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Gendered Violence: Continuities and Transformation in the Aftermath of Conflict in Africa

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Thematic Cluster: Women in Postconflict and Postgenocide Societies

Gendered Violence: Continuities and Transformation in the Aftermath of Conflict in Africa

The *Blue Dress* by Judith Mason, depicted on the cover of this issue, features in the central panel a sculpture of a long flowing dress stitched from pieces of blue plastic and ornamented with several lines of text painted on its hemline. The exterior panels are oil paintings of a blue dress in perfect (dis)embodied pose. To the right and behind each of the (dis)-embodied dress images is an animal caged by what looks like a fence in a honeycomb pattern. In the first panel, the animal appears to have torn off a piece of the blue dress, which it is dragging with one of its front paws. In the third panel, the animal appears to be lunging forward in attack mode, baring its teeth, but it is trapped behind the fence. In the foreground of the third panel are three glowing braziers toward which the dress, without a physical body, appears to be moving, and a glowing mug positioned in front of the animal but out of its reach (see fig. 1).

Judith Mason was inspired by Phila Ndwandwe's story, broadcast live from the public hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in November 1996. A member of the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC), Ndwandwe was living in exile in Swaziland along with hundreds of antiapartheid activists who had been targeted by the apartheid security forces for conducting military operations in South Africa. Like many who disappeared without any trace in the late 1980s, Ndwandwe was abducted, tortured, and murdered in November 1988 by the apartheid government's security police. Her story emerged when TRC investigators identified police officers involved in covert operations for the security police.

The essays in this thematic cluster are drawn from a symposium that was held at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in August 2011. The symposium was supported by a grant from the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Capacity (PERC). We wish to thank Professor Robert Morrell, coordinator of PERC, for his unyielding support. We would also like to give special thanks to the editors of *Signs*, Mary Hawkesworth and her colleagues, for their editorial contributions that greatly improved the manuscript.

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Figure 1 Judith Mason, *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent*. © 1998 by Judith Mason. Permission to reprint may be obtained only from the artist.

Phila Ndwandwe's body was buried in an unmarked site on a secret farm run by the apartheid government's covert operations unit (TRC 1998, 543). According to the testimony of her killers, Ndwandwe was held naked in a concrete chamber and tortured for ten days. When her torturers realized that "she remained defiant to the bitter end," refusing to turn against her comrades and become a police collaborator, they killed Ndwandwe and buried her on the Elandskop Dairy Farm near Pietermaritzburg.¹ When her remains were exhumed, Ndwandwe was found lying in a fetal position with a single bullet wound to the top of her head. Her killers testified that they had blindfolded her and made her walk from the torture chamber to the grave. Sergeant Lawrence Wasserman testified to the TRC that he had struck Ndwandwe on the head before he shot her—"A single blow sir . . . on the right hand side of her head"—which rendered her unconscious.² According to Wasserman, Ndwandwe was unconscious when he threw her into the shallow grave before firing the fatal shot.

When Ndwandwe's body was exhumed, her pelvis was covered with scraps from a blue plastic supermarket bag that had been fashioned in the shape of a pair of underwear. Ndwandwe may have found the scraps of plastic in the room in which she was interrogated and used them to cover her "private parts," which the security police had stripped to further violate her. Being forced into nakedness was itself a violation—one aspect of the many violations she suffered. Judith Mason wept as she listened to Ndwandwe's story recounted in the testimony of the men who abducted, interrogated, tortured, and killed her, and then covered up her murder.

It was not the gendered violence of the physical and sexual torture that Mason chose to commemorate, however, but Ndwandwe's *covering* of the violence of her nakedness. *The Blue Dress* foregrounds Ndwandwe's attempt to challenge her torturers by reclaiming a small measure of privacy. This simple act of defiance profoundly unsettles any narrative of the "weak" woman victim, who is forced to surrender herself, her values, and her beliefs as her captors dehumanize her. Although the security police attempted to strip her of her dignity and disable her capacity for resistance, Phila Ndwandwe died defying them. This is the story that captured Mason's imagination.

