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## **Acts of Culture: Representations of Memory In Postcolonial Literature**

This paper explores the impact of contemporary South African texts as acts of culture that form part of the postcolonial struggle for control of collective memory. Contemporary South African authors interact with dominant narratives of memory exploring complexities that national narratives of memory ignore. This paper considers the consequences of attempting to corral cultural memory of trauma into a national model, and the question of how young writers are attempting to diversify narrative approaches to collective memory. Their consideration of gender, community and ethnicity will form the basis of this investigation. Furthermore, it evaluates the role of the reader and writer in the construction of collective memory through literature, positing the text as an object of collective memory which interacts with the reader in producing, performing and representing collective memory.

The creation of collective memory<sup>1</sup> as a means of overcoming trauma and creating a new, collective identity, is a national preoccupation in South Africa. Cheryl McEwan describes this phenomenon, claiming that

coming to terms with the past has emerged as the grand narrative of the late twentieth and early 21st centuries. Individuals and nations are seeking to overcome their traumatic legacies through the establishment of historical truth and the creation of collective memory. (McEwan 2003: 740)

Collective memory is a narrative of the past created by a nation or group in order to produce a desired identity (A. Assmann, 2008: 53). At times of flux such as the end of Apartheid, this desired identity becomes crucial to preserve peace and form the new nation. South Africa has conducted a great deal of memory work, a self-conscious attempt to re-write the narratives of collective memory to reflect the changing needs of the postapartheid, postcolonial present. Michael Rothberg claims that the struggle against colonialism is, in part, a struggle for control of collective memory. Colonialism interrupts both communicative memory (between generations) and cultural memory by imposing a foreign history and mythology upon the colonised nation (Rothberg 2013: 364). Drawing on Amílcar Cabral's explanation of decolonisation as a cultural act, Rothberg believes that the creation of collective memory in a postcolonial country is also "an act of culture" (Rothberg 2013: 365). Many of the state-sponsored acts of culture, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the construction of museums and archives, aimed to define a shared national memory and thus identity.

Can collective memory truly be decided upon and defined by a nation? Astrid Erll's theory of "travelling memory" suggests that memory is not something fixed but instead a site of constant negotiation between nations, groups, and individuals. She attributes the nation-state bordering of memory both to political convenience and the roots of memory theory itself. Maurice Halbwachs "appears to imagine a 'contained' memory" (Erll 2011: 10). Erll concludes, however, that national memory is never fixed or contained: "there are the many fuzzy edges of national memory, for example, the sheer plethora of shared lieux de mémoire that have emerged

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<sup>1</sup> Collective memory will be used as the general term to encompass both cultural memory and communicative memory. Cultural memory will be used to refer to tradition, myth, and other forms of ritualised or written forms of memory.

through travel, trade, war, and colonialism" (Erll 2011: 10). Even disregarding such movements of people, the exchange of ideas between groups ensures that memory always travels: "different social classes, generations, ethnicities, religious communities, and subcultures all generate their own, but in many ways intersecting, frameworks of memory" (Erll 2011: 9). Erll's travelling memory encompasses cultural memory, such as the exchange of traditions, and also communicative memory via word of mouth. In this paper, I will explore the fluid and flexible nature of travelling memory, as represented in a selection of contemporary South African texts. Their depictions of collective memory contrast with the unchanging political narratives of trauma and recovery which have dominated South African discourse since the end of Apartheid.

Contemporary South African literature contains elements of different kinds of travelling memory, whether between nations, groups within nations or even within groups themselves. Three texts by contemporary South African authors have been chosen because they focus on the representation of memory and identity formation. The hybridity and complexity of memory represented in these three texts sheds light on the inevitable "zones of amnesia" which emerge when any kind of national mythology is created, even in an attempt to bring about postcolonial closure after a trauma such as Apartheid (Bernard 2012: 21). Sisonke Msimang's memoir, *Always Another Country*, is centred on her life growing up in exile as the child of South African activists (Msimang 2018). Her memory travels in the geographical sense, as her family, their community and stories move between South Africa and many other nations. Her idea of herself as a South African is shaped by her emotional closeness and geographical separation from the nation itself. *If You Keep Digging*, Keletso Mopai's short story collection, makes only limited reference to large scale political events. It focuses instead on ordinary lives after Apartheid, including those of a teenage mother-to-be, neglected school children and labourers in South Africa's mines (Mopai 2019). Her representation of memory is "travelling" in the sense that memory is always developing. Individuals and communities are engaged in a dynamic process of the creation and reinvention of cultural memory such as myth, as well as producing new collective memory about the recent past. *The Yearning* by Mohale Mashigo explores the hybridity of group memory within individuals and shows that even within a defined community memory is never fixed or contained. These authors question what may have been lost in the pursuit of peace in the post-apartheid era, and in the creation of a controlled version of collective memory. Their texts are "acts of culture", as defined by Rothberg, reclaiming, and recreating through the means of narratives of collective memory a variety of South African identities (Rothberg 2013: 365).

This paper will first consider the establishment of current metanarratives of collective memory in South Africa, mapping the creation of collective memory of trauma. The second part will consider the role of contemporary texts as objects of collective memory through their construction and readership, observing how they are changing the conception of the limits of memory and whose voices are remembered in South Africa. The final part of this paper will analyse how contemporary authors represent collective memory within their texts, both in terms of collective memory of Apartheid, and the preservation of cultural memory in myth and tradition. Erll's travelling memory provides a useful framework beyond national narratives of collective memory, allowing an exploration of the exchange of memory between and within social groups (Erll 2011). Contemporary literature embraces this travelling memory and thus exposes the limitations of a singular South African narrative of

memory.

