There was this Goat (2009) is a book that one cannot avoid in current discussions and theorizations of trauma in South Africa. The present tripartite essay, which is rather theoretical in scope, takes up There was this Goat as a case study to show how problematical it is to work with Western psychiatric and cultural theories of trauma in a complex post-colonial situation like that of South Africa. In the second part, by drawing on the work of Patrick Bracken, I will suggest the urgency of refurbishing the concept of trauma through an idiom that can account for both complex models of time and the lived experience of trauma. The third part addresses the specifically South African context and endeavours to turn on its head the common question: To what extent should Western theories of trauma be ‘applied’ or ‘adapted’ to fit the South African context? I will argue that there is indeed already a rich non-Western body of work on trauma and race as well as trauma and the experience of the colony, and that it is time to acknowledge it as a seminal contribution to this field.

1. Co-authored by Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and Kopano Ratele, There was this Goat is a re-examination of the TRC testimony of Mrs Notrose

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1 Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni & Kopano Ratele, There was this Goat (Scottsville: U of KwaZulu–Natal P, 2009).
Nobomvu Konile, mother of Zabonke John Konile, one of the Guguletu Seven activists who were killed in March 1986 by the apartheid security forces. Krog, who was reporting as a journalist at the time of the TRC, remembered this testimony and remained particularly struck by it for its dream-like quality. It felt awkward, unintelligible, and incoherent, somehow failing as a testimony because it conveyed a story that within the context of the TRC could not be immediately shared, and thus it remained cut off from the larger national narrative of forgiveness, hope, and reconciliation. While Mrs Konile was speaking, Krog recalled how people were looking away from her, caught between dismay and irritation, even estrangement.²

As Krog explains in *There was this Goat*, the victims’ testimonies at the TRC were expected to follow a particular sequence and form:

> The beginning […] usually consisted of some biographical detail, leading to the middle part about the circumstances and content of the violation. After clarifications, the desire and/or needs of the victim would be established, upon which the commissioner who was chairing that specific evidence, would conclude the interaction.³

Mrs Konile’s testimony did not follow this format, and with its hallucinatory quality unsettled the audience. Whereas the other mothers took the chance to speak about their sons, were clearly conscious about the political climate in which their sons died, and raised issues about violations of human rights and justice, Mrs Konile didn’t. Instead, she talked more about herself, making unclear but persistent statements about housing, a goat she saw that was clearly linked to the news of Zabonke’s death, and a coal rock by which she was pinned down while, it seemed, she was digging in her hometown. Asked at the end by Pumla Gobodo–Madikizela what message she would give to the perpetrators who killed her son, Mrs Konile replied in a low voice that she wouldn’t be able to talk to them and repeated a couple of times that she wouldn’t know what to say or to do with them.

In the context of this essay, I am interested in the second chapter of *There was this Goat*, called “A possible white conversation,” which is inserted self-consciously into the book as a ‘symptom’ of the way in which we have

³ Krog, Mpolweni & Ratele, *There was this Goat*, 85. Further page references are in the main text.