Narrating Our Healing - Perspectives on Working Through Trauma

(Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007)
Chris N van der Merwe and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

Cornelius Thomas[*]
Director, National Heritage
and Cultural Studies Centre
University of Fort Hare

The book, *Narrating Our Healing – Perspectives on Working Through Trauma* – offers a brief foray, 106 pages making up five chapters, into South Africa's violent recent past which spawned a plethora of perpetrators and victims of gross human rights violations. The authors (Van der Merwe and Gododo-Madikizela) posit, in this context, that narration, the telling of stories, is essential for South Africa, as a nation, to heal itself.

Their position is that stories are not only told but also lived. That is true. But then one must immediately ask the question what is lived when the story is told: life itself or an imaginative or even imaginary reconstruction of life?

In their opening gambit, the authors put it that "Trauma defies language; it resists being communicated." They invoke Primo Levi, who referring to the Holocaust, which he had survived, said "Our language lack words to express this offence". Here one is reminded of Joseph Conrad's apt admonition, "Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality." But the authors are more hopeful and argue that only through language (words) can form be culled from chaos and can the process of healing commence. The task at hand, of all and of this book, then, is to find ways to tell stories meaningfully. There is more to this process than the meaning Viktor Frankl seeks (in *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1946), they argue. They see narrative as restoring (or providing) structure, imagining new possibilities (beyond hatred and anger), and as healing a divided society by moving from the specific to the universal.

Chapter 3, "Searching for Closure: The Crying Voice", anchors and indeed centres the book. Here the authors ask of the reader to listen with empathy to the "crying voice", because, they assert, individual and national healing is everyone's responsibility – an admirable if unrealistic request. They acknowledge that sometimes wounds do not heal, but state that the voice of the person in pain should not be stilled. It should be acknowledged, dealt with, and then put to cathartic uses. Specifically, this chapter concerns the pain brought by a lack of closure. Ernestina Simelane, a grieving mother, has not found her daughter Nokuthula who had disappeared during the heady days of 1980s South Africa. That her daughter's body has not been found and returned is exacerbated by the uncertainty about her (daughter's) role at that time – was she a freedom fighter or a collaborator? Trauma here, the authors assert, cannot, for the absence of certainty, can only with extreme difficulty be turned into narrative. This scenario speaks to a wider SA problematique – that much of what led to trauma was started by *impimpi* (informers) and collaborators. It was not always a clear cut case of white perpetrators and black victims. The layer in between, wherein is found the shady machinations of informers, has not been addressed yet. So for victims to find healing through narration, the story would have to be fleshed out. Some perpetrators must come forward still or must be asked by the victims to come clear. This leads us, albeit tangentially, to necklace murderers. If the national healing Van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela clearly strive for were to take place, both the perpetrators of necklace murderers and victims, especially the latter, must emerge from under the crushing weight of political deference and correctness. These aspects the authors do not address; but here too the crying voice must be allowed to be heard. Just as Nokuthula's story could be constructed, albeit with some stretch, from relics held by the mother, other stories, inhabited by unknown villains, can similarly be put together. Such reconstructed and indeed re-imagined stories must of course be accepted as such.

They end this chapter (51) by putting it that "Forgiveness allows people to have a new relationship with their trauma; it is a liberating act, a choice for freedom" and that "The freedom from being captive to anger and hatred as a result of the trauma liberates people to embark on a new journey of healing." Excellent.

The chapter next chapter, on "Literary Narratives and Trauma", uses a translated text by an Auschwitz survivor, Charlotte Delbo, who cites moving examples of trauma and shows that memories emerge in fragments, as I do

in *Tangling the Lion's Tale* (Thomas, 2007), a narration of the police work of one Donald Card. To the credit of the authors it must be said that they accept such fragmentary evidence as useful.

The Theatre of Violence (Foster, Haupt, and De Beer, 2005) shows that there are different kinds of violence, including "horizontal violence within black communities" and recollections of such stories; *Tangling the Lion's Tale* again shows that stories are often constructed from faulty memory. Honest reconstructions are therefore called for if true healing is to take place.

