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THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN ACHMAT DANGOR'S *BITTER FRUIT*

ANA MILLER

One might argue that narratives in fiction may...involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery and the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving an at least plausible "feel" for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods.

Dominick LaCapra

Unless the enquiries of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] are extended, complicated and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future.

André Brink

The representation of personal and collective trauma in Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2003) disrupts the surface of reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa and works to foreground the complex and enduring ramifications of apartheid. The novel represents interacting layers of trauma in South Africa arising from structural and symbolic racial oppression and acts of extreme violence under the apartheid regime. *Bitter Fruit* casts doubt on the ability of universalized Eurocentric models of trauma (located within a specific history and set of cultural practices) to account for South African trauma without suppressing the heterogeneity of experiences and responses to trauma in that locale. Homogenizing accounts exclude the particular historical, social, cultural,

and personal contexts of trauma. Within postcolonial discourse, for example, Elleke Boehmer observes that there are “those among the once-colonised for whom the silences of history have not ended” (132). Boehmer pays particular attention to the marginalization of gender in male-authored postcolonial theory and the “silencing” of homosexuality in postcolonial and African writing (172). In a similar way, Ato Quayson emphasizes the need to articulate postcolonial experiences from “ex-centric” positions in order to include views that fall outside “the perspectives of sanctioned historical tellings of the nation” (192). *Bitter Fruit* suggests the importance of taking into account the specific context in which individual and collective traumas unfold by representing voices and experiences that cannot be subsumed into generalized models of trauma. The novel indicates ways in which gender, race, sexuality, class, age, religion, and language constitute and differentiate South African identities and experiences, past and present; but it focuses particularly on two ex-centric positions in the South African context. *Bitter Fruit* subverts Manichean representations that simplify South Africa’s racial problems in terms of black and white (see Wicomb and Kruger) by representing colored experiences. In focusing on the sexual (and racial) violence of Lydia’s rape, *Bitter Fruit* addresses a widely known but often unspoken area of experience in South Africa. The novel also draws attention to violence against homosexuals within the colored community as well as the wider homophobia in apartheid and post-apartheid society. *Bitter Fruit* suggests that many traumas remain unspoken and invisible, eluding the representation of a collective South African experience.

In the novel’s central narrative, the silenced memory of Lydia’s rape by a white policeman nineteen years earlier (which her husband Silas was forced to listen to) erupts into the post-apartheid present, forcing a confrontation with the suppressed traumatic past. Following the rape, Lydia and Silas have lived in a cold and non-communicative marriage, becoming increasingly isolated from each other as the years have gone by. The unspoken trauma overshadows their relationship and also affects their child Mikey, who is the unacknowledged product of Lydia’s rape. Mikey is initially unaware of the rape and his own embeddedness in this traumatic history. When he reads Lydia’s diary, he is forced to confront the fact that “he is the child of some murderous white man,...a boer,...who worked for the old system, *was* the old system” (131) and has to readdress his past and reassess the meaning of his life. When the buried trauma is unleashed after Silas’s encounter with Du Boise (Lydia’s rapist), the tentative familial bonds, already fraught and fragile, disintegrate completely until Lydia, Silas, and Mikey, living in absolute isolation, eventually go their separate ways. Lydia “knows” that Du Boise is the father, and Silas also suspects this, but this knowledge is never brought out into the open. These personal experiences of trauma take place against the backdrop of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The narrator does not provide external moral commentary, and the novel's use of free indirect discourse inhibits the reader's ability to draw simplified conclusions about trauma in South Africa. Kathy Mezei describes how free indirect discourse "plays upon binary oppositions" and "blurs and elides them," (Mezei 70) creating an "indeterminacy and instability" that "puts onus onto the reader" (72). This instability is magnified in *Bitter Fruit* through the use of a wide range of character-focalizers. One effect of this is to foreground the complexity of personal experiences of, and responses to, trauma. Free indirect discourse, written in the third person but incorporating the inner thoughts of each character-focalizer, creates utterances that, as Michael Peled Ginsberg states, "no one (not one) could have uttered" (qtd. in Mezei 71). In creating such impossible utterances, this and other literary forms may be able to articulate extra-factual, experiential, and emotional responses to traumatic historical processes that are difficult to communicate through "restricted documentary methods" (LaCapra 13). The novel's juxtaposition of perspectives enables an imaginative representation of the unique subjective experiences and responses of each character as they struggle to come to terms with the interconnected events in which they are variously positioned. This gives a "feel" for the subjective, intersubjective, and cultural dimensions of trauma and memory that factual accounts are less able to capture. It illustrates how the characters are caught up in historical and social processes that violently and destructively shape their lives, actions, and forms of self-perception. The behavior of the characters is often deeply destructive and unsympathetic, but superficial moral judgment is deferred as the reader is left to contemplate the effects of trauma on each character.

