The Story of Nongqawuse in South African Twentieth-Century Fiction

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Abstract
The story of Nongqawuse – a young Xhosa prophetess who in 1856 claimed to be the bearer of a message from the ancestors – was told and re-told orally in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The Xhosa population were to slaughter their cattle and burn their crops to see the prophecy fulfilled: the ancestors were expected to rise from the dead, to bring with them new, uncontaminated corn and cattle, and to drive the colonial usurper into the sea. The story activated the imaginative and creative energy of twentieth-century writers, to the point of being revisited several times and adapted to different literary genres (plays, poetry, short stories, novels, and films). In this essay, I discuss three narrative retellings of Nongqawuse's story: Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998), and Mtutuzeli Matshoba's "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion" (1979). My purpose is to highlight the quality of literary inventiveness and technical experimentation that the dialogue, with a deeply suggestive historical past, is able to bestow on contemporary narratives – also on a kind of fiction, like Matshoba's, traditionally considered more documentary and didactic than literary and imaginative.

Key-words: South Africa; 20th-century fiction; Nongqawuse

> *Tell that the whole community will rise from the dead; and that all cattle now living must be slaughtered, for they have been reared by contaminated hands because there are people about who deal in witchcraft.*
>
> (Peires 1989: 79).

These are the words of a prophecy uttered in 1856 by prophetess Nongqawuse at the mouth of the Gxhara River, a few kilometres east

of the Great Kei River, in the land of the Gcaleka Xhosa (present-day Eastern Cape Province, South Africa). This version of the prophecy is to be found in Jeff Peires' work, *The Dead Will Arise. Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (1989). Here Peires provides the most complete historiographical analysis of the movement to this day and discusses the various nineteenth-century sources that record the words of a prophecy delivered by a fifteen-year-old Xhosa girl, Nongqawuse, "on a certain day in April 1856" (Peires 1989: 78)[1]. What happened next is history: between 1856 and 1857 a large number of Xhosa inhabitants of British Kaffraria and the still independent territories east of the Kei River slaughtered something like 400,000 head of cattle, in the hope of seeing the prophecy fulfilled: the ancestors were expected to rise from the dead, to bring with them new, uncontaminated corn and cattle, and to drive the colonial usurper into the sea.

The violence of the Cattle-Killing Movement decreased significantly early in 1858, leaving a destitute Xhosa population: tens of thousands of people had starved to death, and an equal number fled to the Cape Colony in search of means of subsistence (which mainly meant becoming labourers and servants of the white settlers). The weakened amaXhosa gradually lost the territories of their forefathers, and by the end of the nineteenth century the once independent Xhosaland was annexed to the British colonial territories.

The story of Nongqawuse was told and re-told orally in the Eastern Cape – "The story itself of course is a story that I've always known, we all know that story, we grew up with it", said the novelist Zakes Mda in an interview (Mda 2013a: online); it was revisited several times in twentieth-century literature and adapted to different literary genres (plays, poetry, short stories, novels, and films[2]). It is a story of extreme violence perpetrated on animals,

[1] For an overview of the various phases of historiographical and literary research on the subject, see Offenburger 2009. Helen Bradford's articles re-assess the importance of a gendered perspective and of black vernacular sources (see 1996 and 2007). In 2008 a special issue of *African Studies* was devoted to the Cattle-Killing Movement (vol. 67, n. 2). Jennifer Wenzel's *Bulletproof* (2009) explores the literary and cultural "afterlives" of anticolonial prophecies, included the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement.

[2] Some examples regarding the genres not discussed here: there are plays in

which had terrible repercussions on the very people who inflicted death on their livestock; it in turn stems from the violence exercised by white colonialism on a population that towards the middle of the nineteenth century was being progressively deprived of their land and their means of subsistence.

The fictional twentieth-century retellings of the story of Nongqawuse and the Cattle-Killing Movement present elements of primary interest, not only because they feed on historiography – thus contributing to revisiting an astonishing and controversial episode in the colonial history of the Eastern Cape – but also because they create a counter-narrative to the discourse of history through aesthetic means. As literature, fictional rewritings are not strictly bound to historical accuracy – which, in this case, is difficult to achieve, given that events have been handed down mainly through oral transmission. For this reason, twentieth-century fiction succeeds in providing multiple readings of a complex phenomenon, embedded in history, politics, literature, and religion (the Xhosa *millennial dream*).

