

# Among Us “Third World Women”, Trauma, Colonialism and Political Organization

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**Abstract** This chapter proposes to analyse the centrality of trauma in the production of ties of solidarity and political organizing among women survivors of State violence, experienced inside and outside prison walls. Written in first person by both a Brazilian and a South-African woman, the paper proposes to consider trauma as a central element to understand solidarity, but also political organizing. Based on both of the authors’ experiences of mobility, the paper takes into account the centrality of trauma in colonial historiography.

**Keywords** Trauma. Third world women. Feminist theory. Solidarity. Social organization. State violence.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 “Third World Women”, Trauma, Colonialism, and Political Organizing. – 2.1 For Us: South American Historiography and Trauma in the Silent Plot of Colonialism. – 2.2 The Grey Side: An Apartheid and Migration Story. – 3 Conclusions Among Us: “Third World Women”, Trauma, Colonialism, and How to be a Survivor.

## 1 Introduction

This contribution results from two very different experiences of mobility by its authors. One involves an international visiting research project developed by Natália Corazza Padovani, a Brazilian feminist anthropologist who spent two months at the University of Bologna (Italy). The other concerns the migration trajectory of Natasha Adelaide

Anyanwu, a South-African woman who was incarcerated in São Paulo (Brazil), becoming a migrant through her prison experience. They met each other through their lived experiences of migration and experience with anthropological fieldwork on migration.

The article proposes to analyse the centrality of trauma in the production of ties of solidarity and political organizing among women survivors of State violence, lived inside and outside prison walls. The authors examine and discuss trauma and political solidarity, contextualizing their individual trajectories against the backdrop of colonial relations that produce harsh subjectivities while also silencing traumatic experiences. Written in the first person by both a Brazilian and a South-African woman, the paper proposes to consider trauma as a central element for understanding solidarity, but also political organizing.

## 2 “Third World Women”, Trauma, Colonialism, and Political Organizing

The essay is organized in two parts. The first one provides the theoretical framework and an empirical description of Natália Corazza’s own perception of her mobility as a feminist anthropologist from the ‘third world’ living in Italy for a brief period. In the second part of the paper, Natasha Adelaide Anyanwu tells us her story in first person. Finally, the paper ends with an analytical encounter between the two different first-person testimonial writings, highlighting how these two radically different stories of mobility enables one to apprehend the ties of solidarity created through our experiences and the power asymmetries shared among us: women socially and geopolitically considered as being from the ‘third world’.

### 2.1 For Us: South American Historiography and Trauma in the Silent Plot of Colonialism

“For you, jail is hell. For us, an even greater hell is parole”. With this phrase, Natasha Adelaide Anyanwu, a South-African woman survivor of imprisonment in São Paulo state, began her speech at the meeting that took place on November 24, 2019, in the *Terreiro de Candomblé*<sup>1</sup> of Mãe Batia de Oxum, located at São Paulo city. The meeting set

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**1** Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion and ‘terreiro’ refers to the sacred houses where the Candomblé rituals are practiced. To learn more about this topic, see Prandi 2000.

the stage for For Us, a social movement created with the objective of gathering women who had been imprisoned in Brazil.

The people gathered at the meeting were Brazilian, Filipina, South-African, young, old, mothers, sisters, daughters, friends, lovers, evangelicals, candomblecists. All were women tired of being subjugated in their narratives. Tired of seeing their demands transformed into social projects led by (other) women and men who had never been arrested. Through the For Us association, the women made a commitment to listen to and welcome each other. "It was when I raised my voice that I stopped being afraid to tell my story. Then I became stronger", said Mãe Batia de Oxum, who also was incarcerated during the first decade of the years 2000.

On that day in November of 2019, the women who attended the first For Us meeting created relational exchanges of knowledge and webs of solidarity through their imprisonment experiences. Through their speeches, they emphasized that each narrative of pain and suffering exposed there was different, but all were equally important. During a brief moment of that meeting, when some of the Brazilian and foreign women began to dispute the levels of oppression to which they had been or were being subjected, one of the oldest women there, who had spent over ten years inside three different Brazilian prisons, forcefully positioned herself: "No prison can be considered bigger than the other". Understanding the prison and policies of incarceration, which each of them knew from the inside, implied taking the act of listening to each of their processes of imprisonment seriously. This is how the For Us collective of women prison survivors came to life.

In late 2022, I spent just over two months at the University of Bologna as a visiting researcher. At first, the focus of my research project, in the Centro Dipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia of the Department of Modern Languages,<sup>2</sup> consisted of analysing how narratives of trauma produce social and political organizing. My ethnographic interest dwelled on social and political organizations comprised of women survivors of prison violence in Brazil, more specifically the experiences of South-African women who integrate the For Us association. Many South-African women are arrested in Brazil accused of being a part of the international drug market. It is interesting to analyse transnational mobilities between two countries claimed to be a part of the Global South, especially if one considers displacements

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**2** In 2021 I was awarded a Coimbra Group Scholarship, which called for Latin American researchers. As my interest was focused on narratives of trauma from a feminist approach, I applied with a project proposal to be developed in the Centro Dipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia of the Department of Modern Languages, under Rita Monticelli's supervision. Rita Monticelli is a full Professor of English Studies, Gender, and Women's studies in Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna. She also is the Coordinatrice of MA GEMMA (Women's and Gender Studies) at UNIBO.

taking place through an illegal market. It is quite revealing to see how power asymmetries between these two countries are negotiated and reaffirmed in the social relations established daily by the people living inside and outside Brazilian prisons. Such an analysis also permits one to destabilize ideas of Global South and Global North per se.