### **National Trauma: Memory Work and the TRC**

Collective memory work in South Africa includes a variety of projects intended to create a fixed national memory of Apartheid: museums, archives, and a range of community projects. The most significant single process of creating collective memory was undoubtedly the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>2</sup> During the transition period to democracy in the early to mid-1990s, the TRC was created "as a mechanism for the production of a national consciousness" (Adams / Kurtis 2012: 9). Bringing to light "past injustices" was supposed to create "a common-ground understanding of history, which in turn would provide a foundation for an emerging national identity" (Adams / Kurtis 2012: 9). This was a time of great insecurity, which led to a desire to establish a clear collective memory, because "when identity becomes uncertain, memory rises in value" (Megill 2011: 194). The TRC's work led to a concept of collective memory that implied that all South Africans had suffered a collective trauma – Apartheid, from which they collectively needed to recover. A traumatised community "no longer exists as an effective source of support [...] 'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body" (Erikson 1976: 153–154). Traumatic events can also cause a crisis of representation, where former narratives of national memory no longer encompass a group's identity and understanding of itself (Kannister 2011: 301).

The TRC hearings were designed to create consensus regarding the way Apartheid would appear in South African collective memory resolving this crisis of representation following Apartheid trauma. Fiona C. Ross explains the TRC wanted to "create a complete picture" identifying victims and their whereabouts, as well as potential amnesty for perpetrators (Ross 2003: 27). Testimony would be given, which would heal both the victims and the nation. This "simplified model of psychoanalysis" which Ross identifies, was designed to avoid "repetition" (Ross 2003: 30). The TRC was an act of archiving rather than of commemoration. It focused on closure, and South Africa moving forward as a nation with the past firmly recorded and no longer open for discussion. The TRC focused on "the cathartic role of victim testimony and the closure it must bring" (Craps 2010: 56). Opening wounds was done only to "deal with the past effectively and so close the door on that dark and horrendous past forever" (Craps 2010: 56). In this context, it is not clear who is supposed to benefit from closing the door on the past: the individual or the nation. Looking back on the TRC more than twenty years on, it is clear that the Commission, along with other measures, helped to avoid complete societal breakdown in the transition period. Still, the benefit to the new South Africa was limited, as many groups felt that their victimhood was channelled into politically convenient terms, or simply elided by the whole TRC process.

The structure of the hearings led to a focus on certain groups' experiences, despite a considerable effort by the TRC to prevent this. The main cause was the way in which the TRC defined violence, as well as the expectation of the kind of narrative that would be produced. This was largely of evil individuals, who had committed crimes against predominantly male political activists. Their crimes would be revealed, recorded and the South African state would be able to move forward with such crimes firmly assigned to the past. Fiona Ross explains how this narrative arose:

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth TRC.

The Act that brought the Commission into being instructed a narrow understanding of the apartheid past. In construing apartheid as a particular violence whose effect was to produce victims, the Commission elided questions of agency and resistance and thereby precluded an assessment of power's work in constituting subjects. At the same time, it instantiated other subjects – perpetrators and victims. (Ross 2003: 20)

The victims and perpetrators were identified those who had suffered or inflicted bodily harm. This was, as Ross explains, a dramatic shift from the more holistic understanding of harm and violence contained within the original Act:

Multiple forms of social destruction described in the founding statement – deep divisions, strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice – are here reformulated in the Act's concern with 'gross violations of human rights'. Two transitions are involved in this formulation of injury: from 'apartheid' to different manifestations of 'violence'; and from 'violence' to 'gross violations of human rights'. (Ross 2003: 28)

The TRC did not address the everyday suffering of people assigned to the black and coloured groups during Apartheid. Financial impoverishment due to the structure of labour laws and other rights was not included amongst the crimes the TRC sought to cover. Apartheid violence was defined as breaking the law, such as police officers murdering activists. It did not include the violence of disenfranchisement, exclusion from education and enforced poverty. The particular kind of violence was physical, and always in an extra-judicial context (following apartheid laws.) As Ross explains, part of the unstated purpose of the TRC was "naming apartheid as a particular form of violence" (Ross 2003: 25).

The narrative of historical suffering leading to freedom was not experienced in the same way by all groups. Some white communities did not experience Apartheid as trauma at all. Some groups did not experience the radical positive change advertised by the ending of Apartheid. The lack of redistribution means that many people's lives did not change as significantly as they had hoped. With so many different experiences, it is unsurprising that the one national narrative failed to describe the lives of all South Africans. André Brink famously claimed that "unless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future" (Brink 1998: 30). Brink's hoped-for "complications" are yet to be fully represented on the national literary stage.

### **Acts of Collective Memory: Literature as an Object of Remembrance**

What would such complications mean in real terms? Contemporary writers can provide a range of narratives that, for a variety of reasons, were not heard at the TRC and which also fail to register as part of memory work conducted since then. However, these divergent memories, whether collective or individual, also fail to appear as cultural artefacts in the literary world. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney have investigated how literature functions as a part of the production of collective memory. Whether certain works of literature are deemed worthy of being objects of remembrance is something that Erll and Rigney view as highly contentious: "many of the traditional discussions about canon-formation within literary studies can indeed be revisited as exemplifying the ways in which societies squabble over which foundational texts deserve commemoration or not" (Erll / Rigney 2006: 112). I do not aim to answer the question of whether the specific texts I have included in this paper should form part of the South African canon. However, I am interested in exploring why such authors, young, black and female, do not form such a large part of the canon as might be expected more than twenty years after the end of apartheid.

