Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship 2009
Report from Seni Seneviratne

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE – CREATIVE RESPONSES TO TRAUMA
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INTRODUCTION

In 2009 I was funded by a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship to spend 4 months in Cape Town. I am a poet and a psychotherapist and the purpose of my visit combined my passion for poetry and the creative arts with my desire to explore creative responses to trauma. South Africa, with its history of individual and collective trauma was an appropriate destination.

Nelson Mandela has described the act of poetry in bearing witness to brutality as "cultivating a flower in a graveyard". I was keen to meet and interview South African poets about the relationship between poetry and trauma. I believe that while trauma robs us of our humanity, poetry can be a vehicle to bring us back to it by finding words to bear witness and create a space for healing. I also intended to meet with local therapists and creative artists who are combining drama, visual art, writing and bodywork with therapeutic responses to trauma.

I decided to base myself in one major city so that I could build relationships with people and projects and offer ongoing practical input alongside my explorations. Cape Town is a major centre of creative arts and hosts a range of arts and culture events. Before I arrived I had identified several projects working with traumatised individuals and had made contact with South African writers.

ARRIVAL

Ivydene Garden

I arrive on 7th May at Cape Town International Airport and am met by Bradley, a taxi driver sent by Lucille Luckhoff, the owner of Ivydene, the guest house in Rondebosch where I will be staying. Lucille has been recommended to me by Malika Ndlovu, one of the poets I have already made contact with and as soon as I arrive I can see why. Although I am still tired after my journey we immediately launch into a

1 Quote on back cover of Carolyn Forche (ed), Against Forgetting 1993 W W Norton & Co
discussion about the purpose of my visit and she begins to tell me about some of the work she does. As well as running a guest house of self catering apartments she is a counsellor at St. Lukes Hospice; a founding member of Khululeka, a support group for children who experience grief and loss;² a founding member of Ubuntu, a support group for mental health service users. She has also been very involved over the past year in supporting refugees who were on the receiving end of xenophobic attacks. She loves poetry and the creative arts and is a firm believer in the benefits of creativity when dealing with trauma. I know immediately we are going to get on very well and have a lot to share and that she will be a valuable source of connections and information. Added to this her house is set around a beautiful garden which will be a perfect place for writing and reflection during my stay.

2

http://www.khululeka.org

Khululeka offers grief support for children and youth. Their aim is to teach parents and teachers, social workers and nurses, health workers and pastors and anyone else in South Africa to understand the needs of grieving children and become more competent and wise in dealing with them. They run grief groups in various schools and also help other people run them. They visit schools, churches and other organizations to do workshops with teachers and parents and other adults who are interested. They published a book of stories about and from children who have lost someone and are learning together to live their lives again which is available in Xhosa, Afrikaans, Zulu and English.
BADILISHA POETRY X-CHANGE

At the beginning of my fellowship I am very fortunate to be invited to take part in a Poetry X-Change Festival which brings together a total of 21 poets. They are mainly from various parts of South Africa but also include poets from Zimbabwe, the DRC, Nigeria, UK and US. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to make contact with poets in Cape Town and set up future meetings to discuss my project with them. Badilisha is a Kiswahili expression that means to exchange, transform and change and it aims to celebrate the diversity of languages, cultures and styles of presenting poetry and to platform poetry as a performance art. It is also a great way to be introduced to the cultural life of Cape Town.

SUNDAY SALON FOR POETS

Once the Badilisha X-Change is over, I organise a Sunday Salon for some of the poets I have met and invite other poets from Cape Town whose names have been passed on to me. I want to get an initial idea of their response to my ideas about poetry and trauma and also set up individual interview sessions with those who are willing. I ask each of them to bring:

- a goodie for the tea table – savoury or sweet
- three words to add to a creative casserole
- a poem of witness/testimony (your own or someone else’s)

After a lively discussion about the role of poetry in the process of healing and transformation we all take part in a writing exercise I have devised and then read out work to each other. Not everyone I invited has been able to attend but it is a good start to the process.