¹ Comments of Advocate Paddy Prior, evidence leader at the TRC amnesty hearing of the apartheid government security police charged with the abduction and murder of Phila Ndwandwe, which was held on November 16, 1998. Accessed October 20, 2013, from <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/>. Here and below we have included quotations from unpublished transcripts of the TRC hearings.

² Apartheid security police Lawrence Wasserman responding to a question at the TRC Amnesty Hearing, November 16, 1998. See n. 1.

The central sculpture, made of discarded blue plastic bags that Mason collected and sewed into a dress, stands as a statement, both metaphorically and literally, of the triumph of Ndwandwe's dignity over the depravity of her captors. In a letter painted on the skirt's hem, Mason wrote: "Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armor of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood. And against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, common-sensical, housewifely thing to do, an ordinary act. . . . Memorials to your courage are everywhere; they blow about in the streets, drift on the tide, and cling to thorn-bushes. This dress is made from some of them."

The image of the blue dress in the first exterior panel is poised and in motion, which suggests elegant defiance in face of the threat posed by the predator. In the second exterior panel, Mason portrays the same flair of confidence, accentuated again by the graceful movement forward, leaving the predator behind, its face of evil visible but trapped behind the fence and disempowered.

Mason's letter takes Ndwandwe's story out of the private realm of an individual story and into the public and political sphere, evoking gendered, racial, sexual, and collective identifications. Discarded plastic supermarket bags that drift into all corners of the war-ravaged cities of "post"-conflict countries on the African continent—and in the shantytowns that have mushroomed in and around the cities, or what is left of them, after wars and violent conflict—are a common sight. Mason imbues these discarded pieces of rubbish with symbolic meaning, redefining them as memorial fragments dotting the landscape of our war-ravaged continent. Their ubiquitous presence symbolizes the pervasive violence enacted on women's bodies, humiliated bodies, bodies that succumb to violence and those that withstand it, bodies targeted during wars and bodies targeted in peacetime, bodies shaped by history and politically inscribed. The shape and movement of *The Blue Dress* evoke the presence of a living female body, a present absence that couples the living and the dead in a significant way, which resonates in the postconflict context of women in other parts of the African continent—in the Liberian city of Monrovia; in Freetown, Sierra Leone; in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo; in Rwanda, Namibia, and in the innumerable shantytowns that have emerged in postapartheid South Africa.

The essays in this cluster grew out of a symposium on New Knowledge Systems in Post-genocide and Post-conflict Studies: An Afropolitan Dialogue, which was held at the University of Cape Town in August 2011.

Interdisciplinary scholars participating in the symposium emphasized three central themes: the intensity of gendered violence associated with wars and political conflict in African countries, its enduring influence in the lives of those on the receiving end of the violence, and women's labor to heal the rupture caused by violence in their communities. At the heart of these concerns are critical questions about the relationship between systemic trauma within particular nations and the forms of subjectivity that emerge in the aftermath of political violence. Particular attention was devoted to the question of how trauma associated with genocide and other violent conflicts in Africa affects women. The diversity of women's experiences, identities, ideological commitments, and positioning within their communities cautions against any hasty generalizations about gendered violence in and beyond organized conflict. Yet common threads run through discussions of violence in postconflict societies in Africa.

What seems clear, for example, is that violence against women is not a problem of "the past." There are continuities between regimes of violence during organized political conflict and persisting violence against women in the postconflict era of democratic governance. The articles by Louise du Toit, Hannah Britton, and Lindsey Shook explore complexities of postconflict societies where violence of all forms, including gendered and sexualized violence, remains entangled in the past, reconstructed in new ways yet shaped by reiterations of past inequalities grounded in gender, class, race, and sexualities. Their essays investigate the postconflict subjectivities of men and women and raise questions about the extent to which particular men's vulnerabilities within oppressive systems may be implicated in growing rates of intimate violence in the aftermath of war.