The issue of authorship, and how important it should be to the reader or critic has long been controversial. There are a range of views on whether we should consider the intention, or indeed biographical details of the author at all. Roland Barthes claimed that: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject steps away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (Barthes 2000: 253). From a purely literary perspective that may be true, but from a political perspective it is not. The authors chosen for this paper are all young, female and black. It matters that these authors are writing, as historically black women's voices have been excluded from the canon:

South African society, structured in recent history by the oppressive and exploitative systems of colonialism and apartheid, has historically been organised in a way that systematically excluded black women from writing and other forms of cultural production. (Boswell 2020: Introduction 4).

The practical result of this is that fewer black female authors have published work, and where they have, it "has largely been ignored in mainstream criticism of South African, African and postcolonial literatures" (Boswell 2020: Introduction 20). Msimang, Mopai and Mashigo still see their position as somewhat liminal, as the next section will explore. They aim, through their writing, to introduce new voices to literature, to allow new South African narratives to challenge the dominant narratives of identity and memory. Writing as a black woman in South Africa involves reimagining a nation that has no space for you: "those doubly disavowed in South Africa by apartheid on the grounds of their race and gender, have constructed the nation through representations of themselves, their realities, and the nation in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa" (Boswell 2020: Introduction 34). These conscious acts of culture are an attempt to address the imbalance in publication and readership of texts which negotiate South African memory and identity. In the following sections I aim to "make visible the works of black women whose literary production has been ignored by androcentric and racist critical traditions in South African literature" (Boswell 2020: Introduction 19).

### **Sisonke Msimang**

Growing up in exile both in Kenya and Canada, Sisonke Msimang returned to South Africa as a young adult at the end of Apartheid. She identifies the reason why she writes in the preface of her memoir *Always Another Country*: "I've written this book because too few of us women, refugees, South Africans, black people, queers believe in our instincts enough to know that our hearts will be our saviours" (Msimang 2017: 18). She suggests that such people's stories are under-represented, compared to the "heroes" they do not count themselves among (Msimang 2017: 18). In a note on *Always Another Country*, Msimang writes: "I wanted to show that this, too, is Africa" (Msimang 2017: title page). Msimang sees her writing as a way of expanding collective memory. In an interview with Robert Wood, she explains that memoir was a way for her to write about herself, but also to write about South Africa, things that she believes are strongly linked:

[M]y life is literally entwined with the recent history of South Africa. I am of course not alone in this regard and so it seemed like writing about myself would be a way of writing about politics but also of reflecting the experiences of many other South Africans whose stories have been overshadowed by the larger story of Mandela and his comrades. (Wood 2019)

This memoir, for her, is a way of ensuring their stories do not remain overshadowed. There are many unheard stories, which Msimang believes are also part of the recent history of South Africa, but which are not necessarily always understood as such.

In the same interview, Msimang talks about the intention behind her writing. Msimang finds the issue of identity problematic as she believes that writing about her family is interpreted as a "political act", which is not what she intended (Wood 2019). She refers to the "on-going battle black people face everywhere – both in real and literary terms" to be represented as themselves, not as politically symbolic (Wood 2019). Msimang is concerned with readership, and who she is representing herself and others for. She explains:

[T]here's a double bind there – you are writing about yourself as you are [...] for yourself and for your people, but you are also conscious of constructing a new narrative about who you and your people are for an audience that has low expectations. The latter is not a huge concern in my mind, but they become a big deal because of how loudly they read, in other words, how much power they have. (Wood 2019)

Msimang means that some people's readings of literary texts register in terms of critical analysis, literary awards and the reach their interpretations have. The ability of some people to read loudly, either as critics, academics or just members of society with more power has a huge impact on what is read, and especially what is read as part of the South African story. Her memoir is an act of culture, an attempt to wrest back control of the South African story from those who read loudly and to show it is, in fact, many stories.

### **Mohale Mashigo**

Mohale Mashigo is a musician and a writer, *The Yearning* is her first published novel. Reflecting on the kind of lives she represents, Mashigo shares Msimang's idea that what she writes is an important part of the South African story, although Mashigo uses a cast of fictional characters in a novel rather than a memoir. She explains the importance of representation, and her experience of growing up never reading about people like herself. She describes when that changed:

*Nervous Conditions*<sup>3</sup> came into my life when I was in high school. Even then I didn't know people were writing books about Africans. My uncle is from Zimbabwe so *Nervous Conditions* felt like it could be about people I knew. Suddenly it occurred to me that I could write about people I knew – that we belonged in stories too. (Malec 2018)

In a podcast interview for the University of Oxford Mohale Mashigo also addresses the issue of imagining the South African nation. She stresses the importance of being able to know the past, to be able to imagine a different future: "if we don't imagine a different world based on who we are and knowing what kind of a past we had and maybe I'm speaking specifically about South Africans, if we don't think about where we come from, then how do we imagine?" (Haith 2020: 24:31–24:48). In an earlier interview with Jennifer Malec, Mashigo stresses the importance of integrating both the good and bad memories of South Africa's past into narratives of collective memory:

[W]e won't talk about the bad things that have happened but prefer to role-play this weird rainbow nation nightmare. Sometimes we rob ourselves of valuable lessons when we wipe away memories—be they of Apartheid or any kind of trauma. I get that there is a lot of shame and pain in our past but erasing it isn't going to fix anything.

