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# The Blanket of Reconciliation in South Africa

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## *The Blanket of Reconciliation in South Africa*

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The National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa presents each year an astonishing proliferation of theatre, dance, music, and visual and performance art--so much, in fact, that it is one of largest arts festivals in the world. Since the National Arts Festival presents primarily South African work, it provides a revealing national barometer by which to measure the contemporary climate and the winds of change. In the year 2011--seventeen years into the country's democracy and fifteen years after the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began its hearings--the festival's overall patronage broke records with over 200,000 in attendance, signifying a healthy support for the arts in the new South Africa. Yet in terms of artistic quality, indicators were less decisive. Some saw signs of cultural stagnation, evidence

that a deadening weather system of “reconciliation” had set in like a low-lying and persistent cloud cover—stultifying, enervating, persistent.

Festival chairperson Jay Pather said in a newspaper interview, "I am finding work of good substance and quality, but it is interesting that there appears a lot less risk-taking, less work on the edge or jumping off the edge with an idiosyncratic, singular vision that would keep us [as audiences and a country] moving forward” (Tolsi 2011). Pather singled out a "preoccupation with the reconciliation project" as a culprit, for he said works tackling this theme were “lacking in a certain criticality.” Perhaps the underlying problem is that "artists want to reconcile quickly," Pather speculated. Or perhaps the problem is that reconciliation doesn't make for dynamic theatre: drama, of course, depends upon conflict.

For a decade and a half, the reconciliation project has indeed been a dominant artistic preoccupation in South Africa. Theatrical productions that received widespread attention include Jane Taylor and the Handspring Puppet Company's Ubu and the Truth Commission, Bobby Rodwell and Lesego Rampolokeng's The Story I Am about to Tell, John Kani's Nothing But the Truth, Yael Farber's MoLoRa, and the Colonnades Theater Lab and Michael Lessac's Truth in Translation. Plays that more obliquely reference the truth commission but nevertheless are rooted in TRC project of confrontation, reckoning, and reconciliation include Laura Foot Newton's Reach and Craig Higginson's Dream of the Dog. With a few notable exceptions, such as Ubu and the Truth Commission and MaLoRa, many of the theatrical works about reconciliation have circumscribed stories of apartheid-era violence within conventional stylistic modes, using proscenium framing, realistic staging techniques, three-dimensional character development, linear plots, quotidian dialogue, and even box sets. One wonders if the lack of dynamism and

risk might be due to choices about style and form rather than the thematic content of reconciliation per se.

There is no doubt that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought into the public domain a vast repository of stories that deserve attention, analysis, and artistic exploration. And there is no reason why those stories, in and of themselves, couldn't lead to work that "jumps off the edge," as Pather hopes. Yet the medium and style by which such stories are told may be blunting their impact, smothering with too-ready resolutions, safe deferrals, and problematic omissions. "I can only guess that it is our lack of really coming to terms with the paradoxes of the reconciliation project at this time," says Jay Pather, "and how we shift our form and challenge our audiences in a way that really leaves us devastated and deeply moved. The skill and substance is in place; what is missing are the moments of insight that really catapult us into a consideration of issues that we would not normally confront." What are those paradoxes of the reconciliation project? What might be the issues that South Africans would not normally confront but that demand confrontation? By what styles, genres, and aesthetics might that work take form?

One of the key criticisms of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the extent to which it personalized and individualized violence rather than treating apartheid itself as a systemic perpetrator of gross violations of human rights. Larger structural forces were reduced within the TRC process to personal narratives. Heroes and villains emerged during the public hearings, as did a chorus of secondary witnesses in the form of the general public who attended open hearings between 1996-1998. They commented, gestured, sang, wept and even at times danced. But the individuation of stories of violence created distortions, and those distortions continue to warp. The TRC reparation payments from the South African government,

paltry as they were, went to individuals rather than mandating, for instance, the provision of infrastructure such as housing, water, sanitation, schools, safety, roads, and electricity that communities had been systematically denied for decades. The apartheid legacy of gross material inequalities for the majority--widespread poverty and lack of access to proper shelter and services--are still very much the struggles of today.

Many would fault the TRC itself for creating a foundation for the new democracy that appeared to repair personal violence but left deep structural violence intact. One of the victims of gross violations of human rights who testified before the TRC was Father Michael Lapsley. He told the commission about his experience being maimed by a parcel bomb, a traumatic event that blew off his hands, shattered his eardrums and damaged his eyes and skin. Lapsley today does activist work through his Healing of Memories project in Cape Town. In his public lectures, Father Lapsley talks about forgiveness in relation to what he calls "bicycle theology":

Bicycle theology is when I come and steal your bicycle. Six months later I come back to you and admit that I am the one who stole your bike. "I am very sorry I stole your bike. Please will you forgive me?" Because you are a Christian, you say: "Yes, I do forgive you." Of course, I keep the bike. (Lapsley 2010)

Theatrical stories about the TRC often bask in the glow of dramatic moments of confession, reckoning, and forgiveness. But they less routinely tell the story of the "bike." Who is enjoying the stolen apartheid possessions today? How is a long history of dispossession in South Africa still being perpetuated? What are the contemporary complicities in reconciliation's incomplete project? Even if a necessary national confrontation is being repressed or deferred, artists may help us glimpse into what is simmering under the surface. This is perhaps the arena in which Pather hopes artists will do their most daring, urgent and necessary work.