Bitter Fruit is a complex novel, and for reasons of space I am confining my discussion to three aspects. The first part of my inquiry focuses on Silas's "management" of the past in his role as negotiator between the various conflicting truths of the government and the TRC and how this complements the way he "manages" his own traumatic memories by suppressing them. I then consider Lydia's diametrically opposed reaction to the trauma of rape and argue that her silence can be read as an act of resistance against the appropriation of her personal trauma: Lydia refuses to allow her experience to be subsumed into institutional frameworks that deal with the past in superficial and problematic ways. Finally I discuss the novel's representation of collective trauma by focusing on colored experience and the characters' attitudes to the "new" South Africa.

The opening sentence of *Bitter Fruit* implies the ubiquity of apartheid violence—the "inevitability" of meeting an abuser from the past: "IT WAS INEVITABLE: One day Silas would run into someone from the past, someone who had been in a position of power and abused it." The text opens with Silas as focalizer, as he reacts to seeing "someone who had affected his life, not in the vague, rather grand way in which everybody had been affected, as people

said...but directly and brutally” (Dangor 3).¹ From the outset we get a sense of two different and distinct types of experience: the “vague, rather grand way in which everyone had been affected” and the specific traumas of those who had been affected “directly and brutally.” Silas recognizes that collective narratives are too “vague” and “grand” to describe his own personal experiences of the past. The word “grand” evokes the heroic accounts of the struggle against apartheid, and Silas suggests the lack of fit between these and direct and brutal experiences such as the rape at the center of *Bitter Fruit*’s narrative. The paradox is that Silas is more at home with vague and grand accounts of the past and is unable to face the trauma that has affected his life “directly and brutally.” Silas’s character epitomizes and dramatizes the conflict between these two types of memory. In his job as someone who negotiates between the conflicting versions of the “truth” raised by the “TRC commissioners, the old security people” (257) and the African National Congress (ANC), Silas symbolizes the political shaping of national memory, the compromise on which the new South Africa is based, and the slippery nature of truth.

But his public role is always in tension with his own personal experiences and the traumatic set of memories he tries obsessively to suppress:

He knew then, several years before he encountered Du Boise in a shopping mall, that Lydia really wanted to explore some hidden pain, perhaps not of her rape, but to journey through the darkness of the silent years that had ensued between them.

He was not capable of such an ordeal, he acknowledged. It would require an immersion in words he was not familiar with, words that did not seek to blur memory, to lessen the pain, but to sharpen all of these things. He was trained to find consensus, even if it meant not acknowledging the “truth” in all its unflattering nakedness.

Hell, he had an important job, liaising between the Ministry of Justice and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was his task to ensure that everyone concerned remained objective, the TRC’s supporters and its opponents, that they considered the law above all, and did not allow their emotions to sway them. What would happen if he broke his own golden rule and delved into the turmoil of memories that the events of those days would undoubtedly unleash? (63)

Here we get insight into the conflicting aspects of Silas’s character: he suppresses his perceptive, sensitive, and traumatized side beneath his pragmatic, rational, work-orientated side, through which he manages the past, encourages “objectivity,” and argues for a strict adherence to the law. He realizes that his job and the particular type of politically negotiated memory it represents requires a conciliatory and simplified notion of the truth, but he takes comfort in this kind of truth against “the turmoil of memories” associated with Lydia’s rape. His suppression of uncomfortable memories, truths, and emotions and his desire to remain “objective” are not completely separable from the TRC’s

own mediation of memory. Silas is aware of Lydia's trauma and the possibility that her "hidden pain" is connected not only to the rape but also to the silence that surrounds it and his own inability to face the "ordeal" of speaking about the rape and how it has affected them. The complexity of Lydia's personal responses to the rape, her need to explore not the facts of her rape but the enduring traumatic effects of it on her life, is different from and exceeds the TRC's project of uncovering the factual details of human rights abuses. As André Brink points out, the TRC's notion of truth is "equated with 'facts'" (30), and this can never tell the whole story. In *Bitter Fruit*, this focus on facts would not only obscure the complexity of Lydia's trauma, it would also fail to account for Silas's and Mikey's indirectly inflicted traumas. *Bitter Fruit* shows that the repercussions of one act of rape are not confined to Lydia but rebound across the family.