But the subject of my research interests change as a result of my own displacement from the Southeast of Brazil to Northern Italy in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was just ending, and while Brazil was going through what may be considered the most important presidential election of its recent history.<sup>3</sup> But this is what happens when we seriously consider transnational mobilities to be a research method (Mahler, Pessar 2001; Horn 2008; Corazza Padovani 2019). Crossing borders means reframing not only concepts, but also perceptions of our own social location amidst the relations established during processes of mobility. What does it mean to be an anthropologist in a language department? What does it mean to be a white Latina feminist anthropologist in a language department in an Italian university? What does it mean to be a South American in Italy, more specifically, in Bologna (*la rossa*), during October and November 2022? How do these social locations impact perceptions of others about me? How does it impact my perception of being in Bologna, in Italy, and what does it mean to me and to my subject of analysis?

Certainly, it does have an impact.

During my days in Bologna, I visited a lot of churches. Even when I thought I was visiting a museum, I would later find out that I was, in fact, visiting a church. And I must say that, as a South-American woman, visiting churches in Italy has a special meaning. These visits made me reflect upon *trauma* not only as a narrative that produces civil organizations and political solidarity, as in the For Us association, but more broadly, as a historiographical concept that produces ideals about the nation-state. Moreover, that produces silences regarding the traumas and tortures enacted abroad, placing the spotlight on internal politics. Visiting churches in Bologna led me to refer back to a literature that I had read when I was an undergraduate student of social sciences in Brazil. Aníbal Quijano's 2005 critiques of the concepts of modernity and development, and Eduardo Galeano's 1997 bloody descriptions of colonial scenes in Latin America, both deeply influenced my look towards the paintings and sculptures exhibited at the churches that I was visiting. I was also under the influence of a fictional and dystopian book, which impacted me not only intellectually,

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**3** In October 30, 2022, the right-wing extremist politician Jair Messias Bolsonaro, famous for considering torturers during military dictatorship in Brazil to be idols, as well as for his anti-climate, racist, and misogynist positions and politics, lost the elections to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a central-left wing politician who came from the laboring class, and is recognized as a main trade union leader in Brazilian history.

but physically too – through feelings, anguishes, dreams, and son on. All these texts gained new meanings during my time in Bologna.

In the dystopian novel named *O quase fim do mundo* (Almost the World's End), the white Angolan writer Pepetela 2008 describes a character: a black woman who spends time visiting empty capitals of European countries and their famous museums and art galleries. She walks completely alone through territories, which prior to an apocalypse that made almost everybody in the world disappear, she wouldn't be accepted. Spaces that, in other times, she would have been denied access. One of the most emblematic scenes from the book (at least for me) describes the echoes of her footsteps in an entirely empty Louvre.

Ironically, the existence of the character and the fact that she did not disappear like the majority of humanity is due to the same reason for why she was denied access to the territories and spaces that were only open to her after the apocalypse and the disappearance of almost everybody in the world.

I apologize in advance to those who never read this dystopian Angolan novel for the huge spoiler that I am about to give. In order to understand the arguments in the discussion section of this chapter, it is important that you know that the story's main characters only survived because their existence was insignificant even to those responsible for almost ending the world. Their existence was not recognized by the governing power structures of the pre-apocalypse world, they were invisible and inaudible. It was as if they didn't exist at all. So, they didn't need to be exterminated in the first place. These were the people that survived: the non-existent ones. The ones that were nothing.

The post-apocalypse colonization of the world invented by Pepetela in his novel is carried out by the joining of a group of people once so insignificant that they were not even considered important to be murdered during the war waged by those characterized as global powers. The images of a black Angolan woman walking through an empty Louvre, freely wandering through its galleries without being blocked by a guard or a checkpoint, came to my mind and was felt in my body when I entered many of Bologna's churches all by myself.

But in Santa Maria della Vita, the feeling was even stronger. The place was so silent that my footsteps echoed throughout the walls. It was dark too, but I was able to see the amazing Niccolò dell'Arca's sculpture. *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, from 1463, depicts the biblical scene of Christ being removed from the Cross, and having his body washed: being cared for by women screaming and mourning his death after torture and murder.