Sindiwe Magona's 1998 novel Mother to Mother is a reconciliation narrative that, as several critics have noted, avoids the genre's typical pitfalls. Mother to Mother is a fictionalized correspondence from the mother of a killer to his victim's mother. Based upon the true and infamous story of American Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl who was killed by an angry mob in the black township of Guguletu in 1993, Mother to Mother is both an extended epistle and a lament. The novel shifts our focus from victim to killer, and more precisely from the killer to his mother, Mandisa. It deftly modulates between a single episode of violence and a larger history of systemic violence that spans over Mandisa's lifetime and, before that, over generations and centuries.

Through the novel, the angry, teeming mass that descended upon Amy Biehl that August day in 1993 with rocks, fists and knives appears, like furies from a Greek tragedy, propelled by a need for vengeance for the past murders of their kin. So compelling is the force of their fury that it mattered little that the target of the mob's rage was innocent or that she was not even South African. As Mandisa says at the novel's conclusion, "My son was only an agent, executing the long-simmering dark desires of his race. Burning hatred for the oppressor possessed his being. It saw through his eyes; walked with his feet and wielded the knife that tore mercilessly into her flesh. The resentment of three hundred years plugged his ears; deaf to her pitiful entreaties (201)." Meg Samuelson reads Mandisa as performing an act of witnessing that connects the individual testimony of one woman with the fate of an entire community. Likewise, Shane Graham argues that "Mandisa and several generations of her family play out in microcosm the private dramas and traumas of millions of black Americans under apartheid: forced removal and dispossession, manual labor in white homes, and being subjected to a spatial infrastructure designed to confine and control black bodies" (77). The core principle of ubuntu that animated

the TRC process--the Zulu concept that a person is a person through other people--is presented in Mother to Mother in reverse: we see how a person becomes less than human through the inhumanity of other people.

The novel begins abruptly, “My son killed your daughter” (1)--a line that is arresting in its brevity and directness confronts us with the second person address. Through this beginning, Magona transforms what could have been the story’s climax into prelude, or rather—as we eventually learn—into aftermath. What happened the day of Amy Biehl’s murder is a structuring device of the novel: the narrator, Mandisa, imagines how Amy got dressed that morning, how she bid farewell to her friends at the University of Western Cape on the last day of her stay in South Africa, how she came to drive her friends to their home in the township of Guguletu where, as a white woman in a car stuck in traffic, Biehl stood out and became a target for an angry mob of youths to whom she was just a white woman, a boer, one of the settlers who deserved “one bullet.” Threaded throughout the novel is also Mandisa’s experience of that day: how she left the house that morning struggling to get her three children fed as she rushed off to a job as a domestic servant for a white family in the city, a working life that had, from the earliest years of her children’s life, prevented her from mothering them as she would have wished.

But while the events the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1993 structure Mandisa’s story, they are not its epicenter but rather a frame. And what we see through that frame is far more expansive. We travel the breadth of Mandisa’s life’s journey and that of her people stretching back to the Xhosa cattle killing of 1856. We also are invited to imagine other journeys: Mandisa asks how it came to be that a young, idealistic American college student was in Guguletu that day: “What was she doing here, your daughter?” (48). What would have made her come to Guguletu, “this accursed, God-forsaken place,” a township so hostile and inhabitable that any reasonable person with a



choice would not set foot there? In the very next paragraph Mandisa contrasts Biehl's journey with her own arrival in Guguletu:

As for myself, I came to Guguletu borne by a whirlwind . . . perched on a precarious leaf balking a tornado . . . a violent scattering of black people, a dispersal of the government's making. So great was the upheaval, more than three decades later, my people are still reeling from it.

Good intentions and conscious decisions brought Amy Biehl to Guguletu in 1993. Three decades earlier, whirlwinds and the tornados of the white apartheid state blew Mandisa and her people there. Choice was never part of the journey.

The concision of Magona's narrative is its greatest strength. This is a tale told with searing economy, breathtaking directness, and mercurial shifts in temporality. The novel could potentially be a compelling one-person play. Therefore it was particularly enticing to hear in 2009 that Mother to Mother was being adapted for the stage. The show premiered at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town in 2009, with a script by Sindiwe Magona and directed by Janice Honeyman. What I wish to consider briefly here are some of the notable artistic choices in the adaptation process and how these impacted the creative work. These choices exemplify some of the problems of the reconciliation narrative as it has come to be promulgated on South Africa's contemporary stages.