Silas suppresses unnerving memories by rewriting or rationalizing them away. Throughout the narrative, we see him consciously reconstructing his memories to write over the traumatic experiences that he is unable to face. He has a nightmare in which he is drowning while Mikey and Kate, Silas's friend, look on. In it, Mikey has "long flowing blond" hair like Du Boise's. Silas tries to rationalize away the knowledge contained within the dream that "*Mikey is not my son, not physically,*" a knowledge "that he rarely allowed to take shape in his mind" (91). When Lydia tells Silas what Du Boise called her while he raped her ("a nice wild half-kaffir cunt, a lekker wilde Boesman poes" [17]), Silas responds by physically grabbing and shaking her. He cannot deal with this kind of "immersion in words"—words that do not "seek to blur memory" and "lessen the pain but to sharpen all of these things" (63). Lydia reacts to Silas's silencing of her by dancing on glass to create a pain powerful enough to displace the "deeper unfathomable agony" (21) of her psychological pain. Elaine Scarry observes that without visible markers, somebody else's pain remains to the outsider "vaguely alarming yet unreal" (4). Lydia's dance is a way of communicating her pain, making it "fathomable," real, visible, and unavoidable—a pain that Silas cannot run away from.

Lydia's response to trauma is the mirror image of Silas's. She counters Silas's suppression of emotion and traumatic memory and rejects his way of dealing with the past as exemplified in his job. Lydia refuses to allow her personal trauma to be absorbed into familial, religious, and national narratives. She perceives the subsuming of her personal trauma into each of these frameworks as a denial of the specificity of her experience.

Lydia's rape is a racially and politically located act of sexual violence that is a specific act perpetrated as part of the apartheid system's endemic use of violence as a tool of terror and control. Lydia is raped as a colored woman, and she is told it is a punishment for being a "terrorist" (128). She herself was not part of the underground resistance movement, but her husband Silas secretly was. That Silas is forced to listen to the rape suggests that it is also directed

at him. The use of rape by repressive regimes as a tool of political power and control is, as Lydia says, “a ritual as ancient as history itself” (119). Rape in such circumstances is used not only to torture women for being “subversive”; it is also aimed at men and at causing disintegration within families and communities. The shame and stigma associated with rape make it an effective form of political torture. Lydia’s rape traumatizes her and also, in different ways, Silas and Mikey, a sequence that ultimately leads to the disintegration of their family.

Lydia displays some of the characteristic “rape-specific” traumatic responses identified by Jenny Petrak in “The Psychological Impact of Sexual Assault” (20). Petrak surveys research (based largely upon the experiences of US women) into the traumatic effects of rape. She points out that many individuals “experience prolonged anger” that “may be directed at the assailant, the courts, police, society or men” (27). Different women exhibit different emotional styles of response, one of which is the “controlled style” characterized by “feelings being masked...[a] calm and subdued” exterior and “little evidence of visible affect” (28). Some reports suggest long-term negative effects on familial and marital relations. Problems in sexual functioning are common and can persist for years.

Lydia’s memories of the rape frequently overwhelm her. Her trauma is not reducible to a set of facts; it is complex, subjective, and difficult to define. The rape constitutes a physical and linguistic violation of her selfhood: Du Boise’s words during the rape, his derogatory redefining of her as a “wild half-kaffir cunt” (17) there to be raped, intensifies the physical act. The enduring psychological repercussions of her rape and of bearing the child of rape interact with the interpersonal manifestations of trauma in her relationship with Silas and fuel Lydia’s deeply personal and unspoken trauma. In her diary, she writes that she “will recover from the physical act of rape,” but inside of her grows “a rapist’s seed” (126) and this will be more difficult to overcome. It is the psychological pain of this violation that really hurts, not the “mere brutalizing of her vagina,” (119) but the violation of “her womb with the horror of [Du Boise’s] seed.” This horror has fundamentally scarred Lydia, driving her “to deny herself the reality of her body, its earth, its power to conceive.” Lydia’s very sense of herself is shattered by the rape.