To a white feminist and anthropologist from Brazil, from South America, I must say that the majestic scenes of Christ's torture spread all over the city of Bologna (and around Italy, I imagine) cause a particular impact. These sacred art depictions create a historiography

of a city and of a country that reminds visitors that this is a territory produced, politically and economically, through a huge original trauma: the torture of a man (mainly represented as white), who was crucified and murdered. The trauma is expressed in the faces of the women screaming. The man's murder causes trauma and inflicts pain to the women who loved him.

There is another huge traumatic memory that strongly informs Bologna's historiography: the struggle to resist fascism. And I mean the resistance to Mussolini's fascism and to contemporary fascism. Both traumatic narratives are presented as histories of torture and heroism, experienced especially by men, and by the women who were their companions - mothers and wives. Both histories seem to produce local economies and politics.

However, it was in the expression of pain depicted in the faces of the women that received the plagued and bleeding body of Christ that I became aware of the feeling of violence that I was experiencing through my steps. I also realized that my experiences were muted and made invisible. During my time in Bologna, the periods of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were permanently brought to my South American, white, and feminist eyes. The dates, combined with the terror of torture and pain portrayed in Christ and both Marias' faces and bodies, perversely eclipsed the tortures and pains that were being inflicted by white and Christian men at exactly the same time that sculptures as *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* were being made: sculptures and paintings made in the name of the original trauma that creates a certain historiography of Europe as a political and economic power in modern history.

Contemplating the power of such amazing sculptures and the gold gloriously exhibited in Italian churches made me feel that I was an inaudible and invisible being. Narratives of trauma are frequently related to the historiography of nations. Commonly, they are intertwined with histories of resistance and heroism. The original trauma that produces Latin America historiography is the colonial invasion. And for that trauma to be transformed into a heroic narrative of progress and enlightenment, it is frequently told as a struggle to 'pacify' barbarian territories and to civilize its populations. The torture inflicted onto people in South America was considered to be an act of God by the Pope Alexander VI. According to the Holy Church, the type of torture inflicted onto the body of a supposedly white man named Christ was considered a holy act of salvation when inflicted onto indigenous people in South America, a territory "senza re, senza legge, senza fede" (kingless, lawless, and faithless). A heathen land waiting to be 'saved' (see Galeano 1997; Oliveira 2018).

Unfortunately, these narratives of trauma do not concern an ancient history, a colonial past that can be left behind us. Inspired by Anne McClintock 1995, I can say that the colonial context is our

current time. There is no 'post-colonialism', since colonial relations draw the geopolitical power asymmetries of our present time. The colonial clash was in the echo of my own footsteps while I was walking through the churches of Bologna.

At this point it is very important to highlight that I am a white South American feminist anthropologist who was visiting Bologna. It is also important to highlight that my name is Natália Corazza Padovani, a very Italian name. My history and my family's history are also intertwined with the colonial invasion of South America. I am neither an indigenous nor a black woman in Brazil. And yet, I am also part of the 'blood cauldron of Latin America' (Galeano 1997). Therefore, I am a subject of colonial power who inflicts and suffers the impacts of colonial trauma.

Marie Moïse 2021, a feminist writer who is also a PhD candidate in Philosophy at Padua University, produces a very beautiful and provocative analysis inspired in Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 formulations about her own condition as a bordering subject - a *mestiza*. Moïse came from a family of Haitian immigrants living in Italy, and even though she was born in this European country, she is not recognized as an Italian citizen. Through her writing, Moïse calls attention to the fact that in Italy she is not able to be a citizen, but in Haiti she is characterized as a white woman, and is perceived and can be considered a part of the colonial violence that produced class and race differences in Haitian society.

My transnational experience in Bologna made me reframe my conception of narratives of trauma as an element for political organizing, through analysing and feeling, in my own body, the effects of the historiography of colonial trauma, which produces geopolitical hierarchies, but also, eclipses the recognition of some traumatic experiences while spotlighting other traumatic experiences. The act of shedding light and shadowing traumatic narratives is described by Michael Humphrey 2010 as "politics of trauma". As a sociologist, Humphrey analyses trauma in terms of governance and governmentality.<sup>4</sup> Through a multi-sited fieldwork of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa, carried out in contexts of post-conflict in countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Colombia, Humphrey calls attention to the moral criteria implicit in 'politics' that creates possibilities and impossibilities for recognizing trauma. To be recognized as a victim of State violence, or a victim of torture, one must embody the idea of victim. An idea produced by attributes of class, race, gender, and sexuality. According to Humphrey,

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<sup>4</sup> Governmentality is a neologism created by Michel Foucault 1991 that names 'governmental rationality'. Governmentality can be defined as the ensemble formed by public and private institutions, procedures, techniques, analyses, and reflections geared towards governing populations and subjects.

victims testimony becomes enmeshed in forms of governance. In other words, the construction of the victim, the conceptualization of the events, the validity of the memory and the moral criteria of recognition circumscribe what is heard. (52-3)

Taking the movie *The Secret Life of Words*<sup>5</sup> as the object of her analysis, Rita Monticelli 2018 also looks at the connections between trauma and silence at a political scale. In her article, Monticelli addresses what she calls “technologies of trauma”. According to her, silencing trauma makes the traumatic experience heavily present. As Teresa de Lauretis 1987 argues when analysing “technologies of gender”, Rita Monticelli considers trauma as an “off set” element, which is present even in its absence, in the background of the scene. According to Monticelli, even when a traumatic experience is shared, a certain degree of silence is retained; though one can hear, read, or see narratives of torture, no one can feel it completely without living through it.