The technically innovative nature of post-apartheid South African fiction is an undisputed topic. Once freed from the "intense ideological pressure" (Coetzee 1988: 3) that the condition of *legal* racial discrimination exercised on artists and intellectuals, South African writers felt more at ease with literary experimentation, which, in the main, had been considered rather suspiciously in strongly politicised times, and which apparently called for simplification, clarity, and ideological commitment to the cause of liberation. It is therefore little wonder that a post-apartheid novelist like Zakes Mda should weave the texture of his third novel, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), in a literary mode that dismisses a linear

isiXhosa, like Mary W. Waters' *U-Nongqawuse* (1924), and in English, like H. I. E. Dhlomo's, *The Girl Who Killed to Save (Nongqause the Liberator)*, 1936; among more recent plays, see Brett Bailey's *The Prophet*, 1999. English and vernacular poems about Nongqawuse are numerous (see Bradford 2007). Leon Schauder's short film *Nonquassi* appeared in 1939; Mda, Matshikiza and Newman's television docudrama *Day of the Two Suns: The Trial of Xhosa Prophetess Nongqawuse* was distributed in 1999. Harold Scheub's collection of oral retellings of South African stories includes two versions of Nongqawuse's story translated into English (see Scheub 1996: 304-13). As can be seen from these titles, the name "Nongqawuse" has different spellings.

and authoritative narrative of events, setting up a dense dialogue between present times and the narration of the past. This novel is the first to be discussed here, for it engages closely with the story of the Cattle-Killing Movement and the prophecy of Nongqawuse. The second is Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998), which dedicates only a few pages to the recounting of the prophetess's story; nevertheless, the connection with that past episode of South African history is pivotal to understanding the perspective in which the novel is written. *Mother to Mother* also breaks with the convention of a linear plot, and some of its narrative strategies are similar to those adopted in Mda's *The Heart of Redness*.

A different question arises in the analysis of the third work of fiction discussed here. In the 1979 collection of short stories written by Mtutuzeli Matshoba, *Call Me Not a Man,* there is a story entitled "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion", where the homodiegetic narrator undertakes a long journey from Johannesburg to Umtata (the former capital of the Republic of Transkei, now spelt Mthatha and part of the Eastern Cape Province). Once he has reached the land of the "dying illusion", he recalls the episode of Nongqawuse in a strikingly different style from the literary mode employed both in the rest of the collection and in the short story itself. "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion" thus helps highlight the quality of literary inventiveness and technical experimentation that dialogue with a deeply suggestive historical past is able to bestow on contemporary narratives – not only, predictably, on post-apartheid novels like Mda's and Magona's, but also on a kind of fiction that the last thirty years of literary criticism have predominantly considered more as political statements than as artistic expression. Already from the mid-1980s, doubts regarding the formal value of Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* had been raised; he was accused of not paying enough "attention to the special texture of literary expression" (Sole 2001: 104)[3] in his fiction and of representing a sort of manifesto of the ideological stances of the Black Consciousness Movement. "Three Days in the Land of a Dying

[3] Here Kelwyn Sole reports the prevalent opinion of critics from the mid-1980s onwards, but he reassesses Matshoba's literary value. For a more recent, challenging interpretation of Matshoba's short stories see Wenzel 2008: 148-55.

Illusion" seems to tell a different story, though, at least as far as literary inventiveness and aesthetic form are concerned[4].

In discussing these three works of fiction I have decided to work backwards. This means – as mentioned above – that my essay deals first with Mda's novel, published in 2000, and proceeds with the analysis of Magona's, which appeared only two years before, in 1998. Only after examining the two post-apartheid novels do I engage in the discussion of Matshoba's "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion" (1979), written and published in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising (1976). This choice allows me to start by pointing out the full potentialities of an encounter between contemporary fiction and that specific episode of the South African past, since Mda devotes the whole book to the intertwining of voices from a present-day rural Xhosa village and the mid-nineteenth-century Xhosa community living on the same land. Magona's novel and Matshoba's short story engage with that episode only partially; after the encounter with *The Heart of Redness*, a full appreciation of the aesthetic role and of the significance of that prophecy in other works of fiction will be possible.

Helen Bradford remarks that the story of Nongqawuse "soaked up narrative energy" (Bradford 2007: 46). Not only did it generate a relevant number of retellings, but it also fertilised them by shaping their narrative structure in fresh and unusual ways. *The Heart of Redness* enacts a dialogue between past and present which is embedded in the structure of the novel itself: on the verge of the twenty-first century (around 1998), the inhabitants of a Xhosa village, Qolorha-by-Sea, situated at the mouth of the Gxhara River, are still deeply divided on the question of Nongqawuse's prophecy. They live near the very pool where the young prophetess is said to have received the first visit from the ancestors; the Believers are those who still acknowledge the validity of the prophecy, and who worship the memory of Nongqawuse as one of the many seers who,

[4] David Attwell speaks of "a truism in discussions of black South African writing" since the late 1960s, that is the lack of a "fully fledged experimentalism" (2005: 169). He rejects that generalisation, and identifies a kind of experimentalism "that is both socially connected and aesthetically reflexive" (p. 179), with particular reference to Njabulo Ndebele and Zakes Mda. His examination does not include Matshoba's narrative modes.