The effects of trauma on Lydia manifest themselves viscerally. She is initially unable to dissociate her newborn child from her rapist and thinks she can smell Du Boise on Mikey: the “stench [of] the premature decaying of a man who harboured some dreaded disease. A kind of cancer, she thought, something that would one day eat away at his core” (120). She is also unable to separate Silas from the rape and develops a coldness toward him following his reaction to the event. Lydia describes in her diary how she “crossed a divide” (128) when she was raped; but it is Silas’s reaction, his inability “to reach out and touch” her, his “icy unspoken revulsion,” that drives her “into a zone of

silence.” She sees Silas’s inability to touch her as “revulsion” to a contaminated object; he is more preoccupied with his own “affronted manhood” (129) than with her pain. Silas’s immediate reaction and his inability to face the ordeal of talking about the rape become part of Lydia’s trauma. But her hostility toward Silas is perhaps also connected to a deepening mistrust of men and the fact that he serves as a constant reminder of her rape.

“The memory of being raped” (119) overshadows Lydia’s sexuality. Mikey reflects on how he could always tell when his parents had “made love” because of “the intensity of the distance between them” and the contrast between Silas’s “satiation” and Lydia’s “emptiness” (140-41). Sex does not bring them together but drives them even further apart. Lydia’s inability to dissociate sex with her husband from the memory of rape is intensified when Du Boise reappears in their life, and Lydia becomes overwhelmed by vivid memories. She directs much of her pain and anger toward Silas, but this is often unarticulated and takes place internally: “you should not have brought my rapist home. I can’t rest peacefully with both of you around, your bodies, your smells, even your sounds have become all mixed up” (123). The reawakening of Lydia’s trauma makes sex indistinguishable from rape, her husband indistinguishable from her rapist. Du Boise is inside their house “of shadows” (156). What were once shadows have now become the terrifying and overwhelming presence of Lydia’s rape. She is only able to start disentangling her sexuality from the rape when she moves away from Silas, Mikey, and the constant reminders of her rape.

The representation of the silenced memory of Lydia’s rape suggests that the silencing and suppression of traumatic memory take place for complex reasons, some of which are sociologically and interpersonally imposed. Following Freud, many trauma theorists emphasize the repression of trauma and its belated effects due to “the unassimability of the event when it occurs” (Quayson 195). Dori Laub argues that the enormity of the experience means that “the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction” (57). *Bitter Fruit* suggests that the “unassimilability of the event” is not always, or only, due to the “malfunction” of the mind under severe trauma. Lydia registers the rape as a life-changing destructive event as it happens, but she feels unable to speak because of the people and the circumstances surrounding her. If external circumstances silence the traumatized subject or make him or her wary of speaking, trauma may remain unspoken because of the lack of “an addressable other” or an “empathic listener” (Laub 68). The lack of an addressable other intensifies Lydia’s trauma. The novel represents various possible responses to trauma: psychic repression, conscious suppression, and the silencing of trauma connected to the lack of an addressable other. While Silas represses the unbearable knowledge of his brother-in-law Alec’s presence at the rape and tries to suppress his own traumatic memories, Lydia does not repress her trauma but feels unable to speak it.

In her diary, Lydia gives her reasons for not speaking about the rape:

I cannot speak to Silas, he makes my pain his tragedy. In any case, I know that he doesn't want to speak about my being raped, he wants to suffer silently, wants me to be his accomplice in this act of denial. I also cannot speak to my mother and father. They too will want to take on my pain, make it theirs.... They will also demand of me a forgetful silence. Speaking about something heightens its reality, makes it unavoidable. This is not human nature, but the nature of "confession" that the Church has taught them. Confess your sins, even those committed against you—and is rape not a sin committed by both victim and perpetrator, at least according to man's gospel?—but confess it once only. There true salvation is to be found. In saying the unsayable, and then holding your peace for ever after. (127)