There is also considerable evidence that women in many postconflict states play a different role than men in envisioning and restoring familial and communal ties. In her study of Rwanda, for example, Karen Brounéus finds that women are more amenable to peace building strategies than men are. Offering important insights into gendered effects of trauma, Brounéus suggests that women survivors may seek strategies to heal their communities as a means to move beyond their own trauma. As the concept of wounded healers suggests, many women may prefer other-directed, compassionate care to heal the rupture caused by violence in their communities rather than tactics fuelled by a sense of righteous entitlement to revenge or punitive justice. By forging connections with others, women may find hope in the face of despair. By creating sites for ethical engagement in their communities, and taking the lead in building relationships with former adversaries, survivors may find means to transcend their own trauma. In some communities in Rwanda, for example, women widowed by geno-

cide reached out to the wives of their husbands' killers, who were struggling to meet the needs of their children while their husbands were serving long prison terms (Sentama 2011). One need not appeal to essentialized notions of femininity to make sense of this kind of sisterhood response. A strong desire for change in the aftermath of genocide might well motivate some women to apply caring practices in reconstructing their societies as an explicit effort to move beyond political practices mobilized by hatred and violence. Quite apart from any natural inclinations, care work remains feminized in all regions of the globe. Deploying repertoires of care long practiced within their families to the larger polity might seem a plausible strategy for moving beyond trauma. Whether construed as an intentional transvaluation of values or in terms of the democratization of care, such an approach might be key to the pursuit of free, equal, and nonviolent societies, as Joan Tronto (2013) has suggested.

Transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory

Exposure to psychologically traumatic events leads to a profound disruption in the capacity to organize aspects of one's experiences into a narrative. Narrative and storytelling are important processes that help people to make sense out of their experiences. Traumatic experiences disrupt this capacity for narrating aspects of one's life, and the traumatic events are too painful to be integrated into the overall landscape of one's life. Instead of assimilation into narrative memory, traumatic experiences often take on a timelessness (Langer 1993), living on, being relived and acted out in various ways, ranging from fear, anger, resentment, and aggression to maladaptive relationships. Narrating traumatic memory may be one way that victims and survivors attempt to reconstruct a shattered self, find a voice, reclaim a sense of agency, and construct meaning from traumatic experience.

Traumas stemming from civil war and genocide not only have impact on the body and spirit of affected individuals, they also interrupt the capacity for narrating one's past. As collectively experienced pain, shared traumas disrupt cultural and communal bonds. Therefore, undoing such collective traumas requires more than individual storytelling. The truth commissions established in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and South Africa sought to link the undoing of individual and collective traumas by situating postconflict narrative construction and meaning making within the protective presence of reconfigured national communities. Truth commission hearings afforded witnesses an opportunity to reclaim public space,

orchestrating the performance of their stories—verbally or as enactments—before a national audience. Sometimes memories were recalled vividly, with all the relevant emotional aspects of the trauma. In contrast to “flash-bulb” memories, or snapshots of aspects of trauma recalled with few or no details of larger events, some victims and survivors narrated their traumatic experiences with vivid detail. The experiences of national truth commissions suggest that in cases of political trauma, where the trauma has a collective or shared aspect, narratives of traumatic memory extend beyond the personal to the political. When victims and survivors are supported by a community in a broader national process promoting truth telling, the performative aspects of trauma testimony may create the possibility for individual healing as well as the reconstitution of community bonds.

In contrast to the literature on trauma that asserts the inassimilable nature of traumatic experience in narrative memory, the evidence from truth commissions suggests other possibilities. Where received views suggest that survivors should not be encouraged to tell their stories lest they be retraumatized, or insist that trauma is “not known,” is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and . . . therefore [is] not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth 1996, 4), we hold a slightly different view, although with some reserve. Narrating trauma within a public context established in accordance with the norms of restorative justice may unleash new forms of subjectivity for survivors and their descendants. When those who have been brutalized break their silence and reclaim agency and the power of voice before a national audience committed to social transformation, they may also recapture their sense of dignity and worth.