during the first half of the nineteenth century, tried to improve the chances of liberation from the colonial threat of an already destitute population. The Unbelievers, instead, scornfully reject that version of the story and despise the figure of the young prophet, who, according to them, actually threw the still free Xhosas into the clutches of the colonial invader. The division is historical:

> […] the cleavage caused by the great cattle-killing movement of 1856-57 cut right through the heart of the Xhosa kingdom, dividing the Xhosa into two distinct parties: the majority *amathamba* ('soft' ones) or believers, who accepted the truth of the cattle-killing prophecies, and the minority *amagogotya* ('hard' ones) or unbelievers, who rejected it. The names *amathamba* and *amagogotya* were those used by the people themselves, and every Xhosa homestead, in deciding whether or not to slaughter its cattle, was forced to choose between them. (Peires 1986: 443)

Mda's narrative thus opts from the beginning for a non-univocal, dialogical interpretation of the story of Nongqawuse, rejecting the nostalgic mode and an uncritical recollection of a mythical past – both attitudes that are left to certain characters at certain moments, and are mainly presented with mild irony. The third-person narrator portrays the two factions, and above all their leaders – Bhonco for the Unbelievers and Zim for the Believers – with a combination of irony and benevolence. The narrator's status is ambivalent: he seems part of the small community of a village he knows very well, since he shares the cultural background and way of life of its inhabitants; at the same time, though, he looks at his fellow-citizens' idiosyncrasies and often childish attitudes with detachment and with a hint of amusement. This, for instance, is how he introduces the "war between the Believers and Unbelievers":

> They are in competition in everything. The early manifestation of this competition happened a few years ago when the Ximiyas bought a pine dining table with four chairs. The family became the talk of the community, since no one else in the village had a dining table those days. But Zim, of the family of Believers, had to burst the Ximiya bubble by buying exactly the same dining table, but with six chairs. […] Since then the war between the two families has become a public one. (Mda 2003: 5)

Apart from the difficulty of getting acquainted with a story set in an unfamiliar cultural milieu, non-South African readers also experience

a feeling of awkwardness when confronted with all the personal and family names employed from the start. The initial perplexity is bound to increase when, a few pages into the book, readers run into a sudden change of perspective: the story is abruptly moved back to the mid-nineteenth century, to the world of the Xhosa ancestors who lived in that region one hundred and fifty years before.

History bursts into the narrative in the past tense (the sections set in 1998 are told in the present tense) through the voice of an omniscient narrator speaking in the third person and in the somewhat more elevated style of an official chronicler. Like the first, this narrator knows a great deal about the history, culture and everyday life of the amaXhosa, but at the same time is acquainted with what happens on the other side of the fence, in the headquarters of the whites. At the time of Nongqawuse's prophecy, the British colonial forces were under the command of Cape governor Sir George Grey. The fictionalised Grey is portrayed by the narrator as the shrewd man he probably was: one who tried to subjugate the native populations at the borders of the British colony not only by force, but also through the gradual substitution of their traditional leadership with British 'chiefs', magistrates and cultural habits[5]. The narrator clearly deplores white rule and colonial robbery, but does not really take sides between Believers and Unbelievers, and reports even-handedly reasons and faults of both parties. For instance, the way in which the historical Unbelievers let themselves be drawn into the colonial net is explained by their desperate hope of containing the burst of violence that had exploded among their brothers the Believers, who, in their anti-colonial enthusiasm, were paradoxically destroying their traditional way of life with their own hands.

The violence implicit in the prophecy is manifest. More than the very words of Nongqawuse, which are similar to those used by Jeff Peires in *The Dead Will Arise*[6], it is her uncle Mhlakaza's

[5] Jeff Peires introduces the figure of George Grey in *The Dead Will Arise* as: "The Artful Dodger of Governors" (1989: 45).

[6] The historical background of *The Heart of Redness* is largely inspired by Jeff Peires' *The Dead Will Arise*; Mda himself acknowledges his debt to Peires in the dedication of his novel and in various interviews. Offenburger found the textual similarities between the two narrations so striking that he accused Mda of plagiarism (see Offenburger 2008a and Mda's response, also in 2008).

explanation of her message to the whole community that gives voice to aggressiveness:

> The existing cattle are rotten and unclean. […] Destroy everything. The new people who will arise from the dead will come with new cattle, horses, goats, sheep, dogs, fowl, and any other animals that the people may want. But the new animals of the new people cannot mix with your polluted ones. So destroy them. Destroy everything. Destroy the corn in your fields and in your granaries. Nongqawuse has told us that when the new people come there will be a new world of contentment and no one will ever lead a troubled life again. (Mda 2003: 54-5)

"Destroy" is a reiterated keyword, together with "new", which expresses the profound need for renovation and even purification of people overwhelmed, not only by the pressure of a foreign invasion, but also by a devastating cattle disease, a form of lethal lungsickness probably brought to the Cape by Dutch ships carrying contaminated livestock[7]. In addition, "as if lungsickness was not enough, the maize in the fields was attacked by a disease that left it whimpering and blighted. It crept through the roots and killed the plant before the corn could ripen" (Mda 2003: 51). It is therefore up to the more authoritative male spokesman of the female prophet to spread a message of delivery from evil through violence and sacrifice, and of a millenarian expectation of the healing intervention of the ancestors[8].