Lydia feels unable to speak because she thinks her trauma will be appropriated and silenced by those around her. She refuses to allow her deeply personal, intense pain to be managed, contained, or silenced by being absorbed into terms of dealing with trauma that she does not trust. Lydia's written private testimony indicates her rejection of what she envisages would be Silas's and her parents' way of dealing with her rape; she refuses to become an "accomplice" in either "act of denial." She will keep quiet, but she will not forget her rape or suffer with Silas in silence. She responds by directing her emotions and her pain inwards and by articulating her experiences to herself, on her own terms, the only terms she feels able to trust. After the rape, Lydia feels abandoned by God: she tries "to coax the voice of God back" (127) into her mind but finds that "He" has abandoned her. The ensuing mistrust of her religion and its inability to deal with rape prevents Lydia from talking to her parents. Lydia's reasons here do not quite tell the whole story; other things Lydia says and thinks in *Bitter Fruit* indicate that the problem of communication is also connected to the impossibility of adequately communicating how her trauma feels. But her reasons for silence remain powerful and important, and they indicate the significance of the context in which trauma can be spoken and the influence of the listener in determining its therapeutic value. Her silence is an act of rebellion against the appropriation of personal trauma that is directed initially at Silas, at Catholicism, and later at the TRC. In each of these cases, Lydia's refusal to speak is a refusal to allow her rape to be dealt with under the terms of "man's gospel" (127). The Catholic notion of confession implies an admittance of guilt which, for Lydia, equates the disclosure of rape with blame for being raped, and is an inadmissible framework for coming to terms with her trauma. Lydia cannot forget her rape or forgive her rapist by confessing the experience once and then forever holding her peace.

That Lydia feels unable to speak with Silas or her family, that she feels uncomfortable with Silas's attempt to contain and silence traumatic memories and with the Catholic principle of confession, suggests that speaking to the

TRC would only intensify the risks of speech, for the TRC introduces additional problems. Fiona Ross discusses how the TRC's depiction "in the popular imagination as a healing intervention" drew on three models of damage: South Africa and South Africans were likened to "wounded bodies," and truth telling was posited as a way of cleansing the unhealed wounds of human rights violations and the system of apartheid; the wounded South African psyche would be restored through the analysis of individual testimonies whereby "'recollection' was presumed to ensure 'non-repetition'" (12) of the past; and the TRC was also a Christian process of healing in which confession and contrition would pave the way for forgiveness and reconciliation. The TRC is based upon the presumption that testimony facilitates healing, reconciliation, and moving on from the past.² This suggestion of the therapeutic value of testimony is also a common assumption within trauma studies. But the specific context of articulation always determines the therapeutic potential of testimony. Ann Scott counters the uncritical celebration of testimony by some trauma theorists by pointing to the denial of testimony in relation to incest abuse. She emphasizes the need to analyze "what we can hear, what we are unable to hear, what kind of hearing and listening we are able to manage" (72). Similarly, Laub discusses how the absence of an "other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story" (68), an annihilation that can inaugurate "*a re-experiencing of the event itself*" (67).

Lydia, as we have seen, rejects the idea that speaking trauma is in itself therapeutic. In terms of the TRC, whereby testimony is spoken in a public context, additional problems are raised. Not only is there the risk of suppressing the complexities of personal experiences through the direction of testimony within the TRC's framework, but giving testimony in public can itself be a fraught and traumatic process. Ross points out that "people do not necessarily want their activities and experiences to be widely known" (2). Speaking in public about rape is even more fraught. Rape is widespread in contemporary South Africa, yet few cases are reported or prosecuted; and "the need for anonymity, or at least concealment of some testifiers, suggests that neither the threat of violence nor the stigma attached to rape has abated" (63). The novel explores an area of experience that for many women in South Africa remains difficult if not impossible to speak.

When Lydia is asked to speak at one of the special closed sessions in order to bring the "exploitation" of women "out into the open, to lance the last festering wound, to say something profoundly personal," she refuses because "nothing in any of their lives would change because of a public confession of pain suffered": Lydia again dismisses confession as a way of coming to terms with rape, of putting it in the past. The TRC reproduces the religious notions of forgiveness and forgetting that Lydia explicitly rejects; the Commission's notion that it is enough to speak the past once in order move on from it. No

one's trauma will be "undone" (156) by a public confession. Whether or not the special closed sessions are able to protect women against the shame associated with sexual violence in South Africa is brought into question by the fact that Lydia's rape will be made public against her will as part of Du Boise's plea for amnesty. *Bitter Fruit* remains skeptical about the cathartic potentiality of public testimony, particularly when it takes place in a national and political body aimed at reconciliation and drawing a line between the traumas of the past and the present.