I found the final chapter peculiar. Here the text of JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is generalized. And it doesn't work for me. Using a white woman victim's trauma to arrive at understanding, narration, and belated atonement is rather inapt and it is far-fetched. Forgiving the rapist because he had, according to Lucy (or is it according to Coetzee?), committed the deed to avenge some accretion of historical wrongs, are clearly questionable. There is no "innocent scapegoat" here, only the perpetrator and the victim of a heinous crime. This is not forgiveness leading to reconstruction and personal and national healing; this is cardboard character bleeding heart liberal "understanding", false magnanimity, and incredible and imagined self-sacrifice. Annie Gagiano in a review of *Narrating* for LitNet suggests that Bessie Head's novel *A Question of Power* offers a richer case for the study of trauma and working through it. I agree, but add that Head's own story as related by Gilian Stead Eilersen (1995, 2007) offers an even better case study of trauma. Head's story shows that trauma is not simply a white perpetrator-black victim affair. Often, as in Bessie's case, the violence of racism is inflicted by both white and black.

If the authors intend this study to reach beyond the particular cases studies to make a general point, I fear they might fail. The need for healing in South Africa stems from a much wider (horizontal) and deeper (vertical) experience than the few stories they relate. In fact, most South Africans have discarded the painful baggage of the past and are right now engaged in the pursuit of happiness. What to do with them?

The text acknowledges that we come to "the table of dialogue" with different kinds of trauma. And the answer to this, for the authors, is story-telling, or to "be bound by human sharing, by human moments that connect us". The authors fear what will become to individuals if they don't work through their trauma (using story, one can suppose). They often alternate moments of hope (that healing is possible) with the envisioned scenario of "endlessly repeated

conflict" (if healing is not achieved). This is dark stuff but they have merit.

One of the most important observations, near the beginning of this text (37), that "If victims continue to wear the cloak of victim-hood, it closes language and dialogue; but if they shed this cloak, the door is opened for engagement with others as fellow human beings", would have been a fitting final sentence. In other words, those who continue to play the victim, those who use their hurt as a weapon, actually retard the emergence of community.

Narrating Our Healing offers us useful theoretical entry points for the study of trauma and its potential to bring about healing of the personal and private sort. The larger tapestry of national healing however cries out for repressed voices to be released from the suffocating gag of subtle political tyranny.

Sources

Don Foster, Paul Haupt and Marésa de Beer (eds.), *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict*. HSRC Press, 2005.

Cornelius Thomas, *Tangling the Lion's Tale: Donald Card, from Apartheid Era Cop to Crusader for Justice*. Donald Card, 2007.

Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears – Her Life and Writing*. Wits University Press, 2007.

Education and social transformation: An Eastern Cape study (2006)

(University of Fort Hare Press)
L Lawrence and G Moyo (eds.)

Brian Ramadiro

Faculty of Education

University of Fort Hare

It can be argued that public perception of schooling in the Eastern Cape is largely negative. In the public imagination schooling and education more broadly in the province is characterised by, among other things, dismal learner performance, poor teacher self-image and motivation, hostile relations between the department and teacher unions, legendary administrative bungling and

endemic corruption.

In *Education and Social Transformation* are essays that describe and review a selection of attempts at education innovation in schools and communities of the Eastern Cape. A larger purpose of this book is to cultivate educational hope, imagination and action. Lawrence and Moyo refer to this as a vocation of cultivating "spirit".

To my knowledge, this is the first publicly available volume on educational innovation and social transformation in a post apartheid Eastern Cape. Like most socially engaged scholarship this collection of essays is a "work-in-progress", for two reasons. First, research discussed here forms part of a larger University of Fort Hare education research programme that has now begun to be published. Second, the practitioner-scholars represented here have continued to think, create and work on the themes described and reviewed in these essays, well beyond funded project work that gave them initial impetus.

The specific focus of the book is educational innovation. It highlights the contribution, meaning and challenges of educational innovation and transformation in the Eastern Cape. Read as a whole, the volume succeeds in surfacing themes essential to an understanding of the character, the possibilities, and the limits to educational and social transformation in the Eastern Cape.