The Heart of Redness thus combines two narrative strands, linked by the choice of a non-assertive perspective: both narrators offer multiple interpretations of events and of personal and collective choices. Even the recounting of miracles and wonders is meant to provide an external description of events (often uttered in an elevated, prophetic tone) which tacitly combines with the temporary adoption of the people's point of view on the scene:

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[7] The epidemic of lungsickness imported from Europe is also historical. See Peires 1989: 70ff, and Offenburger 2008b.

[8] On the millenarian aspect of the prophecy, see Peires (1989: 122-44) and Bradford (2007: 63ff); Offenburger lists a number of works on millenarianism and the Cattle-Killing Movement from the 1960s onwards (2009: 1440, note 53); Wenzel (2009) deals with millenarian movements throughout.

The Man of the River appeared at the door of his hut, and after one word from him people saw the star of the morning coming down from the sky and placing itself on his forehead. Another word from him and the earth shook and the mountains trembled. (Mda 2003: 16)[9]

The ambivalent status of the narration is also discussed by Richard Samin, who believes that "this novel presents an epistemological challenge to the inadequacy of dual thinking in post-apartheid South Africa" (2008: 49): the creation of ambivalent situations undermines dualistic patterns of thinking and removes "the barriers that exist between animals and humans, the living and the dead, the wild and the tame, tradition and modernity" (p. 55).

Tradition and modernity coexist in both narrative strands, and are also combined in single characters or groups of people. The late twentieth-century Unbelievers, for instance, who boast of being on the side of *progress* and *civilisation* against *backwardness* and *tradition*[10] (all terms whose historical and social implications are never fully specified by either party), regularly enact a complex memory ritual entailing dance, wailing and a state of trance. In that condition of subconsciousness they feel in connection with the world of the ancestors, and take upon themselves to grieve over the suffering induced by "the folly of belief of the era of the child-prophetess" (Mda 2003: 73). The contest between traditional Believers and progressive Unbelievers is sometimes turned into a pun or a paradox, as when Bhonco indignantly affirms: "'I do not believe in progress,' he shouts in a pained voice. 'I am an Unbeliever. None of us Unbelievers believe! We stand for progress!'" (p. 94). Similarly, although in a much more tragic context, the nineteenth-century Believers "watched […] in disbelief" the failure of the prophecy.

[9] See also the description of King Sarhili's reception of the prophecy (Mda 2003: 78).

[10] The term "Redness" in the title of the novel also refers to the dichotomy between progress and backwardness. Mda explained in a recent interview that the "red people", those who wore the traditional Xhosa costumes dyed in red ochre, were considered backward and uncivilised. On the same occasion he denied having chosen the title of his novel under the influence of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "It has nothing to do with *Heart of Darkness* or anything like that, as some critics have written." (Mda 2013b: online).

The novel also intertwines past and present through the recurrent names of its characters, a choice which contributes to rejecting a unified perspective both on the past and on the present. The devious John Dalton of colonial times, a white soldier loyal to the white oppressor, is also the one who speaks perfect isiXhosa and acts as interpreter between the two cultures. His twentieth-century descendant John Dalton need not retrace the violent steps of his ancestor, although he retains the capacity to inhabit two worlds. The narrator speaks of him as one who possesses "an umXhosa heart", who speaks isiXhosa better than most of the village people, and who was circumcised according to custom: "He therefore knows the secret of the mountain. He is a man" (Mda 2003: 8). The name of Qukezwa, too, recurs in past and present sections of the book. At the time of the Cattle Killing she is a Khoikhoi woman who marries the Xhosa Believer Twin. This "yellow-colored wife" (p. 24) is regarded as an outsider by Twin's brother and friends, because she does not belong to their stock. Twin, instead, is fascinated by the capacity of Qukezwa to immerse herself totally in the natural environment, by her deep knowledge of the things of nature and religion, by her faith in the Khoikhoi Gods and prophets that she worships through deeply-felt rituals. Her counterpart in present times is also *different*, a woman who does not conform, who is deeply connected to the land – to nature and its marvels. Sometimes rash, childish and full of herself, the modern Qukezwa is far from perfect, like any other character in the book. She nevertheless fulfils her role as mediator between nature and human beings, and succeeds in drawing the protagonist Camagu to embrace the cause of the protection of the natural environment from the menace of economic exploitation, and from the less evident violence of a global, neo-colonial imperialism which has set its sights on the spectacular landscapes surrounding the village of Qolorha-by-Sea.