Rita Monticelli’s theoretical conceptualization of “technologies of trauma” gave me elements to comprehend what I felt as a heavy silencing of colonial trauma when entering Bologna’s churches. The violence of colonialism in South America, so well described by Eduardo Galeano 1997, was continuously surpassed during my time as a visiting scholar in Bologna. Only the sound of the echo of my steps, entering the chapel of Santa Maria della Vita, could shed light on the juxtaposition between my own South American existence and Pepetela’s narrative of a dystopian colonial apocalypse in Mozambique.

Through my own body and my own steps, the torture committed by the colonizers of South America became present in front of the Niccolò dell’Arca sculpture, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*. And still, my steps produced an extremely loud silence. But even if every European tourist and visitor at Santa Maria della Vita could hear my South American thoughts, the colonial trauma would not be a memory to be overcome. To paraphrase Donna Haraway’s 2016 famous provocation, trauma is something to stay with. Staying with trauma can be a way to resist and produce political solidarity, which always results from differences and asymmetries: the borders among us. No prison can be considered bigger than the other. The act of listening must be taken seriously, even in the grey area of silences.

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**5** “The secret life of words” was launched in 2005. The movie, written and directed by Isabel Coixet, tells the story of Hanna, who is a survivor of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and Josef, who was wounded in a fire on an oil rig in the middle of the ocean.



## 2.2 The Grey Side: An Apartheid and Migration Story

My name is Natasha, I am fifty years old, and I was born and raised in South Africa, during the Apartheid era.

When people think of the Apartheid era, they think of the atrocities that were committed by the white population against native black people. It is true, there were terrible human rights violations that occurred, but my story happens in the grey side of this history. There is a side to this history that is grossly overlooked, the story of the *coloured* population; those that were too black to be white and too white to be black. The Apartheid government had segregated every part of the population, black people in one community, white people in another, and *coloured* people separated from both. Nothing has changed, even with the current Democratic government, *coloured* people are not considered to be real Africans. This is my story.

I was eight years old when I was sent to boarding school, faraway from home and in an area that was predominantly Afrikaner and dangerously racist. Initially, I was excited to be away from home, I thought that finally I would be safe. I was wrong. I can't say how long I was there before the problems started. I was, after all, very young. One afternoon after school, I was in my room and about six High School girls came into my room and dragged me to the bathroom. They stripped all my clothes off and started scrubbing me with nailbrushes, shouting that I was a *kaffir*, and they would scrub the *kaffir* right out of me. If you don't know what a *kaffir* is, it is about the equivalent of calling someone a *nigger*. It is the worse racial slur in South Africa.

I remember being very scared, very humiliated. Nobody stopped them or helped me. I don't remember how it ended; I just remember this part. I was already used to violence, and had a natural instinct to survive, so I did. I survived.

I remember wondering why people would treat me this way; I was white, after all. My grandmother told me that I was dark skinned because we had olive skinned Italian ancestors, I believed her, why would I not? At the previous school I had attended, I had been bullied and beaten, oftentimes not telling anyone, because no one had helped me when I first complained, and because nobody was interested in what I had to say. I was told repeatedly that I was just bad, I was the daughter of Satan, and that was the end of that. Until this day I remember the bullying and name calling that I had faced in the previous school; I remember the name of the main instigator that started her relentless campaign of racial discrimination against me at the tender age of eight. She and her band of friends shouted every racial slur you can think of, always in front of the other children, so that everyone would know that I was a white impostor, an enemy.

In the beginning, I would defend myself by repeating the story that I was part Italian; but after being bullied so many times, I just gave up. When the bullying turned into beatings, I learned to fight back, and then, nobody had the nerve to bully me. I learned all by myself, at a very young age, that if you want to survive, you need to fight back. I had no peace: no peace at home, and no peace at school. I started acting out, but the calls for help of a little girl were labeled as bad behavior. Bad behavior that should be beaten out of me. I was beaten so badly once with a belt buckle that when I changed my clothing for a swimming lesson, the teacher alerted the police and really nothing was done about it. I could not understand why nobody would help me, but I understand now: my skin color was just a shade of suspect. In those days in South Africa, the most important thing was to be white. Non-white people were treated as if they were less than demons. In fact, the very word *kaffir* is derived from Arabic and literally means infidel, or unbeliever. Not only was the government unashamedly racist; they also corrupted religion to fit their rhetoric, as do many fanatics.

Jesus was white. The devil was black. I should have understood it at that time. If I was the daughter of Satan like I was told, then what race was I? But it never entered my mind to question my race. I was eight...