The essays by Muthayan (chapter 1), Cole, Godden, Lawrence and England (chapter 2) and Porteus (chapter 8) speak to a complex interaction of widespread poverty and unemployment with continuing inequality in educational provisioning; low and erratic organisational capacity to lead, plan, and manage educational change in the public education system; contrasted to the heroic efforts of some learners, caregivers, teachers, policymakers and administrators.

Chapters 3 to 7 contains a set of descriptive and analytical case studies exploring the role of educational innovation in: seeding sustainable school transformation (Lawrence and Peters; Moyo); building school and community relations (Moyo); piloting adult education programmes based on the everyday experiences of learners (Matshazi); constructing models for teacher training, development and support in the context of a vast rural province (Lawrence; Adendorff, Botha, Devereux, and Sotuku); and generating new approaches to

school transformation through integrated district based development models (Moyo).

The book also points to a number of substantive issues in educational and social theory. I reflect only on two themes that this book points to as requiring further exploration. These themes revolve around the question of how education itself needs to transform so that it may stand a greater chance of making a contribution to social transformation of the Eastern Cape.

The first theme of exploration has to do with tracing the social and pedagogical ramifications of the fact that the South African education system, like public education systems elsewhere in the world, is run by the middle class – teachers, administrators, and the policymakers. But the South African public schooling system is two-tiered in historically unique ways. Educational achievement is restricted largely to upper tier that is almost exclusively populated by middle class children of all hues. And some of those who are responsible for quality public schooling put their children in private education. Probably, very few in the middle class dare to put their children in the second tier of the public schooling system. The second tier accounts for virtually all educational failure in the system. An essentially Bernsteinian theoretical question to be posed here is how does the fact of social and educational inequality in post apartheid South Africa plays itself in micro spaces such as classrooms and its manifestation in curriculum offerings, pedagogy, assessment and learner outcomes. Taken to their logical conclusion this is an implication of the analyses proffered especially in chapters 1, 2, and 8 of this volume.

The second theme is connectable to the first. This theme has to do with the possibilities and challenges of building the social and intellectual capital of schools, communities education departments so that innovation and change is sustainable. Part of the challenge for the Eastern Cape is educational innovation and transformation has tended to be isolated, episodic, fragmented and short lived. This is an issue which is dealt with at some length in chapters 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8. The strategic research and development question is what are the possible roles of schools, universities and departments of state - in the context of historical and social "adversity" described in chapter 2 - to support communities to build what Dani Nabudere calls "their own local institutions of learning and action".

Democracy compromised: Chiefs and the politics of land in South Africa

Lungisile Ntsebeza
(Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2006, x +297pp.
ISBN 0 7969 2130 X)

Bhekithemba Richard Mngomezulu
Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Lungisile Ntsebeza has made a name for himself in academic circles – both in South Africa and abroad – through his courage in tackling topical issues and his scholarly engagement with some sensitive topics. He presents his views on land and the role of traditional leadership institutions in a democracy with brevity. Different stakeholders throughout the African continent generally concede that traditional leaders are part and parcel of modern governance and therefore cannot be ignored. Consequently, the debate is gradually shifting from whether or not they should be retained in a democracy to how they could function in the modern system of governance. However, Ntsebeza questions the very notion of incorporating the institution of traditional leadership in a democracy. For him, traditional leadership and democracy are antithetical to each other. Implicit in this submission is that traditional and democratically elected leaders cannot co-exist.

Ntsebeza's overall argument is encapsulated in the title of his work *Democracy Compromised*. In essence, he argues that resuscitating traditional leaders in modern governance wittingly or unwittingly compromises democracy. He bases this trajectory on the fact that these leaders are not elected into positions of power but assume such positions by virtue of birth and are therefore not accountable to anyone. Ntsebeza's work presents another angle from which the current process of redefining the role of traditional leaders in post-colonial and post-apartheid Africa could be viewed. Contrary to the resolution of a recent international conference held in Durban (25-26 October 2007) that there must be a continental approach to the question of redefining the role of traditional leaders in a democracy, Ntsebeza's work argues that it is not necessary to entertain such a thought in the first place if democracy is to survive.