Narrative strategies like the intertwining of past and present events, the ambivalence of open-minded, ironic and sometimes dubitative narrators, the many-sided recounting of the same stories, and the employment of the same names for characters who actually link two periods in history *and* mark the distinction between them, all concur in creating an intense and colourful narration, characterised by the multiplicity of its perspectives[11]. The novel's plurality does not

[11] On the symbolic value of Qukezwa's "split-tone singing" in *The Heart of Redness*

prevent it from suggesting an itinerary to well-being – among the inhabitants of the same territory and also between them and their environment; only, this itinerary is characterised by confrontation, dialogue and the acknowledgment that thinking in stereotypes and easy classifications leads to paralysis, and to the loss of key opportunities to make this world a better place to live in.

Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* is set in 1993, just on the brink of the passage from the apartheid regime to a democratic South Africa in 1994. This means that the events take place in the very years that Mda's novel deliberately left out of the picture: the "Middle Generation" is sometimes evoked in *The Heart of Redness* and its suffering is acknowledged, but the choice to sidestep the horrors of apartheid is one of the strategies of the book and concurs in its originality. Magona's novel, instead, explores the violence of those years in its manifold aspects: the extreme violence of murder; the brutality of removing and *relocating* huge sections of the black population, cramming them into dreary, unhealthy and overcrowded townships; the obligations imposed on the black family, torn apart in order to adapt to the social and economic organisation of white society; the violence exercised on the young, deprived of their childhood and of real opportunities to change their lot through education. Lastly, the fury of words, cries, chants and slogans – the auditory protagonists of daily life in the Guguletu of *Mother to Mother*.

Magona has recently envisioned a sort of *inevitability of violence* for the contemporary South African novel. She defines trauma as "a morbid condition produced by wounds of external violence" (2012: 93), and since that is the condition of a country traumatised for years by an inhuman social organisation, it is "little wonder that the South African novel is preoccupied with trauma. […] trauma is *in the blood* for the people of South Africa; they can neither escape nor ignore it" (p. 93). Accordingly, many of her writings deal with the late- and post-apartheid condition of the destitute black population of South Africa, beginning with her early autobiography *To My Children's Children* (1991), through her essays and interviews (see, for instance, Attwell and Harlow 2000).

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to suggest complexity and multiplicity, see Jacobs 2003, Samin 2008 and Schatteman 2008.

Mother to Mother is no exception. In addition, it takes its cue from an item in the news, which actually took place on 25 August 1993 in Guguletu: the murder of Amy Biehl, a white American young woman stabbed to death by a black mob. The girl, guilty only of imprudently driving a friend home through the township, had gone to South Africa as a Fulbright scholar to help the country prepare for the impending democratic elections. In the "Author's Preface" to the novel, Magona makes it clear that the official version of events is only part of the story: "What was the world of this young woman's killers, the world of those, young as she was young, whose environment failed to nurture them in the higher ideals of humanity and who, instead, became lost creatures of malice and destruction?" (p. v). Magona's intention in writing the book was thus to re-tell the story of Amy Biehl's murder from the perspective of the Guguletu community, employing the point of view of the murderer's mother but without disregarding the tragedy of the absent mother of the story, the white American woman who had lost her child. She therefore decided to use the form of the unidirectional epistolary novel, written from mother to mother: a structure that allowed her to show the other side of the coin without losing the emphatic mood that had set her writing in motion.

It is a loosely-constructed epistolary novel, though. The form of the letter is apparent at the beginning, when the homodiegetic narrator Mandisa addresses Amy Biehl's mother to tell her how she feels, to ask her questions about her daughter, to attempt a preliminary explanation of her son's motives – and, lastly, to ask for God's forgiveness. After the incipit the narration develops more as a diary, with each chapter marked by the same date, that of the murder, and by a specific time in the day. Even the diary form is only partially maintained: the recounting of the story starts alternating between the inexorable progression of young Mxolisi towards murder and Mandisa's recollections of her childhood. These recollections become the heart of the story, since they allow the protagonist to show both what it is like to live and grow up as a poor black woman in apartheid South Africa, and also where her son actually comes from – that is, of what social and physical surroundings he is the *product*[12].

[12] See Schatteman 2008: 282 for a discussion of the formal shifts of genre in *Mother to Mother*.