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<sup>3</sup> A novel by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga.

This country is such a frustrating place; we bury our stories and memories and wonder why we are in so much pain. (Malec 2018)

The importance of representing memory in literature is clear, as Mashigo refers to this idea in her novel as well as in interviews. The self-conscious need to write memory is something which is shared by both Mashigo and Keletso Mopai, the final author whose work I will consider for this paper.

### **Keletso Mopai**

Keletso Mopai was born in 1992 and thus was a small child when the Apartheid regime fell. Her work deals with the transition period and South Africa today, but also reflects on how Apartheid is remembered. In an interview conducted for this paper, Mopai explains how her stories were written in the hope that people would see themselves represented within them: "I had hoped somehow that someone will feel seen in the characters and know they aren't alone. And it did that, I receive messages from readers of the book who express how my writing has spoken for them – their rage, sadness, etc." (Winstanley 2020). Mopai was not only aiming to help people see themselves but also to be seen by others in their nation. She explains she was also writing for: "those who know these kinds of characters (orphans, rape victims, people living with mental health issues, queer people etc.) but somehow overlooked or ignored them before reading *If You Keep Digging*" (Winstanley 2020).

Mopai believes that she can bring about change by making the suffering she sees appear as part of the national narrative. She explains:

[M]y job, however, is to place a mirror in front of us and interpret and portray what is reflected. And what I see is mostly devastating, and often what those kinds of sad stories do is invoke fear, tears, or introspection. For me, that's a good start to changing how we see ourselves and the world we live in. (Winstanley 2020)

Mopai explicitly links her choice to feature such a cast of characters in her stories to her own identity. She claims that "mainstream authors" are not "interested in the lives of young Black women". She explicitly links the importance of who is published to the kind of stories which are being told. She explains: "that's why it is important to publish more talented Black writers who can tell these stories and be read by a wide audience" (Winstanley 2020). Mopai is attempting to right that wrong by writing herself, and by representing people like herself.

These authors are self-consciously creating acts of culture, attempting to contribute to the narratives of memory in postapartheid South Africa. Of course, these authors cannot guarantee that their works will be remembered at all, let alone form a part of collective memory, whether national or group-based. Their attempt to engage with the process of creating collective memory, however, shows how important the idea of collective memory and identity has become, and that it is not a homogenised, nation-based process. Thus far in this paper, I have explored the authors as potential producers of collective memory, and their perspectives on such a process. The following part of the paper will explore how the authors represent memory, and indeed the process of forming collective memory. I will first consider the way in which Msimang and Mopai explore the construction of collective memory of Apartheid. Secondly, I will consider Mopai and Mashigo's treatment of cultural memory in the form of myth and tradition.

### **Representations of Memory: Apartheid and Its Fall**

Two authors focus on the creation of collective memory of Apartheid in their texts.

Mopai illustrates the complexity of national memory when conflicting groups have non-compatible identities. Msimang illustrates that identity cannot be defined by national borders or geographical location. Their work has a very different focus, yet both undermine the idea of a singular fixed national memory. Erll's travelling memory focuses on the movement involved in memory, in the case of Msimang's memoir her memory is formed in a variety of countries and is influenced by both stories and visitors from her parents' homeland. Msimang and her family are carriers of memory:

Individuals who share in collective images and narratives of the past, who practice mnemonic rituals, display an inherited habitus, and can draw on repertoires of explicit and implicit knowledge. Travel, migration and transmigration, flight and expulsion, and various forms of diaspora lead to the diffusion of mnemonic media, contents, forms and practices across the globe. (Erll 2011: 12)

In *Always Another Country*, the author-narrator Msimang is not able to grow up in her own country and is denied citizenship by the Apartheid government. She is brought up in various countries, from Kenya to Canada, because her father is wanted as a terrorist in South Africa. The construction of her identity as South African shows the relative importance of shared cultural memory as opposed to geographical location in forming an identity. In *Always Another Country* Msimang shows that, if anything, cultural memory is preserved more strongly in exile. Msimang did not experience the trauma of Apartheid in the same way as her countrymen, yet she still feels that being South African is an important part of her identity. Her memoir illustrates how she builds her own South African identity around stories that she has inherited from her parents.

Her identity, rather than being formed around Apartheid trauma, is initially based on anti-Apartheid activism, experienced through her parents' stories as she is growing up. At the start of the memoir, after recounting her parents' meeting, she describes herself and her siblings thus: "my sisters and I are freedom's children, born into the ANC and nurtured within a revolutionary community" (Msimang 2018: 14). Their identity is based on being part of the ANC, the poetic joy of being freedom's children is a source of pride. She not only observes this memory but participates in it as well. This, as Aleida Assmann explains, is a vital condition for inhabiting a certain identity (Assmann, A. 2008: 53). Msimang and her sister's games were dominated by the political discourses behind their parents' freedom fighting: "instead of playing cops and robbers, we play capitalists and cadres" (Msimang 2018: 15). The collective memory which dominated their childhood was that of the South African anti-Apartheid struggle, and not in the various countries where they were growing up. Whilst playing they "call out the names of our heroes" (Msimang 2018: 15). They are "our" heroes, belonging to her and her sisters, not only their parents' heroes, though they are too young to understand these individuals' importance. As Aleida Assmann explains, they are identifying with the desired group identity, a "we" which is dependent on a shared understanding of historical memory (Assmann, A. 2008: 53).

