Disgrace, Historical Trauma, and the Extreme Edge of Civility

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it is a dry white season / but seasons come to pass
—Mongane Wally Serote

1. TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE arrived when, aged sixteen, I took out a rather hefty book from our school library by Alex Haley titled *Roots* (1976) and proceeded to engage with it. It was a difficult experience which has stayed with me because it was my introduction to a traumatic narrative that had affected millions of Africans who were sold into slavery. Reading such a book after a relatively short time with regard to the Students’ Revolt of 1976 forced me to think about the power of narrative, of the word-mirror and how a people survive events of untold cruelty. I had no knowledge of *Roots* prior to my reading it, no knowledge of slave narratives and certainly no medium that could have ameliorated my ignorance, since television was only introduced in 1976 and would, under the apartheid regime, certainly not show the television series of it. Mongane Wally Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood* came out in 1981 and there was no way one could read such a text, since it was banned in South Africa and the author was by then living in exile. But *Roots*, freely available in a township high school, introduced me to an aspect of what I now see as a long line of trauma narratives and ironically gave nebulous shape to my disquiet about being a black person in South Africa. I could form an inchoate link between Kunta Kinte

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and his struggles, I could visualize what suffering he must have undergone. Kunta Kinte is indelible from my memory in much the same way that the vaporized person is from Lenore Terr, a renowned expert on the psychology of trauma. At nine years of age Terr saw a newsreel of Hiroshima, produced shortly after the atomic bomb exploded, and portrayed images she has been unable to forget and has lived with the vivid image of the vaporization of a human being.² This phenomenon is called vicarious traumatization, and if one takes into account how violable the black body of Kinte is portrayed in Roots, how violable the black body was during the Students Revolt of 1976, then this is one phenomenon with which I am deeply familiar. Once images are created and visualized, they tend to have their own reality and the power to terrify and enrage.³ Terr writes, in her book, of how over the years she continued to suffer vicarious stress reactions, exaggerated startle responses and sleep interruptions.⁴

The point above is that lack of information and books, and the routine banning of progressive newspapers (the authoritative The World and Daily Dispatch were banned together with others on 19 October 1977), made it difficult for a high-school student to seek to know what it meant to be black in South Africa. One had to resort to whatever book shed light on the human condition within and without South Africa. In a sense, therefore, I have grown up with a sense of the inequalities reflected in the quality of life and the cultural miasma that South Africa engineered. Much later, when I read Sol T. Plaatje’s Native Life in South Africa (1916)⁵ with its impressive first sentence – “Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not


³ Pillemer, “Can the Psychology of Memory Enrich Historical Analyses of Trauma?” 147.

⁴ “Can the Psychology of Memory Enrich Historical Analyses of Trauma?” 147.