The story of Nongqawuse makes its appearance only towards the end of the novel, in chapter 10, as part of Mandisa's recollections of her girlhood. The suspicion that her son Mxolisi may be implicated in the murder of Amy Biehl has just begun to take form in her mind; crushed by events, the protagonist abandons herself to another of the many memories of her past life that make up the book, and that mainly deal with the relationship between adults and children. The chosen relative, this time, is her paternal grandfather, who takes it upon himself to set things right as far as the *truth* of history is concerned: schoolchild Mandisa flatly recites to him what they have learnt at school about Jan van Riebeeck and his arrival at the Cape in 1652; to her grandfather's question on whether her teachers had told them anything about Nongqawuse, Mandisa replies: "'She was a false prophet who told people to kill all their cattle and they would get new cattle on the third day'" (p. 175). The girl then adds that the people obeyed "'Because they were superstitious and ignorant'". The old man is filled with indignation: "'These liars, your teachers', he said. 'But, what can one expect? After all, they are paid by the same Boer government … the same people who stole our land'" (pp. 175-6). This is the beginning of a conversation between grandfather and granddaughter that ultimately provides the young mind with a counter-narrative of history which was to shape her mode of thinking for the rest of her life. Not only does she learn her people's truth regarding the story of Nongqawuse, but she also envisages for the first time the possibility of entertaining an alternative version of history, which discloses to her the questionable nature of the interpretation of events. The old man's narrative teaches her to look at the many perspectives from which a story, and history, may be told: "He explained what had seemed stupid decisions, and acts that had seemed indefensible became not only understandable, but highly honourable" (p. 183).

This *story in the story in the story* – the story of Nongqawuse within the story of Mandisa's youth, within the story of the murder of Amy Biehl – thus seems to be one of the clues to the whole novel. The final *truth* that Mandisa wants to pass on to Linda Biehl (the silent mother in the epistolary exchange) does not really regard the discovery of the boy's guilt or the casting of the responsibility for the tragedy on the superficiality and self-assurance of the white girl. What Mandisa really discovers, and what she wants to convey, is

that it is possible to be both guilty *and* innocent, both responsible for one's actions and a victim of the circumstances of one's dreary life and inadequate upbringing. Far from absolving her son from his crime, she blames him sharply instead. Yet individual accountability for a crime does not mean putting the whole burden of history on the shoulders of a single person. It is possible to be guilty, and at the same time to be the product of guilt[13].

Once again, the literary choice of coming to terms with an indefinable historical event, subject to manifold interpretations but ultimately inexplicable, soaks up narrative energies. Both *The Heart of Redness* and *Mother to Mother* – although very different in style, subject matter and narrative mode – enact a dialogue between past and present that results in fragmented narrations with the partial overlapping of different stories. With the help of Nongqawuse, the two novels essentially convey a multiple, non-fixed perspective both on the past and on the present. In the words of Renée Schatteman: "The Cattle-Killing is transformed into present relations through its retelling, which grants each writer the freedom to forgo judgment, embrace irresolution and seek out transcendent answers or possibilities for contemporary South Africa instead" (2008: 290).

What happens, then, when a narrative text which is meant to lead the reader to embrace a specific ideological perspective meets and incorporates the story of Nongqawuse? This is the case of the last work considered here, that is, Mtutuzeli Matshoba's short story "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion", included in his collection *Call Me Not a Man* (1979). Kelwyn Sole's article "Political Fiction, Representation and the Canon: The Case of Mtutuzeli Matshoba" (2001) is particularly helpful to start looking at Matshoba's fiction in a different light from the general critical assessment of his work belonging to the last quarter of the twentieth century. Sole remarks

[13] In the Attwell-Harlow interview, Magona links the Cattle-Killing Movement to the youth riots of 1976 in Soweto, and in general to the street violence of the Eighties and early Nineties. She detects a path of collective degeneration in these movements, which bring the entire community to despair (see 2000: 290). Meg Samuelson remarks that "the incident of the fatal Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1857 is instrumental in understanding Magona's vision of South Africa, past and present" (see 2000: 239).

that, from 1984 onwards – after the strong criticism of Njabulo Ndebele, who "subjected Matshoba and other Black Consciousness writers to a wide-ranging and influential series of critiques" (2001: 105)[14] – the literary fortune of that author as a writer of fiction decreased rapidly and permanently. The very features of his prose style which had earned him popularity from 1978 onwards, when he started publishing short fiction in the weekly newspaper *The Voice* and in *Staffrider,* became aesthetic flaws when literary tastes changed. Sole points out, however, that the stylistic particularities of Matshoba's fiction and even its "idiosyncrasies" (p. 103) had already been appreciated by early critics of his work. Although fully in tune with the politically committed black literature of the Seventies and the Eighties – which sided against the predominant aesthetic convention of "liberal realism" to embrace instead the new mode of "populist realism" (p. 104)[15] – Matshoba's stories intermingle fiction with songs, poems, sound effects, "exegetical statements and philosophical digressions", besides writing "in the form of a dramatic dialogue" (pp. 103-4)[16].

My suggestion is that the incorporation of the story of Nongqawuse within Matshoba's short fiction brings with it changes in style and in the use of narrative techniques; moreover, it broadens the horizon of the short story and employs the dialogue between past and present as an epistemological tool. Finally, it renders the whole narration more imaginative and even visionary, a feature which singles it out from the solid realism of the rest of the collection.