When I was ten, we moved to a new house (we moved a lot). We moved to Simon's Town, a picturesque town next to the sea. It was beautiful, it was a liberal area. I attended a new school where I was not bullied and where other 'Italian descendants' attended. We not only attended, but we were accepted - for the most part. There were a few minor incidents, but nothing serious. I attended this school for three years, the most time I had ever spent in a school. I went to another school, and another one, and returned there for one more year of bliss. When I returned in grade ten, an Afrikaner boy called me a *kaffir*, he pointed out that I was indeed a *coloured*, and not a 'pure white girl'. But by then I was older, and I had a mouth on me. My response was that *coloured* people were a mix of black and white, and added that everybody knew that his father was sleeping with their domestic worker at night, and very soon he would have a *coloured* brother or sister. Nobody ever dared to bully me again.

Honestly, growing up in Apartheid South Africa, I did not even know that Apartheid existed. In my mind, I thought that the different races in South Africa chose to live separately because different races simply did not gel together. I thought it was normal that different races chose to be separated.

We attended a church that met in someone's house every Sunday. *Coloured* people also attended. I did not realize that they attended at great risk to everyone. My grandmother would also sometimes take me to a house in Salt River, where we would buy *koeksisters* (a traditional dessert pastry). I thought it was very weird; my grandmother

made delicious koeksisters, why did we need to go to this house at times? I pointed this out to her, and she became nervous (she was never relaxed). She told me that it was a family tradition to support those people sometimes. This house was occupied by *coloured* people, and these people would always fawn over me, asking about my mother. I thought it was strange, especially because she told me not to tell anyone that we had been to the house and taken tea with them.

I was in grade eleven when I heard Paul McCartney (during some kind of Hollywood ceremony that had been televised in 1989) tell the world that Nelson Mandela should be released in South Africa. I asked my uncle who Nelson Mandela was, and he said to just forget about it: "Nelson Mandela is a domestic terrorist, forget about it". And I did. The following year, Madiba was released. I turned eighteen that same year, and I was told the truth about my family. My family was *coloured*, and when my mother was fourteen years old, they had been reclassified as white and had been separated from the part of their family that had not been considered to pass as white. The separation of her family was so extreme: my great grandmother had fifteen children, of which only six were reclassified as white. I never knew any of the others, or their children. When my grandmother died, those *coloured* relatives of hers were at her funeral. I did not know who they were.

I was shocked and confused: how could this be? I had been raised in a community that vilified other races. Black people were dangerous and savages; *coloured* people were the unwanted result of black and white mixing, bastards, and an embarrassment. I remembered the entire trauma I had experienced: all the beatings, all the hurtful words... They were all true. Looking back, and knowing what I know now, I do realize that I was extremely blessed by the fact that nobody had reported me to the race relations department, that I had not been taken away from my family by the government. South Africa had a race relations department that monitored the purity of the white community and absolute segregation of all races. My issue was not that I was *coloured*, my issue was this: if the bullies in my story had been right all along about my race, then all the other terrible things said to me while I was growing up must have been true too. I was already confused, and now I was lost. I was confused and very angry. I became a problem child. It was difficult for me to understand the difference between right and wrong, I had difficulties concentrating. Nobody helped me.

Until recently I thought that *coloured* people were reclassified by force, that those *coloureds* that were too white were an embarrassment to the white population, so they were forcefully removed from their families and communities and placed into white communities. Not so long ago, I learned that they were reclassified as white by choice. The process was lengthy and humiliating. Reclassification of race included a visual inspection of physical attributes: skin

tone, shape of the face, firmness of earlobes and of course the pencil test. A pencil was placed behind the ear and the candidate had to bend down and touch the ground. If the pencil remained behind the ear, you were classified black. If the pencil fell out, maybe you were *coloured*, and maybe you were white. The interviews were recorded and sent to Pretoria, where pure raced white Afrikaner government officials would decide your race and your fate. During the interview, officials would walk around the candidates, assessing them as you would assess cattle, not saying anything. Of course the biggest fear of any reclassified family would be the birth of a child that did not tick all the boxes of being white. During the process of reclassification, every single act that required an identity document was frozen. The reasoning being that if you were about to be classified white, you could not have a paper trail of another race. Children could not go to school, people to hospitals, everything was in limbo until the government had decided which side of the fence you belonged. The process could take years. Officials even spied on candidates.

During this time, people who doubted the race purity of their neighbours, their colleagues, or even children that were schooled with their children, simply had to call the race relations department to have these impostors reclassified and removed from society. During the winter, I pass for white, but in the summer, after five minutes of sun exposure, it is extremely obvious that I am, in fact, not white. Children were separated from their parents and held by the government until it could be decided if in fact they were white. Schools called the race relations department to report children in schools that were obviously not white. Schools expelled and denied education to any child that did not fit. These children, if not taken away by the government, would have to be home schooled. In one case, a child that was born to a pure white family contracted Addison's disease as an infant. The disease left her skin unnaturally dark. She was denied access to schools, had to be home schooled, and eventually she requested to be reclassified and married a black man. This girl came from a 'pure white' Afrikaner family who were staunch white supremacists. Public figures, and even an extremely successful boxer and his family were reclassified. This boxer thereby lost his right to pursue his boxing career, because non-whites could not compete against white athletes.