National memory, whether based on citizenship or perception of shared suffering, inevitably falls short. The reduction of South African identity to one narrative of the Apartheid excludes the experience of Msimang and those like her who were forced to leave their homeland behind. National memory cannot encompass collective memory like Msimang and her family both form and take part in. Erll claims that memory is "first and foremost not bound to the frame of a place, a region, a social group, a religious community, or a nation, but truly transcultural, continually



moving across and beyond such territorial and social borders" (Erll 2011: 9). Msimang specifically links her state of exile to how she relates to South Africa as a nation. She believes: "exile made me love the idea of South Africa" (Msimang 2018: 17). She understands her identity as bound up not only in South Africa but also in the struggle to create a new South Africa: "the dream of freedom was a sort of home for us" (Msimang 2018: 17). Msimang can place herself within the South African narrative, even when she is far away. She describes this process, on the day of Mandela's release from prison: "I am imagining the smell of the place and wondering whether it is cold. I am trying to imagine myself into the moment" (Msimang 2018: 141). The almost ritual element of repetition makes her part of experiences she did not really share: "I watch and I watch and I watch, as though the screen might suck me in" (Msimang 2018: 141). On the day of the election, she describes the event as if she were there "on this day the weather complies with our wishes, there are no rains" but then later says "I am in Minnesota" (Msimang 2018: 209). The strength of her connection with the process means that she almost feels as though she were there. Msimang's work insists upon the transculturality of memory and pushes against the boundaries of a nation-based South African memory defined by geographical borders. Memory travels from South Africa to her, but also travels through her in Erll's sense as she continues the narratives and practices of a South African society that has never truly been her home.

Keletso Mopai's short stories, too, illustrate the multitude of identities that can all be considered South African, but by contrast to Msimang, within the borders of the nation. In particular, she explores groups in conflict, where interests are not aligned in terms of creating a memory of the past. Her short stories show the impossibility of creating a national memory, both because it is not in the interest of varied groups to do so, and because such group identities are so fragile and dependent on their own interpretation of South African memory. The memory she describes is travelling in two ways: not only as it illustrates exchange between groups, but also as it exposes the weakness of the nation state as a means of containing collective memory. The edges of the nation in her stories are not so much "fuzzy" as Erll describes, but barriers which divide communities who have no interest in a united vision of South African memory and identity (Erll 2011: 10).

The first issue in terms of creating a postapartheid collective memory is that not all groups in South Africa perceived themselves to be benefitting from the new multi-racial democracy, or indeed from any concept of a singular South African identity. Two of Mopai's short stories which clearly illustrate the difficulties with forming a single national memory are *Monkeys* and *In Papa's Name*. Both stories, told from two different perspectives, form an account of one day in 1996, during the first years of democracy in South Africa. The two main characters live very different lives. They are both ten-year-old boys, but one, Nicolas, is an Afrikaner living with his parents, the other, Mdu, an orphan whose father was murdered by the Apartheid regime. The two boys do not meet, though they live in adjacent areas. In *Monkeys* Nicolas describes his difficult home life with his violent father, though the focus of the story is his friend Kevin's birthday party. Through the child's eyes, we see the adults around him as they adjust or fail to adjust to the new South Africa. In *Papa's Name* describes the typical school day of Mdu, a boy living in a poor, black neighbourhood, near to the setting of *Monkeys*. The events of *In Papa's Name* are punctuated with Mdu's memories of his father.

Memory is crucially important to all the characters in these stories, but despite them inhabiting the same geographical area, they ascribe to completely different groups

and thus collective memories. Whether or not memory can be truly described as travelling here is difficult to say. Certainly, the nation-state has not created a "contained" memory in the way Erll describes in this instance (Erll 2011: 10). Yet, memory between these two groups does not travel at all, they remain steadfastly attached to their own stories of South Africa. The desired identity of each group is so contrasting that what they want to remember cannot be the same. The construction of collective memory is dependent not only on remembering but also on forgetting. That which does not serve a group or nation's narrative about itself, which cannot be counted as 'their' history, is forgotten (J. Assmann 2008: 113). Cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as 'theirs' (J. Assmann 2008: 113). Stories that do not contribute to the formation of group identity are forgotten (J. Assmann 2008: 113). Groups' perception of their 'right' to certain things is bound up in an understanding of the importance of their history as a part of South Africa. This cultural memory is not an objective matter of what has happened, as it is not complete knowledge about the past, but selected events and narratives which contribute to the formation of their identities. The acts of culture required for a postcolonial nation to take control of collective memory are shown to be limited by the material situation of the two groups presented in these short stories.

In *Monkeys* historical links to the land as well as to the idea of the old South Africa also dominate the ideas of the older generation. Nicolas explains what he knows about who the land belongs to: "black people from this area say they own the land we're living on. Some of the Balobedu people say their ancestors lived here a long, long time ago" (Mopai 2019: 15). Although the boy knows about this claim to the land, his father has taught him that it is unimportant. He explains: "Pa told us this with so much anger, his veins popped out on his eyelids: 'Who do these people think they are? My grandfather owned this farm'" (Mopai 2019: 15). This is also factually true, his grandfather did own the farm, but it is presented as though this historical fact overrides any previous historical claim. It is clear to see that collective memory is at work here, the important historical fact is the one which is remembered by this group. It serves their material interest to focus on certain historical events, and to dismiss the importance of others, even where they do not fully deny them.