A first element of distinction is the title: if compared with other titles in the book, like "My Friend, the Outcast", "Call Me Not a Man", "A Glimpse of Slavery", and "Behind the Veil of Complacency", "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion" stands out as more imaginative and evocative, not strictly connected

[14] Sole mainly refers to Ndebele's article in *Staffrider* ("Turkish Tales", 1984).
[15] Sole draws the expression "populist realism" from Vaughan's 1982 article.
[16] Williams 1991 and MacKenzie 2002 discuss the transposition of oral forms into Matshoba's short stories. MacKenzie contends that Matshoba's stories owe much to African oral culture, but are unsatisfactory "*as works of literature*" (p. 355, italics in the original).

with the exposure of social injustice[17]. Its double meaning becomes apparent when the narrator comments upon the "dying illusion" concerning the recently established Republic of Transkei (1976), and the historical "dying illusion" stemming from the failed prophecy of Nongqawuse in 1857. Already from the title, therefore, the story succeeds in establishing a relationship between past and present, which discloses its full aesthetic potentialities with the advancement of the plot.

However, there are many features that this short story shares with the others. It may be useful to point them out first, in order to be able to identify more clearly the ways in which it detaches itself from the rest of the collection. The use of the narrator is one of them: in each story of *Call Me Not a Man* a first-person narrator relates either what happened to him personally, or what befell someone else – an incident in another man's life that he witnessed, heard, or even overheard from the very mouth of the person involved. In addition, this narrator is highly intrusive and addresses his readers directly on a number of occasions: to elucidate a point, to call attention to a given aspect of the story, to keep the link between storyteller and audience alive, and also, typically, to instruct readers on the correct perspective they should adopt to understand things rightly. Part of the narrator's task is clearly to educate his readers.

The plausibility of the stories is another stable feature of the collection. Matshoba's didacticism feeds on the faithful representation of black people's daily life towards the end of the Seventies in a hostile environment, made up of violence and outright injustice, but also of the petty viciousness coming from brutal and corrupt policemen, stingy shopkeepers, ill-natured employers and indifferent prison wardens. It is no wonder that characters are represented as realistic and immersed in a realistic environment, even at the expense of their individuality; the stereotypical description of people and situations always lurks in the background.

In spite of all this, Sole is ready to reassess the literary craft of Matshoba the storyteller as far as certain aspects of his narrative technique are concerned. One of them is the complexity of the

[17] Also "A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana" distinguishes itself from the other titles: in Wenzel's words, "[…] it indicates that [Matshoba's] temporal and spatial concerns are more complex than Ndebele allows" (2009: 145).

character of the narrator, who is "nuanced and carefully crafted […] he is self-deprecating, ironic, humorous and compassionate, with an inquisitive, friendly and apparently open-minded streak" (Sole 2001: 109). If this is true for all the stories of the collection, once we get to "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion" the complexity and originality not only of the narratorial figure, but also of the structure and texture of the narrative become apparent. Here the protagonist tells his own story in a lively description of his journey from Soweto to Umtata; although events take place in present times, the relationship of Xhosaland with its past is the real focus of interest. Once the main character reaches Transkei, he is struck by the traditionally-dressed Xhosa women, who remind him of nineteenth-century history and the legends of that territory. This intrusive narrator addresses his readers to justify his "interpositions" and state the importance of the past in understanding the present:

> Please pardon the interpositions, dear reader. I find it hard to look at a country without its historical background looming over it. Maybe this is because of my belief that what is today is determined to a great extent by what happened in the past. (pp. 150-1)

Issues of land and cattle, raised by the passengers on the bus going to Umtata, link past and present even more clearly. The question raised by an "indomitable Xhosa woman": "Where were the men when the land and cattle were lost?" (p. 156), may well refer to the nineteenth-century frontier wars against the British, but the question is immediately applied to the 1970s, to the connivance of the black leaders who accepted the so-called *independence* of the Transkei, thus destroying the last hope of ever developing the economy of that territory. As soon as the bus reaches Umtata, the narrator feels carried back to a past age, and the name of Nongqause (alternative spelling for Nongqawuse) makes its first appearance. He remembers that the girl's "tragedy" had occurred in the Transkei:

> […] the vision came back to my mind in clear detail as we hurtled towards Umtata, for seemingly it is repeating itself during this, my own lifetime. In order to understand my interpretation of past and present events in relation to each other, I think it is necessary to review the tale I heard from my instructional voices. (p. 164)

The narrator thus has a "vision", just like the nineteenth-century Xhosa girl. His recollection of her story is the fruit of a sudden image which imposes itself upon his mind and asks to be interpreted. This timeless vision puts "past and present events in relation to each other", thus working as an epistemological tool to understand both; more than in the events themselves, though, the narrator is interested in his own interpretation of them, which dates back to his school days. Actually this character, even as a boy, found it hard to believe the story of Nongqawuse as it was told by the teacher. Unlike Mandisa in *Mother to Mother*, who is instructed twice (once by the teacher, and then by her grandfather) and receives both lessons passively, Matshoba's narrator constructs his own version of the story from an early age – and it is a version full of creativity and imagination, told in evocative, even prophetic language.