BEYOND RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE

I am contacted by Pumla Goboda Madisikela, a South African psychologist who served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and works at UCT (University of Cape Town). She has heard about my visit and is very interested in my ideas about trauma and poetry. She is organising a conference in December 2009 about dealing with the aftermath of mass trauma and invites me to submit an abstract for a presentation at the conference. We agree to meet and she also asks me if I will consider a creative input to the conference as well as a presentation. This opportunity
gives an added focus to my plans to interview South African poets. The paper was presented in December 2009 and I will include some extracts at the end of the report.

**TRAUMA CENTRE OPEN DAY**

The Trauma Centre for survivors of Violence and Abuse was established in 1994 by psychologists and therapists from the psychiatric department of Cape Town hospital. When the ex political prisoners were freed from Robben Island it was found they needed support and counselling to cope with post traumatic stress. The organisation has since evolved from supporting just political prisoners to supporting a wider base of service users. They currently work with victims of domestic violence, survivors of torture and still work with political prisoners. They have five main programmes to support survivors and create safety:

- **The Trauma Response Programme:** Supporting survivors of violence
- **The Trauma Skills Programme:** Extending services to support survivors of violence
- **The Children and Violence Programme:** Reducing the impact of violence on children
- **The Political Violence Programme:** Witnessing the impact of the past
- **The Disaster Management Programme:** Responding to large-scale traumatic incidents

I meet Vimla Pillay, Executive Director of the Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Abuse. We discuss the needs and well being of workers who are supporting traumatised people. I tell her about the workshops we run at the Women’s Centre in UK where I work, where we look at issues of burn out and vicarious traumatisation. She is very interested and asks me to take part in their Open Day and talk about my work. I also agree to open up the day with a poem and close with a song.

![Vimla Pillay and I on the panel](image1)
![Speaking on self care of staff](image2)

**TUTS PAINTING SPOT**

“...if each day in your life is a brush stroke, are you living your masterpiece?”

I had made contact with Charlene Maslamoney, a visual artist, before I left UK and am interested to find out more about the work she does with individuals and groups. We had talked about doing some collaborative work and I am keen to meet her. My introduction to TUTS is by attending a session myself and discovering first hand the therapeutic potential of having the space to play with paints. She tells me about the work she does with voluntary sector organisations (NGO’s) offering her painting sessions as team building, self care events especially for staff who are working in
projects with traumatised individuals. She has recently organised a workshop for staff in an HIV/AIDS project.

PLACE OF HOPE

Charlene and I agree we will do some joint work at a local women’s shelter for women escaping violence and abuse, and I join her one Friday morning to meet the group. We agree to combine writing and visual art in the weekly sessions and see what develops out of that. What develops is a series of weekly creative adventures that sometimes are based in the centre, complete with leaking roof and the drip drip sound of water being caught in a series of buckets. (The Centre doesn’t have core funding and is constantly struggling to raise money for essential repairs as well as daily costs.) On some Fridays we take the women out, one day to the seafront (some of the women are from the rural areas and have never seen the sea), another day to District Six Museum*

Writing workshop at District Six Museum Charlene running a painting workshop

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3 *Some notes on District Six and the Museum

District Six was named the Sixth Municipal District of Cape Town in 1867. Originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants, District Six was a vibrant centre with close links to the city and the port. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the history of removals and marginalisation had begun. The first to be ‘resettled’ were black South Africans, forcibly displaced from the District in 1901. As the more prosperous moved away to the suburbs, the area became the neglected ward of Cape Town. In 1966, it was declared a white area under the Group areas Act of 1950, and by 1982, the life of the community was over. 60 000 people were forcibly removed to barren outlying areas aptly known as the Cape Flats, and their houses in District Six were flattened by bulldozers. The District Six Museum, established in December 1994, works with the memories of these experiences and with the history of forced removals more generally.
I meet Toni Stuart a poet who is co-ordinating Pascap’s after school care project at Hout Bay High School in Hangberg, Hout Bay. She works with disadvantaged children using the arts, creative projects, lifeskills, career guidance, sport and many other ways to build self-esteem, the ability to speak out, and create opportunities they otherwise would not have access to. They have made an exhibition combining photos and writing which is launched at an event at the District Six Museum. As a result of my meeting Toni asks me to take part in a series of workshops around National Women’s Day on August 9th. One workshop (see below) brings together girls from several schools in the area.
WHOLE WORLD WOMEN ASSOCIATION