In the context of truth commissions, many testimonies seemed to allow survivors to transcend the passivity of victimhood by giving voice to their pain and crafting narratives that denounced the perpetrators. The assertion of agency took various forms.

One antiapartheid activist, who had been raped multiple times and tortured during detention, described her unbearable experiences, explaining that to shut out the pain and shame she would “remove” her soul from her body and put it in a corner so that the rape was only of her body. Appealing to the restorative possibilities embodied by the TRC commissioners presiding over a special women’s hearing, she asked the commissioners to help her get her soul back.

A woman who was raped by twenty men during the brutal war in Sierra Leone described the manifold losses she suffered because of the rape, in-

cluding losing the ability to observe Ramadan because of health-related problems. Asserting her right *not* to absolve her assailants, she testified that she would never forgive the men who raped her.

A South African woman, Nomonde Calata, the wife of an antiapartheid activist whose body was found burned by the security police, charred beyond recognition, confronted her husband's killers and told them that they had robbed her of a loving husband and her children of a loving father. At the end of her testimony to the TRC, she let out a piercing scream that shattered the stillness of the large city hall where the hearing was held. Giving voice to her pain and refusing to be silenced, she "dared" to wail, conveying her years of pain and grief to the public space of the TRC hearing, reclaiming her right to bear her pain for the world to see.

Whether seeking communal assistance in becoming whole, asserting a right to refuse forgiveness, or registering the pain of loss with an intensity that could not be forgotten, these witnesses took steps toward psychological recovery by integrating their traumatic experience into a coherently organized narrative. By making their wounds public, recording the atrocities done to them, and identifying the perpetrators, these testimonies begin to recreate temporal boundaries that place brutalities in the past.

In other cases, however, the traumas women experienced exceed the scars written on their bodies and their minds by the violence that they had witnessed and the violence inflicted on them. They live with the additional burden of not knowing what has happened to their loved ones who went missing during the years of conflict, not knowing whether their loved ones were killed. When there is no body, no bones, it is particularly difficult to confront loss, to situate it in the past, to construct narrative memory, to accept its finality. Claire Leimbach, Trypheyne McShane, and Zenith Virago have suggested that the shock of overwhelming trauma brings with it "protective veils" (2009, 284) that shield us from the brutal truth of loss. As time passes and shock recedes, "the veils thin and blow in the wind, bringing gusts of the physical finality of death" (284). But time does not "pass" for family members who have not found the remains of their loved ones. When what happened remains intangible and elusive, the process of working through and healing trauma, which may be achieved by transforming trauma into narrative, is deferred, replaced by a haunting and an unfillable chasm of sorrow. Such trauma cannot be assimilated, not only because of its overwhelming quality but precisely because of the void created by an experience that by its very nature is inarticulable. A void separates the possibility of knowing from not knowing, an unspeakable emptiness that cannot be grasped. The survivor's mournful lament is sus-

pended between acting out the trauma and an attempt to work through it, a situation that invites comparison with what Kyo Maclear (2003, 238) calls the “vexed impossibility of memory” and the “unstitched terror of remembering and witnessing.”

The trauma of sexual violence: Continuities in the aftermath

As previously noted, violence against women is not a problem of “the past” in postconflict societies on the African continent. High rates of rape and sexual violence against women continue long after the rebel wars and violent political conflicts have ended. Indeed, “extraordinary violence” associated with organized conflict bears critical resemblance to the gendered dynamics of the ordinary (George 2007). Women’s narratives and memories of sexual violence under abusive racist regimes and during genocides become interwoven with the experiences of violence in “postconflict” contexts.³ Although some narratives of violence receive full public airing, others do not. In postapartheid South Africa, for example, stories of rape and sexual abuse as part of torture in detention and under political repression, such as the narrative of sexualized violence against Ndwandwe, dominated the TRC’s special hearing on women. Yet these highly publicized cases coexist with a larger public silencing and underreporting of sexual violence (Vetten et al. 2008). Only a small part of past and current experiences of gendered and sexualized violence circulate in public.