The narrator's recollection of the way in which he had learnt about Nongqawuse's prophecy is told in the form of a *dialogue* between the authoritative version of history provided by the educational system and the young boy's reception of it. The alternate use of italics and Roman script helps the reader to visualise the way in which the schoolboy actualised the teacher's words as soon as they were uttered:

> The voice could not be wrong. It was the instructor's and what's more he was reading from a book, and never a book was wrong:
>
> *Nearly a hundred years ago, a little more than that. You must remember that. In eighteen fifty-six …*
>
> I thought that my father should be about that age. […]
>
> He went on and on about a tale which I found hard to believe. For that reason I tried to construct my own version of the story: the conquest, the dispossession and the vision. (Matshoba 1979: 165)

After this introduction, the story of Nongqawuse begins, and the literary style changes. The intrusive narrative voice disappears, and the reader is plunged into a more traditional storytelling mode, in which an omniscient narrator reports in the past tense and in the third person the thoughts and feelings of his characters. The register switches from the colloquial, dialogical and sometimes brusque tone of the first part of the short story to a more elevated, almost lyrical style. The following passage describes the young maiden when, on the banks of the river, she abandons herself to the silent pain that

the contemplation of the progressive decline of the land and the people arouses in her soul:

> For some time she did not say anything but surrendered herself to her thoughts and the feelings of her soul. The feelings brought tears to her eyes, which overbrimmed and made little streams down the white desert of her face, the cheeks that were caked with *ingxwala*, the white stone. (p. 167)

Matshoba even makes use of the classical *topos* of the reflection in the water of the protagonist's face to suggest the girl's sudden awareness of her own feelings through self-recognition (see p. 167). The girl wishes she could be "a custodian of custom and tradition" (p. 167), and longs to know what is to be done to save her people. What follows lies at the borders of plausibility. It is true that the prophecy stems from the depths of the maiden's mind – and not from the voice of strangers magically speaking from a bush or rising from the water of a pool; but it is also true that she receives it from two different voices speaking alternately inside her, "as if the two voices of her mind were holding conference […]" (p. 169). The story seems to suggest that what Nongqawuse hears on the banks of the river is, and at the same time is not, the message of the *amathongo*, of the ancestors.

The notion of collective sacrifice then makes its appearance, announced by the second voice:

> "To avert the disaster, there must first be a great sacrifice. The people must sacrifice their very existence. […] When the livestock pens are empty and the land is parched they will long for all that was lost and they shall be forced to go over the mountains to reclaim it." (pp. 170-1)

Among the various historiographical interpretations of the Cattle-Killing Movement, Matshoba's version seems to validate the notion that the Xhosa chiefs used the story of the prophecy to spur their people to action, relying on the consequences of the collective sacrifice: starvation and despair[18]. Similarly *rational* – and definitely revolutionary – appears the interpretation of the eschatological

[18] For an overall but concise discussion of the historiographical interpretations of the movement (the "chiefs' plot" / "Grey's plot" theses) see Offenburger 2009.

aspect of the prophecy: the narrator does not really imagine an uprising of the ancestors to drive the white usurpers into the sea; it is the people who shall rise like a hurricane and free themselves from the colonial usurper (see p. 178).

It is clear that Nongqawuse's story suited the general purpose of the author of *Call Me Not a Man*, which was to spur black people to break their chains by becoming aware of the racial and social oppression they were subjected to. But instead of using the same narrative strategies as are found in the other stories (and among them, the device of an intrusive narrator who explains things clearly and unequivocally), the relationship between past and present is exposed in a different narrative style which allows for uncertainty and doubt and explores the psychological agony of a by no means *typical* young Xhosa woman. Far from being represented in stereotypical traits, both the protagonist and her father Mhlakaza rise to the status of fully individualised characters.

Despite the political assumptions underlying *Call Me Not a Man*, "Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion" is differently constructed and differently told when it comes to the rewriting – and the re-imagining – of the story of Nongqawuse. Matshoba succeeds in imbuing his narration with an aura of sacredness and wonder which suggests the possibility of multiple interpretations of events. His rendering of this story of violence, just like Magona's and Mda's, is built on the overlapping of different narrative strands which make use of the past as an epistemological tool to offer new perspectives on the present. Above all, the story of Nongqawuse opens up the possibility to explore different aesthetic forms – a possibility seized not only by the late twentieth-century novels of Magona and Mda, but also by Matshoba's strongly political, committed narrative of the late Seventies. Like the powerfully constructed character of his Nongqause, Matshoba believed that "the clans should unite – and actually helped to seek this togetherness by the infinite stretching of [his] imagination" (p. 173).

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