I visit Mary Magdalene Yuin Tal who is the founder and director of Whole World Women Association and with Anne Schuster has compiled and edited a book of poetry by women who are refugees from various countries in Africa. It is called living on the fence and it came out of a Life Writing Project focusing on healing through creativity. Here is one of the poems from the book by Epiphanie Mukasano, a Rwandan refugee and WWWA member:

I am the woman
you despised the other day
throwing out wicked words
which cut like a sharp knife

I am that woman
at whom you threw burning pots
and whose clothes you scornfully tore away
chasing me with a broom out of your house

I am the woman
who wandered naked
in the dark street
wondering where to go

I am the woman
full of scars, but
I do not hold a grudge

Today I am stretching out my hand
Will you take it?"

Mary is a dynamic and inspiring woman who has come through her own traumatic experiences as a refugee from the Cameroon and in 2002 realised her vision to set up a self help support group for refugee women in the Western Cape. She is now the director of Whole World Women Association, (WWWA) an organization that works with refugee communities to prioritize women's issues. The organization raises

Mary Magdalene is at the back of the group next to me
awareness on the plight of ordinary refugee women, the impact of war and trauma on the human psyche. Their membership is open to refugee women of all ages and backgrounds, as well as refugee children who are living at home with their parents or in foster homes and shelters. Initiatives include trauma counselling, skills development, advocacy, lobbying and arts activities such as traditional music and song. She tells me that a group of women currently meet on Thursdays afternoons for self esteem workshops. Some of them were involved in the previous writing project others have not done writing workshops before. I agree to offer some creative writing sessions over the lunchtime.

**BONFIRE THEATRE COMPANY**

I meet up with Lesley Bester who works with Bonfire Theatre Company. On their website they explain the basis of their work. “It is through our stories that we remind ourselves and each other what it means to be human. The Bonfire Theatre Show is an interactive and improvised theatre experience where the audience is an active part of the performance. Traditional barriers between the audience and the performers as well as between audience members are broken down.”

I have seen them in action a few weeks before at a performance of “The Memorial Project” or “Project Siyakhumbula” and I want to find out more about them. The show had included the improvised Bonfire Theatre show and a short one-hander based on the true-life stories of the performers. I had seen Lesley’s piece and was interested to talk to her about the process of making it and how it had helped her deal with her particular trauma. I also wanted to learn more about theatre as a means of healing trauma.

**How it works**

To warm the audience up to storytelling the actors and musicians create theatrical responses to the descriptions of daily life that are suggested by the audience. Audience members are then invited on stage to tell a true story of any kind. The actors then ‘play the story back’ to the teller. In playing the story back the actors’ focus on the essence of the story, often giving the teller new insights and perspectives on their own story. The musicians enhance and emphasise the action with improvised music. In playing the stories back we use physical theatre, spoken word, puppetry, music, dance, comedy, along with a range of theatrical styles. During the show each story is played back in a different style, using different media as suits the story. This creates a dynamic and aesthetically pleasing result that is both entertaining and moving.

**Playback Theatre**

The work of The Bonfire Theatre Company based on the theatrical form of Playback Theatre developed by Jonathan Fox (www.playbacknet.org for more info) This is a new theatre form in South Africa and is providing an exciting new aesthetic for South African theatre. Playback theatre is a powerful tool that can be used in many different contexts from conflict resolution between groups, team building in
organisations, celebration at special events, confidence building in individuals to healing in traumatised communities.