Political discourse in the postconflict era, for example, often envisions a past characterized by solidarity between male and female activists involved in the struggle for freedom from colonialism and oppressive rule in African countries. Yet claims about solidarity among comrades coexist in tension with women activists’ stories of rape by their male comrades, which have emerged in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and other conflict-torn regions such as Sierra Leone. The gruesome violence inflicted on women by their fellow revolutionaries is captured poignantly in academic research and in the testimonies of women combatants who appeared at public hearings of the truth commissions established in the aftermath of conflict in African countries (see Denov and Maclure 2006; Coulter 2009).⁴ But in nations that have not established truth commis-

³ See Barnes, Albrecht, and Olson (2007), Teale (2009), and Richters, Rutayisire, and Slegh (2013).

⁴ Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure (2006) have also conducted research on girl and boy child soldiers in Sierra Leone. The research illustrates the different experiences of these two groups; while both girls and boys were forced into a life of violence as soldiers, the girls suffered additional multiple traumas of gang rape, sex slavery, and other sexual violations

sions, sexual violence by some independence fighters against their own has not been publicly acknowledged. Pauline Dempers founded the organization Breaking the Wall of Silence in Namibia to launch campaigns for public acknowledgement of sexual violence by commanders and soldiers of the liberation armies of Namibia and Zimbabwe (see Dempers 2008).

Sexual violence against women and girls is acknowledged globally as a widespread and severe violation of human rights (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Nevertheless, continuing violence against women and girls is evident in postcolonial and postconflict “new” democracies such as South Africa, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda, as well as in nations that remain in the throes of organized conflict. In the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which is considered the “the rape capital of the world” (Gettleman 2009), women suffer violence of pandemic proportions.⁵ In the DRC, the civil war continues to be waged on women’s bodies by groups of men. Although some women are gang raped in fields, in the majority of cases, perpetrators of rape attack women in their own homes. Susan Bartels, Jennifer Scott, Denis Mukwege, Robert Lipton, and Michael Van Rooyen (2006) paint a grim picture of the rape pandemic in the DRC and its horrific consequences in the lives of women and their communities. In Sierra Leone, sexual violence against women and girls has been so extensive that gang rape has been normalized and used by male rapists as a “bonding tool” (Cohen 2013, 405). Richard Maclure and Myriam Denov (2008) have shown that gender inequities prevail long after the cessation of organized conflict, making it nearly impossible to alter the rising tide of sexual violence against women in Sierra Leone.

In postapartheid South Africa, sexual violence is made visible through high-profile media cases such as the brutal rape of “Baby Tshepang” (Bird and Spurr 2004), and the rape and murder of Anene Booysen, a young woman living in one of the poorest small towns in the Western Cape (Munusamy 2013).⁶ Research spanning more than two decades reveals

because they were girls. After the war ended, boys participated in rehabilitation programs while girls were thrown back into communities that shunned them as “rebel wives” or mothers of “rebel children,” among other slurs they had to endure.

⁵ Margot Wallström, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, also used this phrase after a visit to the DRC in April 2010.