While the novel begins, "My son killed your daughter," the play's point of entry is more circuitous. We first hear a piano playing jazz modulations evocative of Cape Town musician Abdullah Ibrahim. Upstage there is a window through which images of quotidian life in the townships are projected: windows with security bars, exteriors of houses painted in bright colors, a kitchen table with food, a boy at dusk, goats crossing the road, a woman tending a boiling pot

outdoors. Lights gradually come up on Mandisa (played by Thembi Mtshali-Jones) as she sits at her kitchen table before a lit candle. She hums and then sings, “Got to know my heart. You know I’m a mother, with a mother’s heart. The shame weighs heavy on my shoulders.” When the music ends, Mandisa says, “Oh God. Where will I start?” She delivers a monologue addressed only to herself—not to Amy’s mother or to the audience. She asks, “How will I open my mouth before her sorrowing eyes? I am shaking like a leaf. I can’t help thinking that she is without her daughter because of my son, because of me.” Rather than leap, as the novel does, into describing the recriminations Mandisa must face from her community because her son is a murderer (“People look at me as though I did it”), the theatrical adaptation begins with hesitation. However, the novel showed no such hesitation: “Let me say out plain, I was not surprised that my son killed your daughter. That is not to say I was pleased. It is not right to kill. But, you have to understand my son” (1). And in many ways, the whole point of the novel is to help us understand her son. But it is also about helping us to understand Mandisa.

In the novel, we learn about Mandisa’s family’s life when she was a girl in Blouvlei, prior to the time her entire community was forcibly removed through apartheid’s insidious Group Areas Act. Mandisa tells how news of the planned forced exodus came from the sky: an airplane scattered handbills announcing the date of eviction, epistles from the State. Relocation tore asunder communities and families. This tragedy of dispossession was followed by many others. As a teenager, Mandisa was evicted from her nuclear family when her own blossoming sexuality proved too threatening to the patriarchal order. An unexpected premarital pregnancy, a conception that happened without sexual penetration, ended whatever aspirations Mandisa might have had for her life. The seed that climbed up into her womb was Mxolisi, the boy who “killed

your daughter.” And when Mxolisi killed Amy Biehl, Mandisa was further dispossessed. To her community, she became the mother of Satan (115).

In the novel’s preface, Magona describes the real life murder of Amy Biehl as the provocation for her story, however Amy Biehl is never directly named in the novel. Her murder is a catalyst for the tale, not its focus. The novel Mother to Mother is about the escalation of traumas, the cascade of violence and injustice experienced both by Mandisa and Mxolisi. A primal site of Mxolisi’s trauma is a murder he witnessed—and indirectly caused—as a young child. Older boys from his compound were being chased by the police, and in total innocence, Mxolisi pointed out to the police their hiding spot. The police then shot the boys dead, right in front of the child Mxolisi. After that, he stopped speaking for two years. As Mandisa explains, the circumstances of Mxolisi’s brief life meant that by the time of that fateful day in 1993 when he killed a young stranger on the streets of Guguletu, he had become the “blind but sharpened arrow of the wrath of his race” (210).

It is, therefore, especially notable that in the theatrical adaptation of Mother to Mother, we learn precious little about Mxolisi. Crucial details of his life that are so central to the novel are excised entirely. Instead Amy Biehl emerges as a prominent character, especially through the scenography. Her image is projected several times on the screen through the upstage window, with mournful music playing and a slow motion zoom inviting us to dwell on the tragedy of her loss. The play becomes an elegy for Amy Biehl, this bright, well-intentioned American student from Stanford who only came to South Africa to do good and, tragically, was killed by an angry mob the very day before she was to return to her homeland. By favoring the story of the murder, featuring often an image of the victim, and marginalizing the life history of Mandisa and Mxolisi, the theatrical adaptation of Mother to Mother blunts the real power of this extraordinary

novel. Remaining behind the safety of the fourth wall, the play does not breach or even threaten the separation of between the actor and the audience, or between the past the play narrates and the present in which the audience lives. How much more theatrically potent it would have been to begin the play, as does the novel, with the line: “My son killed your daughter.” No candles, no singing, no projections. Just an unadorned, lean, five-word sentence delivered directly to the audience. In a South African present where those with access to live theatre still are overwhelmingly those of a privileged minority, such a sentence could potentially challenge audiences to consider more deeply the paradoxes of the reconciliation project. Such a beginning could potentially launch a play that, like the novel, would lead audiences to reflect upon the systemic, structural inequalities that transformed ubuntu—humaneness--into its antithesis: inhumanity. The potential for such a play resides in this novel. But for the potential to be realized, it may require artists to throw off the blanket of a reconciliation narrative that presumes reconciliation has been completed. Those stolen bikes are still out there.

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