I was very impressed with Bonfire Theatre as a way of combining therapeutic work with the arts in a creative, innovative and moving way. On their website they explain in more detail why they are doing this work:

*Transformation from an apartheid mentality is taking place at the level of government and institutions, however transformation is a much slower process on the personal and individual level. In order for any change to be successful and healthy it needs to take place on all levels. Playback theatre is a powerful and accessible way to facilitate change of people’s attitudes towards one another.*

*The Bonfire Theatre Company provides a space for the social and community healing, where people not only tell their stories but can hear other’s stories and discover that they are not alone in their experience. Audience members have the opportunity to ‘stand in the shoes’ of fellow audience members as they watch their stories unfold on stage, leading to greater understanding across social, cultural and racial divides.*

*The Bonfire Theatre Company actively encourages crossing divisions between race, class, gender and nationality so that we can undermine prejudice with knowledge of one another.*

**CONCLUSIONS**

These are some of the highlights from what was a most rewarding and inspiring time in Cape Town. I met with a range of creative artists who are using their art forms in the process of healing and reconciliation in the aftermath of the abuses and atrocities of apartheid. I learnt a lot from these artists and also was able to offer my own skills through writing workshops and sharing my ideas and expertise on issues of self care. I was able to interview poets for my paper which was well received at the conference in December.
Extracts from: *Speaking the Unspeakable. The Poetry of Witness,*
a paper presented at Beyond Reconciliation Conference December 2009

**Extract 1:**

**TRAUMA** creates an unspeakable void.
It produces feelings of being:
    overwhelmed, disintegrated, fragmented, disempowered, disconnected.
It affects:
    sense of self, control of memory, language and narrative, meaning-making.

Poetry steps into the void and lets the trauma speak rather than imposing a language on it. It doesn’t rely on a linear narrative. It can express fragmentation. It honours the spaces, the breaths between the words.

Poetry can look into the abyss of trauma and say “Yes” – I see you. I can write you without accepting or justifying you or the damage you inflict. I can write you because you exist, because you are a phenomenon. And through writing you I can reveal a route beyond you, beyond your terrible power.

**Extract 2:**

The act of making poetry can be a way of creating a safe place. A means of stepping into the chaos and from that experience re-creating a sense of self, a restoration of the spirit/soul, a sense of place in the world.

*... a container. Something to hold the trauma...like a higher self speaking in the poem* (Lesley)

*It contains in a way that protects but also frees me ... gives me the mirror to hold up to myself... I survive because I create a witness for myself....poetry says you exist...* (Mbali)

*...to express my rage to be able to tell it to someone without having to repeat it again and again.* (Malika)

The suffering, the trauma is not denied or eliminated but transformed through poetry and put out into the world, no longer silenced.

**Extract 3:**

Trauma causes a split between the emotional and cognitive centres of the brain, disrupting the ability for meaning making or linear narrative.

It leaves the brain at the mercy of powerful, distressing images and emotions. It’s like a short circuit – normal connection between the two parts is damaged in some way.

Poetry engages with emotions, the felt-sense of the body, images, metaphors and searches for a language thereby making a connection to the meaning making centres of the brain. It acts as a channel or bridge between them.
Extract 4:
“Then I could write about deep secrets in my family...a tragedy...not spoken about. I was writing about my village and how it had been destroyed and thinking about my father. I could hear him in the fields, smell him, feel him and I get out of that stanza and write about yearning for the village and how it holds ‘my father’s headless body’ and it was out – for the first time....My mother had built a solid wall around it. In my poem I had dared to go there. It has liberated me a lot. It was a deep secret ... so many years of denial,... It is my story it is true I have spoken about it and I want people to know.”

Those immediately affected by a trauma are silenced, frozen by the horror of what they have witnessed and it falls to following generations to break the silence, bring the details to light. Poets act as mediums channelling the voices of silenced ancestors.

“There are faultlines – traumas that haven’t been addressed. Poets can open closed doors, write about the damage, contribute to the cleansing of the nation, so we can live free from hate.”

Extract 5:
Poetry invites people to empathise. It can change hearts as well as minds. It can reach beyond the numbing frozen response that is a symptom of the times and enable us all to feel, to be moved by injustice and oppression whether or not we are directly affected. It reminds us what our hopes and visions are.
In the act of public witnessing poetry forces the trauma to be unsilenced, unhidden. It brings the trauma into the light. We are forced to look, to see, to feel to accept the trauma as a liability for the whole community not just the victims and the perpetrators. It has the potential to move us to restoration, to the beginning of change.