⁶ Stories of the rape of babies appear frequently in South African newspapers. “Baby Tshepang” was nine months when she was raped by a man who had been her mother’s partner. In the same week that Baby Tshepang was raped in the Northern Cape region, another case of the rape of a one-week-old baby was reported in the Kwa-Zulu-Natal region, making her the youngest rape victim in South Africa. The man charged with the rape of Baby Tshepang was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

extremely high rates of gender-based violence in South Africa, including intimate partner violence and sexual abuse and violence against girls and women (Jewkes and Abrahams 2002; Abrahams et al. 2013). Shereen Mills (2010) has explored the apparent contradiction between the unprecedented incidence of rape in South Africa and the country's progressive constitution, which explicitly protects human rights and the rights of women. South Africa's progressive constitution also guarantees the equality of gays and lesbians, yet constitutional equality coexists with the phenomenon of "corrective rape," sexual violence that targets lesbians with the intention of coercing them into heterosexuality. The rape and murder of lesbians have become common, everyday features of the violence waged against women in contemporary South Africa. Despite the formal equality established in the postapartheid constitution and the legalization of same-sex marriage, corrective rape continues to target working-class women living in black townships (Mieses 2009; Carter 2013).

Empirical research on sexual practices and gender-based violence has proliferated in postconflict African countries as the incidence of rape and sexual abuse has increased. Scholars and activists have noted, however, that only the most brutal incidents of sexual violence garner public attention in local and international contexts. Political leaders—women and men—only address the problem of violence against women intermittently, when the most brutal stories are reported. Such selective attention may facilitate the erasure of everyday and commonplace violence, shoring up silence concerning the larger social context in which violence occurs. The focus on extreme forms of violence and ruthless rape and murder of women may help to draw the public's attention to the brutality of specific rape incidents while neglecting normative gender roles, hegemonic masculinities and femininities, and material contexts of inequality and structural violence that heighten women's vulnerability to other forms of violence. When attention is deflected from everyday violence, important clues may be missed about the conditions that make more brutal manifestations of violence against women possible. Thus, these everyday violations may be obfuscated and go unnoticed. For example, a 2008 UNIFEM report documented the pervasiveness of men's violence against women in Rwanda. The study demonstrates not only an increase in sexual abuse in women's homes since the genocide but that one-third of the cases of rape are committed within marital relationships. Similarly, research in South Africa illuminates how sexual violence is powerfully enmeshed with normative gender roles and heterosexual practices. For example, studies of the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and other social inequalities suggest that coercion is endemic in "normal" heterosexual practices (Shefer et al. 2008; Bhana and Anderson 2013).

Greater attention to the everyday violence suffered by women in post-conflict societies can enhance our understanding of the more subtle terrains of silenced violence. For example, Shireen Ally (2009) illuminates the plight of migrant domestic workers in South Africa who are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation and abuse related to the intimate nature of their work. Her research provides an important context for reflecting on issues of gender and continuities of violence against women in the context of social transformation. Indeed, her work demonstrates how to tell women's stories of sexual violence, in ways that foreground continuities of sexual violence from past to present within a reflexive framework attuned to the power of representation within the politics of knowledge production.

Patriarchy: The present past

In addressing the issue of narrative memory and thinking creatively about how to organize the past therapeutically in the aftermath of violent conflicts in some countries in Africa, it is imperative to recognize that "post-conflict" does not imply the absence of violence, at least not in the context of women's lives. Academic and media investigations of the extent of violence in postconflict African countries indicate that women face the danger of violence in their homes and communities daily. In countries where rape and sexual abuse of women were used as weapons of war, little seems to have changed. Women's bodies continue to be the battleground on which violence is waged.

The coexistence of progressive protections of women's human rights enshrined in the South African Constitution and rampant violence against women in their homes and on the streets demonstrates the state's inability to fulfil its promise of providing safety and security for the most vulnerable communities. The failure of the state to provide physical security for all citizens is also a form of violence. The gendered dimensions of this failure suggest that the "new" governments, like their predecessors, continue to accord greater weight to the perpetuation of male power than to the provision of equal security. Although African countries have introduced new laws that suggest a departure from the past, the break with the past has not been total. Change in government has not changed institutional forces in postconflict societies that continue to privilege men. In Sierra Leone, for example, unwritten traditional laws give men permission to beat their wives. Customary laws that govern marriage (including the status of widows after the death of their husbands), property ownership, and inheritance are deeply rooted in patriarchy and deprive women of

the right to benefit from their husbands' estates. The only time a woman is able to benefit from assets left by her deceased husband is when she marries one of his relatives (Kane, Oloka-Onyango, and Tejan-Cole 2005).