Looking back, I remembered how my grandmother would almost never leave the house; she was afraid of turning darker. She would always insist that I stay out of the sun. She must have noticed how quickly I changed *color*. She lived her life in fear, in a constant state of panic, knowing that at any moment her whole world could fall apart. I understand that she chose to be reclassified because she thought that it would give her children a better chance at a peaceful and prosperous life. But she gained no peace in return. Madness, pure madness. I have read the Bible many times, I am yet to find the verses

where racism is encouraged. Strange how people chose to overlook the words, “A new commandment, I give unto you. That you love one another as I have loved you”.

Growing up, I never knew my father much. He was white, for all the good it did him. After fighting in the Angolan war, he lost the plot. He became addicted to drugs and alcohol, and I suppose he did the best he could, given the circumstances. I do not judge anyone, and understanding quells the fire that anger ignites. I did not know his family, never knew my grandparents growing up. I met my father’s mother when I was in High School. I was not impressed, to say the least. I remember once my aunt (my father’s sister) told me proudly that she told my father not to marry that *kaffir* (my mother). One of my father’s oldest friends, who I call my aunt because she has shown me more understanding than anyone I know, told me her story. She had a relationship with a dark skinned Indian man. She became pregnant, and when the baby was born, the hospital called the race relations department. Her newborn baby was taken away from her and given to the father’s family. She was imprisoned, humiliated, and degraded for having a relationship outside of her race. He was also imprisoned and beaten. When Apartheid was done away with, the first thing she did was to contact her child. On the flip side, one of my father’s uncles fell in love with a *coloured* lady, married her and changed his race from white to *coloured*. I cannot say how this affected his relationship with his family, I can only guess, based on the fact that my father’s family abhorred the idea of my very existence. My great uncle was an educated man, and after having changed his race, he could only work as a labourer.

It must have been incredibly difficult for my maternal grandmother to separate from her family, there could be no therapy, no healing for her. Where could she turn for help, for therapy, fully aware that the majority of white people were vigilant for racially impure impostors? If she had gone and spoken to someone, the chances are good that they would have reported her. Doctors and psychiatrists were not unbiased individuals who simply cared for patients, everyone was a spy. I cannot imagine how my mother grew up in a *coloured* community, surrounded by her big family, ostracized by the white community, and suddenly at the age of fourteen was declared white, separated from her family and friends, and promptly moved to a neighbourhood of white people. I also cannot understand how she thought it would be a good idea to send her obviously *coloured* eight-year-old daughter to a boarding school in the heart of Afrikaner land.

And then, Madiba was released from prison. White South Africans had a referendum to vote in favor or against the rights of black people to vote. I voted yes, they absolutely should have rights, as human beings. My vote was not just a vote for democracy, but also a vote against the racism that I had suffered growing up. I really thought that this would be the end of the road for me, as far as racism was

concerned. I was positive. I was happy to see the ANC on the ballot, and I voted for them. With the dissolution of the Apartheid regime, many African people voiced their horror stories of the Apartheid, truth and reconciliation was on the table, and I was hopeful that we would move forward as the rainbow nation, to overcome the past and build a new democratic society. But what does it mean to be a democratic society? Is it possible to leave behind a history of violence and oppression? Is it possible to produce a rainbow nation without facing the scars of history? How can we live in a traumatized nation?

The 'rainbowism' (Cock 2004; Mavengano, Hove 2020), articulated by Nelson Mandela in 1995 in order to create a united South Africa, was systematically challenged by many economic and political barriers. The violence of Apartheid remained latent and I, after surviving a life in between black and white borders, as a *grey* girl (trying to live the strict racial laws during the dictatorship), with the introduction of democracy became a white poor woman. Yet, still grey: too black to be white, and now, too white to be black.

Just like the *coloured* community, I was too dark during Apartheid and too white for the democratic government. In fact, there was so much hurt caused in the *coloured* community to the point where, when drugs were introduced, it took off like a fire in a dry forest. Finally, people, especially men, found a way to escape the fact that they could do nothing to protect their families from the Apartheid government and its oppressive reign of terror. Drugs filled the abyss of helplessness, softened the jagged edge of trauma, and became a welcome escape from reality. Unfortunately, the drug epidemic did not lessen with the abolishment of Apartheid or the introduction of the democratic government. I hated South Africa, and I felt that South Africa hated me as well. I am not considered African by most Africans. It is just too much to comprehend.

To this day, I get really anxious, my heart races, and I break out in a cold sweat when I have to fill in a form that asks.