As we can see from *Monkeys* the concept of a connection to the land plays an important part in Afrikaner historical memory. *Monkeys* also shows the necessity of forgetting to sustain this particular identity. The narrator's father complains about areas of South Africa which are not predominantly white. He claims: "the whole of Natal is owned by the Zulus. But are any whites crying like caged animals about that?" (Mopai 2019: 15) This presupposes a choice of where to live which was generally not available to non-white people during the Apartheid. Many groups were forcibly removed from their land or multi-racial areas in cities. Many of these people were forced to live in "homelands" located within South Africa created by the Apartheid state to provide a migrant labour force (Magopa 2016). This was the case for the Zulu people in Natal. They were already (before Apartheid) the dominant ethnic group in this area, but many Zulu people living outside what came to be known as KwaZulu were forced to live there in the 1970s, due to the 1970 Bantu Homeland Citizenship act (Magopa 2016). The number of a particular ethnic group living in an area was a direct result of Apartheid policies. However, this is simply not acknowledged at all by the father.

The South African memory which occupies the second of this pair of stories *In Papa's Name* has nothing to do with the land or the flag but is as essential to the

young narrator's sense of self. His identity is challenged by his poverty which he finds shameful, and he tries to find solace in his father's sacrifice fighting against the Apartheid regime. However, the narrator is unable to learn about his family's history. Unlike Nicolas' family, who have various rituals and practices of remembrance, Mdu is left struggling to find any account of the Apartheid past. Communicative memory has broken down within his family; both his parents are dead, and his aunt is reluctant to talk about his father's role in the anti-Apartheid struggle. The boy explains: "Aunty never wants to talk about my parents. Not Mama's suicide, not Papa's murder, not anything" (Mopai 2019: 25). Naturally, as a young boy he can only know what he is taught in school and by his family. The boy has no source of information to find out about his father, as he explains: "ask that Apartheid guy Verwoerd; oh yah, he's dead too. So, I don't know. All I know is that Papa died fighting Apartheid" (Mopai 2019: 25). He cannot force his aunt to talk about his parents and cannot have access to Verwoerd or indeed any other authority figure who might be able to tell him what happened to his father.

The desire to bring back together shattered communities by creating a singular collective memory was motivated by a desire for peace. Many diverse groups make up a nation and when their interests are not aligned, they will naturally remember and forget different parts of the South African story. Whether they are individuals exiled and unable to be physically part of the South African nation or groups who do not want to be part of the same nation, these two authors show that a singular South African memory of Apartheid will always fail to encompass the experiences of South Africans.

### **Cultural Memory: Myth, Traditions and Identities**

Keletso Mopai's short stories not only consider the contrast between the collective memory of different ethnic groups but also show that even within groups, collective memory is something that is always travelling and moving, between generations and locations and other means of identifying such as gender or sexuality. She draws attention to "traffic between individual and collective levels of remembering, circulation among social, medial, and semantic dimensions" (Erl 2011: 15) One such division is gender. Sylvia Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut note that although gender plays an important role in individuals' experience of identity and memory, "most debates on public commemoration focus on the political space of the nation and, as a general rule, they neglect the gender of the actors" (Paletschek / Schraut 2008: 7). In terms of South Africa and the experience of black women, they are doubly excluded from nation-building narratives: by both gender and race. At best they serve as objects of nation-forming narratives, at worst they are completely absent from all such narratives. Cheryl McEwan explains that: "black women have often been most marginalised by colonialism and the Apartheid and excluded from dominant accounts of history" (McEwan 2003: 740). Mopai's work considers this gendered perspective and asserts its importance in the creation of collective memory and the adaptation of cultural memory such as myth and tradition. Women are agents in her stories, who cause history to happen and are not only on the side-lines.

In *Becoming a God* Mopai explores the retelling of a myth, and the reimagining of traditions to connect her vision of South African today, to the cultural memory of her ancestors. Myths are a site of constant recreation. Handed down through oral history they have been constantly improved to reflect the changing needs of the tellers: "a significant part of literary production consists of the rewriting of canonical texts and, more generally, of earlier cultural narratives such as folk tales and

myths" (Erll / Rigney 2006: 113). This retelling can both preserve or contest traditional understandings: "these rewritings may take the form of pious commemoration (of re-citation, as it were) or of critical contestation" (Erll / Rigney 2006: 113). Mopai's story performs both functions, a commemoration and a contestation. The story is loosely based on the myth of the Rain Queens. Mopai describes the story thus:

[T]he Rain Queens, who were traditional leaders of Balobedu, were claimed to have magical powers to compel clouds to shed rain and were considered royalty. So powerful that even the famous male figures such as Shaka Zulu, who was a leader of the Zulu people and known for his combat skills, considered the Rain Queens a threat. They were later secluded and dubbed "witches" by the Apartheid government. (Mopai 2021)

She identifies the power of the women, and the respect paid to them by other, male leaders like Shaka. In her retelling of this myth, she both preserves cultural memory which was prohibited and dismissed by the Apartheid but also finds space to explore contemporary themes that make such a myth equally relevant today.

