe and Pumla Dineo Gqola, Lucy Valerie Graham asserts that, "'post-apartheid' is a misnomer when it suggests a total rupture with apartheid" (9). Dangor's text reinforces this claim by continually underlining the lingering symptoms of the rape, namely that Lydia is invariably "cold and hard and unreachable" (84), so much so that her skin is "impervious to touch and her mind deaf to even [her husband's] most heartfelt pleading[s]" (13). Her justified inability to forget about the rape showcases that the cruelties of apartheid persistently push their way into the present. In a moment of profound distress, Silas recognizes that his wife has "never been the same since the night she was raped" and that, "somewhere inside of her that *other* Lydia was hiding" (Dangor 60; emphasis original), which underlines the vast internal change that has occurred. In an article that largely focuses on rape trauma syndrome, Yvette Abrahams notes that "the immediate psychological consequences of rape are a loss of self-respect and a concomitant loss of socialization" (9), which we can correlate to Lydia whom we know recoils every time someone attempts to get close to her. Her failure to exude warmth is alluded to on numerous occasions, though especially conspicuous in the following passage in which Michael mourns the person his mother used to be:

> When Mikey thinks of his mother, the word 'Mama' no longer comes to mind. Gone is the softness, the warmth of that word. It is no longer capable of absorbing him, the way it did when he was a child. […] There is a sharpness to her now, a sweetness of oranges, tangerines, he searches for the word – citrus! – that was not there when he snuggled into her as an infant, feeding on her breasts, or as a little boy, simply seeking love (139).

This excerpt points to the pronounced distance that now exists between Lydia and her loved ones, showcasing the extent to which the people in her immediate vicinity are affected by her suffering. In fact, Silas even cries out, during an explosive argument he has with Lydia at the outset of the novel, "it hurt me too" (13), adding, "yes, for fuck's sake, I went through it as much as you" (15). Thus, despite Lydia's unyielding "resolve never to dwell on the past, to avoid being seduced by imagined 'happier times'" (Dangor 115), she continues to be affected by the incident—as do her husband and son—which has facilitated an irrevocable change in her. As states Silas, "for a lot of people, it will never be over. For many, it will go on, for a while yet" (160), emphasizing, as was mentioned in the introductory section of my paper, that, for the characters in Dangor's novel, past and present are not separate entities. Silas *does* render Lydia's ability to move forward with her life more difficult by telling her about having run into her rapist whose actions, according to Michael, "represent an entire system of injustice" (Dangor 196). This displeases her profoundly, as is evidenced when she states, "you should have left Du Boise alone when you saw him, Silas, you should not have brought my rapist home" (123). Her assertion showcases a strong desire to leave the past behind due to its painful and traumatic nature. Borrowing from Desiree Hansson's work, Abrahams affirms that, "memory itself is traumatic" and that "the very act of remembering is likely to inflict further psychological scars" (10), which constitutes one of the chief reasons as to why Lydia does not want to emotionally engage with the events of the past, and consequently the Truth Commission.

Lydia's ability to find a modicum of closure beyond testimony highlights the limits of public tellings, emphasizing instead a healing that takes place in the immediate domain of

everyday life rather than the transcendent domain of national reconciliation. As was stated earlier, she does not testify at the hearings despite her husband's insistence that she do; rather, she terminates her relationship with Silas, with whom she cannot "rest peacefully" (123) and embarks on a solitary self-searching voyage that helps her heal. This is evidenced when, at the end of the novel, the narrator takes the time to focus on her newfound ability to laugh, adding that, "even Du Boise does not matter any more" (281). The significance of the latter line lies in that it showcases that Lydia's journey of convalescence has finally begun. A second passage that showcases this same idea is when the narrator asserts, looking at things from Silas' point of view, "now not every man would be a rapist to her" (267). He realizes this when he sees his wife—this would be the last time—being intimate with another man. This constitutes a significant moment as it demonstrates that Lydia has, to some degree, "found release" from her "captive demons" (267) of the past. Men are no longer adversaries but "potential companions" (Propst 94), which her physical engagement with the young man evinces. It further denotes that she has overcome one of the most prevalent symptoms of rape trauma syndrome, "transference." As explains Abrahams, "it is very common that the rape victim becomes afraid of all men, and thus transfers her feelings from the actual rapist to all men" (10). Jenny Petrak also points out that the "prolonged anger" that women experience "may be directed at the assailant, the courts, police, society or men" (27). Lydia ultimately transcends this taxing stage, which constitutes an immense feat in the life of a sexual violence survivor. Hence, whereas the exceptional event of testimony brings us out of everyday life, *Bitter Fruit* focuses on recovery within it. One of the issues with the TRC is that it aims to put rape trauma to rest, whereas Dangor's novel reveals that it cannot be. Read in this way, the time of testimony cannot be set by official venues, but must be part of everyday life in a survivor-centred, rather than commission-centred way. Attesting to this idea is one of the narrator's final lines, "times and distance, even this paltry distance, will help to free her" (281). This concluding statement underscores the importance of allowing someone to reflect upon the

events of their past in ways that go beyond the temporal constraints and pressure-laden environment of public testimonial venues such as the TRC.

5. Conclusion

One of this project's foremost goals was to elicit a generative discourse about the dangers that social narratives carry, and to illustrate that speaking about trauma does not constitute a simple task. Moreover, the project emphasized the notion that testimony is limited in its ability to grasp the truth of traumatic experiences. The prevalence of rape in South Africa and the lack of seriousness with which testimonies are oftentimes met makes continued interrogation of this problematic urgent, for the hostility toward victims and survivors constitutes an ongoing reality. The environment in which victims of abuse must set out to "regain their humanity" is still frequently isolating (Abrahams 11). My goal in talking about this troubling reality is not to "contribute to Afro-pessimism" (Graham 14), but instead to ensure that we continue to have conversations about a status quo that needs change. That said, a common feature of Molope and Dangor's novels is their lack of closure, which emphasizes the complexities of testimony and reconciliation. The open-endedness of both texts underscores the notion that healing does not come about easily and that they demand an ethical response from the reader, gesturing toward the ongoing work that needs to be done. I will conclude by stating that this project is one part of the conversation only, so future analyses might examine distinct responses to testimony and consider appropriate ways to alter these lived realities.

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