In the democratic "new South Africa," to use local parlance, unwritten laws perpetuate patriarchal power in the sexual lives of men, particularly men in positions of power and political leadership. The state's treatment of cases involving sexual assault might well be considered a manifestation of state patriarchy. The 2005 rape trial of Jacob Zuma, prior to his election to the presidency, provides an illustrative example of the intersection between private and public patriarchy. Zuma was accused of raping the daughter of his former comrade in the antiapartheid movement, while she was visiting in his home. As Kopano Ratele has noted: "A range of moments from the rape trial of Zuma point to the links between sexualities and a ruling masculinity" (2006, 50). One of these moments occurred when Zuma insisted that sex with his accuser was consensual despite her testimony that it was not. Zuma offered a cultural defense of his actions, telling the court that the young woman was dressed seductively in a *kanga* (a colorful wraparound skirt). According to Zulu culture, he claimed, this was an explicit sexual message, and failure to respond to such a message would have been an insult to the woman (Ratele 2006).

Zuma's concoction of this cultural defense illustrates how men position themselves as custodians of culture and tradition in order to silence and denigrate women. That the court found this defense compelling, acquitting Zuma of the charge of rape, demonstrates how the patriarchal status quo is shored up not only to the benefit of those in the echelons of political power but also to the benefit of all rapists. For the court's ruling would actively dissuade women from filing rape charges and seeking legal redress.⁷ As Sylvia Walby (1990) has argued, the state and other public institutions are central to the maintenance of patriarchy. When the men who hold power in official institutions represent the interests of patriarchy, the egalitarian values of the constitution are bound to be compromised. When male privilege is allowed to trump the testimony of rape victims, patriarchal violence in the private domain of the home is exacerbated in the public terrain of law enforcement.

Rape and other forms of gender-based sexual violence remain among the most visible expressions of male power. Despite an increase in women's representation in political leadership, in most postconflict countries

⁷ For a critical analysis of this problem and its consequences, see Suttner (2010). See also Gobodo-Madikizela (2013).

the state continues to privilege patriarchal imperatives. When state institutions allow “culture” and “tradition” to be deployed to justify sexual violence, written guarantees of human rights and democratic commitments to equality are thoroughly undermined.

The use of culture to defend male violence can be deeply mystifying. Appeals to culture seek to mobilize allegiance to a cherished heritage, even as they mask the fact that the values being defended may be of recent vintage, part of an invented past rather than an authentic tradition. But when the culture at issue has been the victim of centuries of colonial and neocolonial oppression, the cultural defense may be difficult to resist. As Amanda Gouws (2012, 102) has noted, women and men flocked to Zuma’s defense, demonstrating outside the courthouse in shirts emblazoned with the slogan “100% Zulu Boy,” dancing in the street while burning images of the woman who filed the rape charge, chanting “burn the bitch.” But the notion that culture is fixed, unchanging, and in need of unreflective allegiance is itself a fiction, one that has been challenged by cultural historians and anthropologists. Cultures are constantly changing, sometimes as the result of wilful intervention and sometimes unwittingly. Interpretations of particular cultures and traditions are often skewed, to the advantage of some and to the detriment of others. Although it may be easy to fall prey to such manipulative interpretations, there is nothing sacred or sacrosanct about the deployment of culture to vindicate sexual violence.

In postconflict societies, some women have mobilized to defend patriarchal imperatives, while others have devoted their efforts to promote egalitarian values and policies. Our observations in South Africa suggest that there is no solidarity among women in opposition to gender-based violence. Yet there are many examples in Africa, during and after conflict, of women standing in solidarity with each other to support feminist agendas. We turn to those examples in the final section of this essay.