This uncomfortable question, however, turns out to be necessary for the compilation of demographic statistics that shows how racism still works as an important element of inequality between people until now, 2023. After all, the absolute majority of people imprisoned in the world are black or racialized as 'Latina', or even from colonized countries, such as South Africa and the Philippines (Díaz-Cotto 2005; Sudbury 2005). On the other hand, people who make the laws that criminalize those 'brown' subjects (Moïse 2021) and who have the power to maintain structures of inequalities are mainly white, from former (and current) imperial countries (Stoler 2022).<sup>6</sup> Not request-

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<sup>6</sup> In the *Hot Sur* novel, Laura Restrepo sensitively explores narratives intertwined with the process of criminalization of 'brown' subjects. These border-crossing individuals

ing racial data in public forms can be a way of not confronting racism in State structures and public policies (Maeso 2019). Racism is, after all, a product of colonial history. To decolonize our world means to confront the colonial continuities that prevail.

To recognize that racial differences impact inequalities in population standings, nevertheless, is not the same as to homogenize experiences lived by each person. Homogenizing experiences is also a way to replicate colonial stereotypes (Mohanty 2003). Each one of us is literally a piece of a massive jigsaw puzzle. Each one is different and yet, when we all fit into place, we, together, make a beautiful work of art. In a way, we all have grey stories in our trajectories: we all are victims and victimizers.

Everybody always said that I was strong. I could deal with anything and still walk out of the fire unscathed. They were wrong. I was not unscathed. I just became very good at hiding my feelings and moving on. I was not healing; I was building a nuclear bomb inside of me that would have catastrophic consequences in adulthood. I survived my early life, but when the effects of trauma took a hold I lost my mind, my direction, my purpose, and my strength. I understood nothing. I had no compass, no roots. I made one mistake after the other, one bad choice worse than the other. I will tell you right now that I take full responsibility for all the hurt that I have caused and all the wrong that I have done. The problem, the worse part of healing from trauma, is not having to remember the things that have happened to me. The worse part is that once I healed and I understood the hurt and destruction that I had caused in other people's lives, I was traumatized all over again. Not a day goes by without me remembering something that I am ashamed of; and I ask myself, what were you thinking?

I had a string of destructive relationships. I handed the care of my children over to a family member, knowing that I could never raise them to be productive, well-balanced adults. I simply did not have the tools to care for them, and I wanted them to have a better life than I had. I worked as a *mule*, carrying drugs across different national borders. Then one day I woke up, I realized that I was on a destructive road to nowhere. I retired from this illegal activity and got a job selling advertising. I had just started rebuilding my life when the 2008 economic recession hit. Everything started to change, international companies started pulling out of South Africa, and things were getting very difficult. I was tired and depressed.

I felt that South Africa was getting more dangerous as every day went by, and I wanted to leave. I remember in 2009, standing at the

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embody attributes of contamination and danger, as they traverse the borders of America (Restrepo 2012).



top of Long Street in Cape Town, looking down the street at all the people going in and out of restaurants and bars, street children pick pocketing and drug pushers doing their trade. I was alone in what I felt to be a very dangerous and lonely world. I did not belong anywhere. I had no money to leave South Africa, I had no educational qualification to offer a foreign country, and I was 36 years old already. My children were in Holland, with their uncle who had adopted them. I was tired and broke. I decided to do the *mule* thing one more time. Deep down inside, I knew that I was going to be caught and imprisoned. I hoped they would lock me up forever, so I would never have to come back to South Africa. I hated it. With all its diversity and natural beauty, I really hated it.

In October of 2009 I travelled to Brazil. All the time, while I was in prison, I would enquire if there was a way that I could stay in the country. Everyone told me no. As it happens, the justice department took a very long time to process my expulsion. In that time, I met my husband and the law changed in regard to foreign prisoners. My expulsion was cancelled, due to the fact that I have been with Carlos for eight years by the time they reviewed my case.<sup>7</sup>

After all that happened, I am very happy, very grateful and humbled by the way that things have worked out for me. Brazil is the place where I found my purpose, my true self, and direction. Sure, I have had some bad experiences, but that is all a part of life. Nobody has solely good days. I am equipped to deal with challenges, I have found healing and acceptance here. I do my best to cooperate with students and researchers, so that together we can try to understand people and help them. I am a member of the South African group called Locked up in a Foreign Country, which is a civil society organization that aims to help South African people imprisoned outside South Africa. I also collaborate with any other human rights groups that might reach out to me, and I am one of the founders of the Brazilian group For Us: a group that focuses on women who are or have been in prison. My personal objective is to help as many people as I can, especially those who have been abandoned and forgotten. I know

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**7** Foreigners arrested in Brazilian territory face an expulsion process, distinct from deportation. Deportation is associated with migratory irregularities, while expulsion is tied to criminal convictions within the Brazilian justice system. This process is based on the Brazilian Migration Law, sanctioned on May 24, 2017. The law clarifies that people serving time in Brazil have the right to reside in the national territory during the period of the sentence. There are loopholes for the expulsion to be revoked. Such revocation depends on proof of 'resocialization of the foreigner', as well as the recognition of parenting Brazilian children, or marriage (common-law marriage) to a Brazilian or to a foreigner with a permanent visa living in Brazil. The expulsion is a form of continued imprisonment for foreigners in Brazil after the end of their sentences (Corazza Padovani 2020).



what it is to feel like you are alone in a world full of people. I hope I can alleviate some of that suffering.