To be sure, Ntsebeza argues from a well informed position and is not apologetic about the views he espouses. He states that his book "is about traditional authorities in a democracy" (p.3). He uses the Xhalanga District as an avenue to enter into a bigger debate regarding the possible coexistence between traditional and democratically elected leaders both in the South African and broader African contexts. Ntsebeza analyses the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act and the Communal Land Rights Act, both promulgated in 2003, as well as the South African Constitution. He then contends that "upholding a Constitution that enshrines democratic principles in the Bill of Rights, whilst acknowledging a political and developmental role, or roles, for un-elected and unaccountable traditional authorities…is inconsistent and contradictory" (pp.15-16).

Ntsebeza's familiarity with a number of key debates regarding the issue of traditional leadership and democracy is evident. This is reflected in his succinct summary of those debates (pp.17-31). He is also well informed about the chronology regarding the evolvement of the institution of traditional leadership and the changes that characterised different historical moments such as colonialism, indirect rule and apartheid.

But what distinguishes *Democracy Compromised* from other works on the same topic is the manner in which Ntsebeza portrays traditional leaders. Instead of presenting them as freedom fighters who were at the vanguard of the liberation struggle, he views them as accomplices of the colonial interlopers. The two Acts passed in 2003 are generally applauded for defining the role of traditional leaders in a democratic South Africa. Ntsebeza blames these Acts for taking the country backwards. He attacks the Communal Land Rights Act for "effectively resuscitating the powers they enjoyed under the notorious Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 which was introduced by the apartheid regime" (p.14). He goes on to say that traditional leaders joined hands with the apartheid state to exercise control over black rural communities. Consequently, when black resistance re-emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the rural areas, "the target was often Tribal Authorities and the issue was the authoritarian and despotic nature of these authorities particularly with regard to land allocation" (p.14). This presents traditional leaders as anti-democracy. Therefore, looking at the situation from this vintage point Ntsebeza tacitly argues that it would be impossible for traditional leaders to promote democracy, a system that would potentially deprive them of their despotic powers.

In conclusion, Ntsebeza's work is timely, not because the views he espouses can easily be implemented but because it takes a different trajectory. It is views such his that will enable African leaders to think carefully as they embark on the relentless and tedious journey towards finding a place for traditional leaders in post-colonial and post-apartheid governance in Africa.

There is no doubt whatsoever that Ntsebeza has amassed knowledge on this subject. He articulates his thesis boldly and buttresses his submission by referring to evident and conspicuous contradictions. But to what extent can the arguments advanced in *Democracy Compromised* be implemented in post-apartheid South Africa? This is the most intriguing question Ntsebeza's work forces the reader to ruminate about.

Basically there are two parallel issues at play here. On the one hand is a call to work towards an ideal situation whereby the democratic ethos and democratic principles would be entrenched in the minds of all stakeholders so that there could be no (South) African conception of democracy that accommodates un-elected traditional leaders. This is the call *Democracy Compromised* is making. On the other hand is an appeal for a pragmatic approach to the conceptualisation of democracy. This view can be gauged both in the 1996 South African Constitution and in the two Acts enacted in 2003.

By all accounts, Ntsebeza's argument has merits. Not only is it logical, it is also aptly substantiated. However, it would be intractable to implement it for a variety of reasons. For example, before assuming power, the ANC was portrayed as an organization that was opposed to traditional leaders. To counter this portrayal, the ANC made public pronouncements that the institution of traditional leadership would have a place in its government. The establishment of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) and the House of Traditional Leaders (HTL) was a way of dissuading those who were using the uncertainty of traditional leaders about their future to score political points. The two Acts enacted in 2003 derived from this political context.

Moreover, South Africa is not the first country to face the debate regarding the fate of traditional leaders in a democracy. Other African countries tried in vain to abolish them. Ntsebeza acknowledges this reality thus: "Studies conducted in countries such as Mozambique, for example, reveal that despite

attempts by various post-colonial governments to marginalize and even abolish traditional authorities, the latter remained a force that could not be ignored when multiparty democracy and decentralisation were introduced in the early 1990s" (p.16). So, the will to abolish the institution of traditional leadership and the inability to do so continue to wrestle with each other for supremacy.