Women reclaiming their sense of agency: Healing in the aftermath

Whether in transitional societies that implemented restorative justice processes such as truth commissions, or in Namibia, where no transitional processes were put in place, victims and perpetrators of violence continue to live in the same country and in some cases in close proximity in the aftermath of mass violence. Although men and women have suffered profoundly from organized conflict, women have been exposed to particularly gendered forms of violence, suffering multiple forms of rape and other kinds of sexual violence. Women may also experience qualitatively differ-

ent modes of cruelty, from severe injuries caused by gang rape, to gender-specific illnesses associated with HIV and AIDs, to bringing up children conceived through rape, to being forced into marriage. War may also have disparate gendered effects. As Karen Brounéus has documented in this issue, after the genocide in Rwanda 40 percent of women were widowed, compared with only 3 percent of men.

Despite their pain and suffering, however, some women in postconflict African countries have reached out to form bonds of solidarity in order to rebuild communities ravaged by war. Inspired by a desire to break cycles of violence that often ensnare successive generations, some women have advocated peace at national and regional levels. In many cases, women have forged ties across ethnic, religious, class, and enemy divides to try to stop war. During the war in Liberia, for example, the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) organized successfully to mobilize women from all regions and ethnic groups to stop the war. While surrounding the hall where peace negotiations were underway to physically prevent negotiators from leaving, WIPNET issued a statement that was unequivocal in its authority: “In the past we were silent, but after being killed, raped, dehumanized, and infected with diseases, and watching our children and families destroyed, war has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace! We will not relent until peace prevails” (Molinero 2008).

Similarly, the signing of the peace accord that established the newest country in Africa, South Sudan, opened up space for a new kind of gender politics. In an act that demonstrated a “deeply gendered” transnationalism, the South Sudan Women’s Empowerment Network created a coalition of Sudanese women in diaspora and Sudanese women in their country of birth to challenge patriarchal power (Erickson and Faria 2011, 628).

In Rwanda, women who lost their husbands in the genocide joined forces with women whose husbands are serving long-term prison sentences for their participation in the genocide. Their goal: basket weaving for economic survival (Sentama 2011). Overcoming ethnic barriers entrenched through mass murder, these women are working in solidarity to rebuild the dignity of their communities and to give their children a life free from violence.

The image of women from opposite sides of genocide weaving together is a powerful symbol of connection. Solidarity of this magnitude raises important questions about the factors that enable some women in postconflict societies to work together to restore peace in their communities. What forces enable an ethical vision of compassion and care for others, even an “other” who is a former enemy? Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

(2011) has suggested that certain languages and cultural practices associated with motherhood enable and sustain a spirit of empathy and compassion. In our work in Rwanda and South Africa, what has been most striking about the women who forge links with one another, despite coming from opposing sides of past violent conflict, is their shared experience of being a mother or a widow. These sites of shared experience provide points of identification, entryways into the experiences of others, which enable comparison across critical registers of difference. Appeal to the familiar and the familial creates a context in which it is possible to engage empathetic questions, such as “How would I feel?” and “What if it were me?” By grounding themselves in what is shared, they create mutual intelligibility. The shared experience of loss, for example, cuts across the distinction of “victims” or “perpetrators.” On the terrain of a horrific past, certain statements resonate deeply: “My son was eighteen years old when he was conscripted into the army; he was brought back in a body bag and I wasn’t allowed to see him.” “My son was eighteen when he was abducted, and twenty years later we still do not know where his remains are.” “My best friend died in the bombing of St. James church.” “ANC soldiers killed my little niece.”

It is ironic that the same factors that can ignite and perpetuate animosity, fear, and hatred—the love for those killed or maimed by “the other”—might also suspend those negative sentiments. By providing a way into the experience of the “enemy,” love and loss may provide a way out of violence. Ultimately, love and loss are what is common and thus in a sense shared. Love and loss enable healing that opens new possibilities in the aftermath of violence.

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