If Silas evokes nationalized attempts to "manage" the past, Lydia opposes this "containment of history" (155). She does not allow her trauma to be appropriated for political ends. The TRC would "contain" and therefore suppress the magnitude and complexity of her experience by reducing it to a series of facts. She resists the idea that she should or can forget her trauma and "get on with life" (121), and she criticizes Silas's way of dealing with the past: "It was good to have a rule to live by, but how little his rule—if you make a law, then apply it, to the letter, there is no other way—had helped all those 'victims' who had told their stories before the Commission. The brave victims and the wise Commissioners, the virtue of both defined as if by divine decree" (155-56). Silas's obsession with the law helps him to manage his own traumatic past, but, as Lydia points out here, the law has not helped the victims who have told their stories at the TRC although, of course, it has protected many perpetrators from prosecution. Lydia calls into question the presumed "virtue" of the "wise Commissioners" (and the virtue of the Commission itself). What makes the Commissioners wise? Is it their ability or their role as interpreters of the various "truths" spoken? Is it their contribution to the national healing process? Lydia rejects the notion that the Commissioners' "wisdom" has any relationship to, or legitimacy in regard to, her experience. Her position in *Bitter Fruit* raises some important questions: Who has the power and who has the ability to interpret trauma? The person who has been traumatized or "wise" outside interpreters? How can an individual's trauma be translated to others, and what are the acceptable terms in which this can take place? As she tells Silas earlier in the novel, Archbishop Tutu has never "been fucked up his arse against his will" (16); therefore, he can never understand how it feels to be raped, tortured, and humiliated. Lydia, here and throughout *Bitter Fruit*, asserts the alterity of her traumatic experience—outsiders can never know or feel her pain. The imaginative insight we get into Lydia's thoughts suggests the psychological complexity and privacy of her experience: communicating what the trauma means to her in all its complexity is not something that can easily be done in any of the contexts that the novel represents. There is something about trauma that remains difficult to articulate and perhaps impossible to communicate to outsiders. However, Lydia's choice to see a counselor indicates the potentially therapeutic value of speech: a safe private space could allow her to explore her deeply personal experience.

These questions, and others raised in *Bitter Fruit*, are important to consider in relation to the wider study and treatment of trauma. The novel not only represents the damaging psychological effects of repressed and silenced trauma, but it also raises numerous difficulties that surround the articulation and communication of trauma. It problematizes oversimplified, generalized, and politicized notions of healing and foregrounds the need to pay attention to the individual contexts of traumatization. The context in which trauma is spoken, whether or not it is heard properly, and what conclusions are drawn from it (by whom and for what reasons) all affect and often constrain the (therapeutic) power of testimony.

Although the novel focuses on personal traumas, these are set against the background of collective traumatic experiences. Laura Brown discusses how the traditional understanding of trauma as connected to “*an event outside the range of human experience*” (100)³ excludes the “insidious” traumas “that are not necessarily overtly violent...[but] that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107).⁴ Although Brown is discussing sexual violence against women, her identification of the need to recognize “as traumatic stressors all of those everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events that are so often the sources of psychic pain” (108) is relevant to what the novel suggests about the collective traumas of apartheid. *Bitter Fruit* intimates that “insidious” traumas pervade contemporary (non-white) South African experiences. It also explores the structural and economic legacies that the apartheid past has bequeathed to the post-apartheid present, which manifests itself in the characters’ pessimism in regards to the “new” South Africa. There is the sense that apartheid racial categorizations continue to haunt the present, as we see in the colored characters’ internalization of the racial gaze.