As for what race am I? Some time ago, I decided to search online for clues of my ancestry, but to no avail. I have looked up random names of white people that I knew growing up, and found their family trees. I found my father's complete family tree. I can't find anything related to my grandmother's family. I cannot find any details on my grandmother and her five sisters who were reclassified. It is as if they never existed. So, speaking with my brother, I asked him to do a DNA mapping test, since he lives in the United States of America. The results were shocking, to say the least. Our ancestry includes almost every location you can imagine. Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, North-Western Europe, Africa, Southern Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, Ashkenazi Jews, India. I don't know what race I am, but I do know that I come from a long line of migrants. These are travelers, even from north India. Perhaps I am Roma, maybe a descendant of someone who was enslaved, or even worse, an enslaved people trader. Filipina, as many people from the Philippines fled to South Africa during the rebellion against Spain. English, my grandfather came from St. Helena, where his ancestors had been sent to guard Napoleon. Ashkenazi Jew, the people who fled Europe and were too scared to admit that they were Jews in South Africa. Perhaps they were separated from their community because of the person they married. So many possibilities, or could we just accept one possibility? I am a citizen of this planet, artificially divided by national borders, constructed by many stories of violence and trauma. Histories that I don't want to forget, but I do not want to be repeated. I am, after all, the grey subject that stands in the middle of the frontiers.

### **3 Conclusions Among Us: "Third World Women", Trauma, Colonialism, and How to be a Survivor**

Eurocentric analytic paradigms continue to flourish, and I remain committed to reengaging in the struggles to criticize openly the effects of discursive colonization on the lives and struggles of marginalized women. My central commitment is to build connections between feminist scholarship and political organizing. (Mohan-ty 2003, 229-30)

This chapter results from an experiment with bricolage. It presents two very different texts written by a Brazilian feminist anthropologist and a South-African woman living in Brazil. Both women are from countries built through violent colonial ventures. Both women felt the effects of the politics of silencing colonial traumas in their

own bodies. One during an academic experience abroad in Northern Italy. The other understood that migrating from South Africa to Brazil, even through an illegal transnational market, was the only way possible to survive. It was impossible not to be black or white in South Africa, where her own *grey* existence was intolerable. For Natasha, running from South Africa was a manner of transforming herself into a refugee of the effects of Apartheid, fifteen years after its end. Natasha's story could not be understood through the frames upon which the "politics of trauma" (Humphrey 2010) of Apartheid was constructed in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Ross 2003). Natasha is a survivor. She survived Apartheid in South Africa and Brazilian imprisonment.

Prison abolition movements, all over the world, use the noun 'survivor' to highlight the State violence represented by the policies of mass incarceration of poor and black people (Davis 2003). In Brazil, as well as in other Latin America countries, the notion of being a survivor of imprisonment is, however, strongly related to the social and political movement of survivors of torture and political persecution during the military dictatorship that lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s (Kleiber 2009). Different from Chile and Argentina, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Brazil was implemented only in 2011, during Dilma Rousseff's government. It is important to highlight, nevertheless, that Dilma Rousseff's presidency was also characterized by a politics of increased securitization and punitive measures. During the administration of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), Brazil became the fourth country with the largest prison population of the world. Since 2021, we are now the third ranked in terms of the largest prison population. Dilma Rousseff's government was ambiguous regarding police enforcement and punitive measures. At the same time as she undertook important efforts to make crimes committed during the period of the dictatorship clear and to hold people accountable, blaming the military for their actions of torture, her administration was also responsible for increasing punitive laws and the use of technologies, which strengthened the process of criminalizing poor and peripheral populations, as well as social movements such as the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (Movimento sem Terra - MST) (Martins 2021). This administrative ambiguity made women survivors of contemporary State violence in Brazil - such as those that are part of For Us association - realize that they were not being considered as victims. Their traumas were being made invisible. Their existences were being made invisible. By creating an ideal victim of the State's crimes during Brazilian dictatorship - the white left-wing militant - some traumas were heard loud and clear, while other traumas were kept silent. This political choice was related to perceptions about class, race, territory, and sexuality.

Through the bricolage experiment exposed in this chapter, we aimed to analyse the effects of geopolitical power relations on the possibilities of recognizing (or not) colonial trauma, as well the practical feasibility of a person like Natasha being recognized as a victim of a traumatic experience: a refugee of Apartheid (Richmond 1994). In the first part of this chapter, we tried to shed light on the transnational aspects of the recognition of colonial geopolitical trauma. Natasha's writing about migration and being 'grey' allows us to apprehend that power asymmetries, forged in the colonial clash, are also reflected at a local and very personal scale of politics of trauma. Through this experiment with bricolage writing, we seek to build connections between feminist scholarship and political solidarity among us.

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