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For Nthabiseng Motsemme, coming to terms with women's painful testimonies at the TRC demanded an exploration of the meanings in their silences.

Analysing black women's stories at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) plunged me into a landscape of ideas I never dreamed I would encounter as a writer. It made me wrestle with ways of unifying concepts which I had come to believe were polarised opposites, or could be placed into neat hierarchies, such as it is the case with speech/silence.

Well-trained during my university years in this logical and disconnected Cartesian ideology of viewing the world, I thought myself well-equipped to explore these painful stories women shared during the TRC hearings. However, as I began reading, watching and listening to their testimonies, and my explorations deepened, it became clear that this way of thinking, of producing knowledge and therefore giving authority to what was meaningful, was profoundly limited and would not be able to express what I encountered in women's narrations. As Belinda Bozzoli had noted during sittings at the TRC hearings in Alexandra township, these recollections quickly became less to do with nation and more with "a wholeness of self, body, the family, home that had been breached in ways that left victims bereft of something precious".

I had reached the place we are all familiar with, where what has operated as a normative standard is deeply questioned. You are thrown into a journey

which involves the expansion of both imagination and self. Not only did reliable polarisations of ordering the world and its experiences collapse, but I had to ask more basic questions about this illusive concept called memory, and its meanings. What do South Africans consider legitimate and authoritative memories? Which dominant collective memories are shaping this young democracy? Why these specific memorialisations, and not others? What meanings do we attach to these collective stories? What analytic frameworks do we use to uncover their authentic meanings, if such a thing exists? What do we consider legitimate memory sites, and why? What kinds of socio-political contexts contribute to the formulation of particular meanings around specifically chosen memories? I have explored these questions and others in three works called: *Losing Life and Remaking Nation at the TRC*; *Black Women's Identities* and *The Mute Always Speak: on Women's Silences at the TRC*. I will share some of the themes I encountered when I listened attentively to women's stories.

In women's memories of apartheid horror, many expressed a sense of being diminished. What authors exploring women's stories under violent regimes have noted is, how they struggled, in the midst of everyday violence, to make and maintain homes and relationships; their ways to carry out the delicate work of restoring and repairing relation-

ships across generations; the multiple practices they invented to refigure the home as a place of normality and safety for children in the face of open violence; their failures and how this broke them. I discovered the silences expressed by women telling their stories of loss and pain during the 1980s, were part of a deeply evocative language articulating women's embodied courage and consciousness of their precarious positions as mothers, wives and sisters of often absent men – whose position of authority within the home had been fading in the 1980s, one of the worst moments of apartheid violence. This absence expanded the burden of women's roles as nurturers, providers and compassion-givers in the family and community.

Observing early TRC testimonies in 1996, Fiona Ross noted that those, who could not give voice to their past, were seen as "languageless, unable to communicate". However, several scholars have shown how narrations of extreme human rights violations leave many with an inability to speak about their felt pain and loss. Language fails us, as it becomes inadequate to the task of conveying the experience of systematic degradations and humiliations. I have found this unspeakability of suffering in examples of writings about holocaust memories, recollections of the India-Pakistan partition and in slave narratives. Nigerian feminist philosopher Bibi

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Bakare-Yusuf, drawing on phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, argues in her fascinating study on Jamaican dance hall culture that we need to be open to the idea that pain, suffering, humiliation and joy do not necessarily only find their expression through verbal language, but in a number of representations such as songs, dances, gestures, tears, smells, and even in silences.

However, to avoid misunderstanding, let me clearly state that I am fully aware of the negative manifestations of silence and silencing, which can be observed in instances of political repression, the suffocating silences of sexual violation and untold family secrets. My aim is not to romanticise silence and thus undermine the power of giving voice and exposing oppression. It is rather to remind us that under conditions of scarcity and imposed limits, those who are oppressed often generate new creative meanings for themselves around silences. Instead of being absent and voiceless, silences in circumstances of violence assume presence and speak volumes. Further, we are aware of how the language of grief and loss is usually located in silence. When we begin to invest meaning in women's silences, suddenly these narrations of remembered violence by township women are transformed to a platform through which they are also engaged in a process of sharing their *own* strategies of coping and tools of reinvention within the unjust world they daily occupied.

Through the reading of women's recollections of violence it became clear that not only silence should be invested with complex meanings, but also dreams, prayers, gestures, tears, sounds, smells, tastes and flesh. In these places oppressed women often housed their memories and thus grounded meanings of violating events. Many studies have also confirmed how the powerless often used unofficial vehicles to critique power.

At these points we come face-to-face with counter memories, or subaltern memories. Interestingly, exploring these neglected memory sites also serves to emphasise locations where women produce their own forms of authority and meanings about shared experiences of violence. What kind of memories do we encounter at these counter-memory spaces? Women release stories of pain, loss, despair and courage amid an overly strained everyday. For example, in the TRC testimonies they spoke about how they felt they had failed as mothers to protect their children from danger; how they longed for their children who had been arrested, crossed borders or disappeared with little hope of finding them; how they prayed for the safety of their loved ones; how they yearned to be loved by their men who were never there; how they wept over witnessing the disintegration of their homes and communities. However, these are not the stories building nations.