The new democratic South African Constitution and the TRC were products of a negotiated settlement with the apartheid regime; both were “co-written by the oppressed and the oppressors” (Fagan 261). The ensuing compromise limited the ANC’s constitutional ability to dismantle the economic and social legacy of apartheid and set substantial limits to the legal opportunities to prosecute against apartheid crimes. Each of the main characters is cynical about this compromise at the heart of the new South Africa. Michael observes how the “bright hopes and burning ideals” of the struggle made way for “an ordinariness” that made South Africa like any other nation, pragmatic and bureaucratic, selling out its ideals and becoming like other liberal-democratic nations (168).⁵ Even Silas, the character who most identifies with the new South Africa, feels uncomfortable about the direction it has taken and “increasingly summon[s] up happier times, epochs of greater clarity” (164). Silas’s nostalgia for the apartheid past indicates his discomfort with the new system and his own part in it: “Being in government is different from fighting for freedom. Things have to be managed now” (171). Members of the new government have “to make decisions that accord not with their own wishes but with the ‘needs of

the country,”” needs that “make demands on their personal principles” (165). The novel suggests that apartheid has left an enduring legacy that continues to exert its influence; the old geographical racial and power divisions still abound even if some middle-class black and colored people have moved into the government and the suburbs. In the white suburb where Silas’s white colleague Julian lives, for example, “every black male” remains “a suspect,” a potential robber, carjacker, or rapist (255). Alec is cynical about the new South Africa and its government. He reflects bitterly on the state of post-apartheid society: “Law and order, it’s the joke that whites sold us. Gave us the government, kept the money. Now we police ourselves. Look at the high walls and the barbed wire. Just to protect the misery we had all along. No wonder the crime rate’s going through the roof” (85). Alec sees South Africa’s “transformation” as a “joke” because the changes have been too superficial. The government does not have the constitutional power to redistribute wealth or to address the massive inequalities that apartheid has bequeathed to post-apartheid South Africa. White privilege and black destitution (for the majority) remain entrenched; the upsurge in crime does not come out of nowhere.

Bitter Fruit also illustrates the enduring influence of colonial and apartheid discourses of race and miscegenation on the South African present, in particular how these have been internalized. Each character sees through the lens of race, through his or her particular (generally colored) racial subjectivity. The novel explores some of the psychological effects of having mixed racial and religious origins in a society that associates miscegenation with “concupiscence” and “degeneracy” (Wicomb 91). Colored people bear the “marked pigmentation of miscegenation” (93); it is a mark that obsesses many of the characters in the novel. The novel touches upon the shame associated with miscegenation, most explicitly in the narrative that Imam Moulana Ismail tells to Michael about the rape of Silas’s father’s sister Hajera in India by a British colonial lieutenant. This narrative links the colonial histories of India and South Africa through the racial and sexual violence of rape in both settings. After being raped and becoming pregnant, Hajera is sent away to have the baby in the hope of lessening the family’s shame of having “a soldier’s whore” for a daughter; the infant might bear the marks of her shame—the “tell-tale blond hair and blue eyes” (200). The shame associated with inheriting the unwanted genes and appearance of the white colonizer is echoed in Silas’s nightmare in which Mikey/Michael has long blond hair like Du Boise’s. Mikey’s uninvited birthright haunts the family and is experienced as traumatic by Mikey, Lydia, and Silas.

Exotic eroticism pervades both the way that colored people are gazed upon and the ways that they perceive themselves. Silas is hypnotized by Mikey’s friend Vanu and her “dirty honey” beauty—“Beauty honed on the same bastard whetstone as” his own (222). Kate, who is white, is mesmerized by Mikey’s sensuous and “sinister” (71) beauty; she sees him as “a nimble animal, not

fully grown” (79). Her fascination with his animalized beauty evokes the racist colonial gaze. But this gaze has also been internalized and is perpetuated by the colored characters. When Silas fondly recalls the “legend” of his sexual “prowess” (following his encounter with Frances, the Chinese girl rumored to have a “golden sideways poes”), he is endowed with “the gift” of masculine virility for “conquer[ing] a ‘left-to-right Gong poes,’ a bushie lightie, a fucken moegoe and weakling in everything but sex” (104). The macho “conquering” of the despised but attractive and exotic racial female other indicates the pervasiveness and eroticization of racial differences within the non-white community as well as the internalization of racial stereotypes. The “bushie lightie”—despised in everything but sex—echoes the wider denigration and sexualization of non-whites within apartheid (and also post-apartheid) society. Indeed, Silas also refers to himself as “bastardized” (101). Throughout *Bitter Fruit*, colored appearances are represented as beautiful, but the beauty is tainted, “dirty,” and always racialized.

Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy suggest that living between cultures and having to reconcile different and conflicting pasts may also “be constitutive of trauma itself” (7). Many of the characters in *Bitter Fruit* feel a lack of belonging and miss a sense of identity. The colored characters are “all twisted up inside” (86) as they negotiate conflicting racial and religious heritages and struggle to fit in anywhere. The feeling of not being white enough before apartheid and not being black enough after is articulated several times in the novel. Silas, who fought against apartheid, resents the idea that all of a sudden he is not black enough, and he dreams of moving to Mauritius where he imagines that he would be able to live “at home among his bastard kind” (148). Vanu expresses anger at her and Michael’s mixed heritage and subsequent lack of belonging: “Why don’t they marry their own kind?...That way, they won’t have to *discover*, years after they’ve brought children into the world, that they’re culturally incompatible, and the children won’t have to suffer” (164).

Wicomb discusses the “current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category” (92) as well as the resurgence of the term “*Coloured*,” once rejected in favor of the term “*black*” to indicate the “rejection of apartheid nomenclature as well as inclusion in the national liberation movement” (93). The novel explicitly refutes the idea that “colored” can be understood as a pure racial category by illustrating the (often traumatic) racial, religious, and cultural hybridity that constitutes the colored subject. Although *Bitter Fruit* suggests certain similarities in colored experience, it also illustrates division and fragmentation. Silas reflects on his ultimate incompatibility with Lydia: “we were not necessarily the same, just because we were both coloured;...we were not necessarily compatible, just because we both came from some kind of bastard strain. We were different” (107). In *Bitter Fruit*, the term “black” is used to describe both non-white and—at other times—black South Africans. The first use suggests the shared history of disenfranchisement of all non-whites

under apartheid as well as the participation of colored people in the anti-apartheid resistance whereas the other use indicates differences between black and colored experiences under, and responses to, apartheid. *Bitter Fruit* hints at the shame of colored (often coerced) complicity during apartheid but also depicts colored trauma, resistance, and animosity toward apartheid, holding these positions in tension to ward off any facile solution of this ambiguity.

The bitter fruit of the title plays on the notion of antecedents; the past produces the future. We see the bitter fruits of one brutal act and the bitter fruit that is apartheid's legacy. Contrary to the idea that the TRC "was in its own way a trauma recovery center" (LaCapra 43), *Bitter Fruit* raises questions about the TRC's ability to recover and recuperate the massive personal and collective traumas of South Africa's past. As my analysis has endeavored to demonstrate, the novel suggests that the heterogeneous traumas of apartheid exceed and cannot be "contained" by the TRC's national narrative of healing without being submerged and distorted beneath its particular "framing" of the "truth."

In representing individual and "ex-centric" experiences of trauma, the novel foregrounds the heterogeneity of traumatic experiences within the South African context. It problematizes the ability of homogenizing accounts of trauma to account for the specificity and heterogeneity of experiences of, and responses to, trauma. It suggests the need to contextualize trauma, to examine each experience as it is embedded in a particular historical, geographic, social, cultural, and personal history. In doing this, it suggests the limits of theoretical models in describing and explaining trauma: individual experiences will never quite fit attempts to place them within a model, particularly when the model is restricted. Our models for understanding trauma need to be open and malleable, necessarily incomplete and in process.

This is perhaps where literature can play a role. To return to the LaCapra epigraph, perhaps literature can provide "an at least plausible 'feel' for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods" (13). Literature can individualize and differentiate generalized experiences to foreground heterogeneity, complexity, and ambiguity. By representing trauma through an imaginative insight into the inner thought processes of each character, *Bitter Fruit* powerfully suggests the existence of countless unspoken and invisible traumas that exist off the narrative radar, outside of institutional, national, and collective accounts of the past.

NOTES

¹ Hereafter the page numbers will refer to *Bitter Fruit* unless otherwise indicated.

² For critical discussions of some of these presumptions, see Ross and Holiday.

³ This is a quotation from the definition given in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1987).

⁴ The concept of insidious trauma is developed by Brown's colleague Maria Root.

⁵ Mikey renames himself Michael about half-way through *Bitter Fruit*. Shortly after he finds out that he is the child of rape, he rejects the "oxymoron" (163) Mikey and calls himself the more formal Michael.

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