In *Becoming a God*, the narrator Mmadjadji belongs to a fictional community that follows a set of beliefs which include the figure of a Storm God. The narrator's father is the Storm God, but he is also a cruel man who abuses his daughter. Mopai uses the story of the Storm God not to dismiss tradition and culture as misogynistic, but instead to show that cultural memory is an interaction. It is not something which is passed, unchanging, from generation to generation, but instead something which is influenced by each new generation. According to the traditional story of this imagined community, based on Mopai's own, the Storm God is always a man. However, in this story, the young, gay, female narrator becomes the Storm God. She overcomes the abuse inflicted on her by her father, and her community is finally able to accept her as the Storm Queen despite her gender and sexuality. Although she is not male, she is seen by her community to be the inheritor of the normally patrilineal powers of healing and rainmaking. They first assumed she could not be, because she was a woman, but are able to recognise that she does truly possess these powers, where her father did not.

In *Becoming a God* Mmadjadji is sexually assaulted by her father. In the original myth, incest is presented merely as a necessary condition for the creation of the Rain Queen, the daughter of the raped woman. In the original story, we do not ever find out what the mother of the Rain Queen thought or felt about her daughter or the assault which caused her conception. Mopai illustrates that the incest present in the original story is not something that can be passively recreated in modern South African myths. In Mopai's story, the assaulted woman speaks about her experience. Since the original mother of the Rain Queen is silent in the first version of the myth, we do not know anything about her. Only the child she gives birth to, the future Rain Queen, is significant. In the Rain Queen myth, the queens are very powerful, but the first woman was impregnated and was passive; she did not have any power. Mmadjadji, by contrast, does have power. She has powers she inherits from her grandfather, those of the Storm God. But she is also able to confront her family with the wrong they committed against her and takes power over her own life and how she wants to live it. Mopai's story turns the narrative of the original myth around by illustrating that women have power, not only through birth but also within themselves. It is Mmadjadji, the victim of incest and rape, who becomes powerful, and not any daughter who she may or may not give birth to in the future.

Mopai also describes the assault in terms of corrective rape, an assault where homosexual women, or women who are identified as being so, are raped by men who believe that it will make them heterosexual. Kammila Naidoo reveals the devastating extent of this problem in South Africa: "since 2000 there have been close to 40 lesbian women murdered and on average about ten lesbians are raped each week by men who subscribe to the view that they are 'correcting' the women's sexual orientations" (Van As / Naidoo 2011: 101). Focusing on gendered violence as worthy of record in and of itself, Mopai gives an explanation from the perspective of both the father and the daughter. The father justifies his assault by claiming that Mmadjadji needs to "feel like a woman" (Mopai 2019: 144). He claims that her behaviour is too masculine and implies that she is gay. When Mmadjadji's father rapes her, he uses her failure to meet his idea of gender norms to explain why he does it. He tells her: "you need to feel like a woman. You are not a boy. You may dress like one, act like one, but you'll never be a boy" (Mopai 2019: 144). It is unclear whether this is simply a convenient means of justification for his actions, or whether he believes that what he is doing is merited by her failure to comply with his idea of what a girl should be. Mopai's decision to include an instance of corrective rape in her story shows how rewriting of myth can allow authors to express new concerns about society that were not present at the time of the myth's creation. Here, rape is not a metaphor, or a symbolic literary device, as in the original myth and many other national narratives, but rather something which many women experience in South Africa. Mopai asserts here the importance of including gendered violence as part of the South African narrative, and its place in collective memory.

Mopai illustrates that traditions are not static but constantly evolving: "the idea of traditions being ahistorical, immutable and misogynistic" is "an insult to any dynamic tradition" (Frenkel 2008: 3). Where authority figures attempt to preserve tradition unchanged, it is often an attempt to control. The horrible trauma that she has suffered makes Mmadjadji question the cultural memory she has been brought up with. She asks herself: "were there ever any gods in her family in the first place? The stories about the Storm God and his forefathers, were they made up?" (Mopai 2019: 147). The use of her culture to excuse the crimes committed against her makes her reject it. The use of culture to "enforce compliance, particularly in terms of gendered roles, is not a new phenomenon in any context" (Frenkel 2008: 3). Mmadjadji's experience illustrates the danger of the reification of culture, refusing all change that is not desired by those in power as not traditional. Mopai's story shows, however, that traditions can change and develop with time. Not only does Mmadjadji become the Storm Queen, but her family come to accept that their treatment of her was cruel, and that they were blinded to its cruelty by their fidelity to an unchanging cultural memory. Her aunt explains that Mmadjadji's father was only named god because he was the oldest male heir. She tells Mmadjadji: "we only named him god after your grandfather because he was the first-born son" (Mopai 2019: 153). The family admit their mistake, claiming: "clearly we were wrong" (Mopai 2019: 153). They ask for her forgiveness and persuade her to become the god she was supposed to be. Despite her initial reluctance, she consents and is able to heal herself and her community. Mopai shows in her retelling that it is possible to question certain aspects of cultural memory without abandoning that memory entirely.

### **The Hybridity of Individual Memory**

Thus far this paper has considered the different formulations of memory in South

Africa between different groups, and within defined social groups. I will now look at the way that even a single individual can be part of various narratives of collective memory. The final text I will consider is *The Yearning* by Mohale Mashigo. This novel describes a young woman, Marubini, whose uneventful life in Cape Town is shattered by flashbacks to a traumatic event which she cannot fully remember. She begins to remember parts of songs from her childhood, up to that point forgotten. As her memories become clearer, she starts to sense a presence in her flat, though she is at first unable to remember who this figure is and how he fits into her history. Her tools for understanding herself rely on a collective memory that encompasses a wide-ranging identity. The groups to which Marubini belongs are not fixed, and the memories through which they form themselves are also fluid. South African memory politics has attempted to incorporate all these multiple identities into one South African one. Through *The Yearning*, Mashigo shows the impossibility of such an attempt. In *The Yearning* Marubini draws on many sources of collective memory, which are always changing. Her parents and grandparents identify to varying degrees with Zulu or Sepedi cultural practices, without conflict between them, or within Marubini herself. The groups which produce collective memory are shown to be incredibly porous. There has been a tendency in the field of Memory Studies to view groups as static; however, this is not the case. There is a risk of "treating social groups as essential and static entities" as though memory were derived "from pre-existing groups" (Feindt et al. 2014: 26). *The Yearning* shows both that Marubini has access to the cultural memory of different memory groups, but that they also interact and change. Travelling memory, is, as Erll insists, a metaphor. The literal movement of memory in terms of physical spaces is less important than the "movement" which occurs as memory is told, practiced and exchanged.