Heroism and sacrifice are the essences which make the stories of nations compelling and therefore worthwhile listening to. In these tales, tears, when shed, reflect sacrifice and not the loneliness of longing and the quiet depression of having lived through a context where your existence equalled negation; the feeling of constant exhaustion, when each moment and each death was and is a struggle to rise and remake yourself once again. Otherwise, who will take care of the children and recreate the everyday life? No, these are not the stories serving the platters of political menus, unless perhaps for the sake of instrumental nostalgia. There are only a few who are *really* interested to hear them.

It remains true that within the surge of interest in memory work in the public arena, we continue to search and immortalise memories in places we can



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visit. We therefore become tourists of our own pasts. If we refer to any dictionary, it will inform us with definitive authority that a memorial is a monument, statue, tomb and perhaps a gravestone. But this is not what I encountered in my exploration of black women's memories and the stories of lived violence they tell. In fact, this idea of "memory as an object" is enriched and extended. At times it led me to places of solace and generative healing for many of these mothers and grandmothers, where their will to endure daily humiliation partially lay.

All this has gracefully invited me to loosen what I believed to be the source of our individual and collective memories and where they rest. It has emphasised that, until we free our thinking from the idea of "memory as an object" and also embrace the notion that it includes embodied practices found in the person next to us in everyday life, we will be mostly telling our already privileged versions. Until then, we will continue to tell partial stories which exclude those who cannot find words to express their pain and/or their chronic socio-economic conditions which are voluntarily trapped within the Eurocentric bias asserting that the world is only knowable through words. We would have shrugged our shoulders and erased these places of memory simply because our current tools of comprehension cannot fully grasp their meanings.

Perhaps we fear the truths they might reveal and the horror we will have to face and collectively share as well. The irony is: by continuing to marginalise these memory sites, we participate in the practice of neglecting those very spaces which actually speak about women's lived experiences of the global conditions of violence.

While I am sitting on my bed and writing this essay, I continue to wonder whether silences, tears, dreams, prayers, songs, dances and other symbolic practices, which serve as critical memory sites for those who have been denied the occasion to tell their own stories, are of any value and have any meaning to the way we write stories about those who continue to occupy the fringes. I am now convinced that part of the reason why we continue to exclude and cast these interpretative sites as "feminised", and thus secondary to objective analysis, is simply because we lack creative languages to interact with them. In many ways we have delinked our political selves and lives from these concepts, which appeal more to our cultural and emotional selves.

But what has any of this to do with those involved in the media world? Firstly, particularly today, when people's freedoms remain under threat all over the world, the media cannot divorce themselves from contextualities and emotionalities which shape our diverse experiences and identities. Secondly, if we remain committed to creating spaces which facilitate the telling of democratic stories as connected as possible to individuals and communities' centres of meaning, then we will have to take the risk of leaping into places which have become unfamiliar for many of us who have been fed on the

restricted diet of the power of articulation and the text.

I want to call to our attention how this visual and textual bias in the western episteme is under great stress and threat. This is because it has proved to be limited, and thus inadequate to viewing the experiences of violence of the others in a comprehensive manner. Thirdly, Frantz Fanon's observation in his intuitive book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the struggle towards freedom is not merely about the attainment of political independence, but also lies in the ways we remake dignity for those whose experiences have been diminished and distorted, seems to me more relevant than ever, as South Africans celebrate 10 years of democratic rule. For we cannot afford to forget that totalitarian regimes thrive on telling stories that homogenise, exclude and label taboo multiple sources of truth. And we must remember, when we distil violence by taking out history, politics, culture, gender and class, that we will have succeeded in reducing it to fantastical caricatures.

In my eyes, ears and skin, this is not different from continuing the legacy of imperial accounts of the "savage object". Making efforts to link our stories to the everyday practices and fractured meanings of existence of individuals and communities is indeed a challenge, but also part of the unavoidable search of telling free and democratic stories.

Let me end by sharing a personal story, whose meaning I leave to you to consider:

Recently, under a bright moonlight, my deceased father's sister stood naked, as my mother, female cousins and myself washed her body. This is part of a cleansing ritual for widows, when they have finished their period of mourning. My cousins and I, new to the custom, laughed gingerly as my aunt shivered from the winter evening breeze. We all touched her body. Apparently, in the old days, this ritual was done in nearby rivers. But we are making do with an open deserted veld we have found to carry the ritual out. There was not much explaining of what was about to happen, only a few instructions from my mother: "Chop this special plant and mix it with water as this is what we will use to cleanse your aunt." – "No, we must leave everything here at the veld." – "Don't forget the matches as we must burn your aunt's mourning clothes out in the veld." This was a symbol that the individual and family are leaving behind a period of darkness. I submit, as a tradition of healing is being passed on to us by the older generation. But I am not sure whether I will ever pass it on to others in my lifetime.

However, right now I wonder if journalists had happened to be driving by that night and witnessed this performance, what would have been the first thought on their minds? African magic? A couple of witches? Or would they have marvelled at this moment as of an intergenerational healing memory being passed on between women? What meaning would you attach? I am still finding mine...

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