I claim that all cultural memory must 'travel', be kept in motion, in order to 'stay alive', to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations. Such travel consists only partly in movement across and beyond territorial and social boundaries. On a more fundamental level, it is the ongoing exchange of information between individuals and the motion between minds and media which first of all generates what Halbwachs termed collective memory. 'Travel' is therefore an expression of the principal logic of memory: its genesis and existence through movement. (Erll 2011: 12)

*The Yearning* shows that cultural memory, which the apartheid threatened to silence through forcible removals disconnecting generations, has been preserved both through cultural practices and the stories which people tell each other. Marubini's grandparents educate her about their different backgrounds and allow her to feel part of them all without limiting her to choosing one. Marubini is a "township child" who feels confident changing between languages and ways of being depending on the context in which she finds herself (Mashigo 2017: 24). For Marubini the languages she has inherited are a source of fun and she continually mixes languages even in the same sentence: "why don't amadlozi want uBaba to be with me?"<sup>4</sup> (Mashigo 2017: 24). Her speech combines the different languages she knows, and the novel switches between them in much the same way, containing phrases in Sepedi and Zulu as it represents the characters' speech.<sup>5</sup> The meaning is possible to

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<sup>4</sup> Why don't the ancestors want my father to be with me?

<sup>5</sup> A varied terminology exists for mixing different languages in the way that Mashigo does in this novel, both on a character and text level (code-switching, code-mixing). About multilingualism and multilingual literature and authors see Aneta Pavlenko: *The Bilingual Mind and what it tells us about language and thought* (2019) and Yasemin Yildiz: *Beyond the Mother Tongue. The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012).

understand from the context, so the reader can engage with the multilingual situation but still understand what is being said. She talks about her grandfather and her mother talking: "They were speaking a language I didn't really understand. When I enquired what language they were speaking Ntatemoholo informed me it was Sepedi. He told me that I was a township child and that I spoke bits and pieces of many languages" (Mashigo 2017: 24). She does not mind this as "the people around me understood" (Mashigo 2017: 24). She is unconsciously taking part in linguistic and cultural history. She does not feel that she has lost a connection to cultural memory, because her community, made up of a variety of ethnic and cultural groups, has its own mixed identity.

Collective memory has been preserved in this community, not only in the language but also in traditions, practices, and the creation of stories. Marubini is also able to take part in traditional social practices and learn their importance without it threatening her identity. Traditions are maintained in her community: she is able to take part in a coming-of-age ceremony. She describes her feelings: "I felt very important on that day. All the homes that had an initiate slaughtered an animal and cooked a lot of food" (Mashigo 2017: 184). Being able to take part in such a ceremony allows her to feel part of the cultural memory of her grandmother's people. Her grandmother tells her: "you are one of us now Marubini" (Mashigo 2017: 184). By following traditions and learning the secrets she has become part of the women of her community. As Aleida Assmann explains, it is "only through internalization and rites of participation" that an identity can truly be constructed (Assmann, A. 2008: 53). The community guides Marubini, and both allow her to participate and learn about aspects of her identity. The cultural memory she is partaking in cannot be "remembered", instead "it has to be memorized" (Assmann, A. 2008: 53). As she grows up Marubini will learn more about the history of her father's family and their beliefs, however, this act of participation is as important as learning about the facts of cultural memory. Memory in *The Yearning* lives within the individual and her stories and understanding contribute to its future. As Mashigo shows, it is not fixed but instead something which flows through individuals and creates a multitude of narratives.

### **Conclusion: The Limits of Trauma**

Contemporary South African authors represent acts of collective memory, illustrating the production of culturally significant events and narratives. Not only do these authors represent collective memory, but their texts also form part of it as cultural artefacts. Msimang shows that collective memory is not attached to the geographical nation-state but can grow as strongly in exile far from the desired homeland. The memory she represents in her memoir is both an act of culture, where she is deliberately writing herself into South African collective memory, and also an example of travelling memory where national borders do not limit but instead provide the impetus for the creating and sharing of memory. Exploring different memories within the borders of the South African nation, Mopai shows that collective memory cannot simply be created for political expediency. There are good reasons why certain groups have very different memories of the Apartheid, and indeed of more recent South African history. Merely fixing a memory will not get rid of historical and current injustice. Mopai's reading of the Rain Queen cultural memory is as a story of negotiating gender and sexuality in South Africa today. She has taken a traditional story and considered both its misogynistic implications but also the power it bestows upon women. Mopai shows that South African culture has not

always been the same and that it does not need to be in order to be authentic. Finally, Mashigo in *The Yearning* shows that every individual is made of many different traditions of memory, which can conflict with each other. However, they can also coincide and allow the individual to belong in many places at once.

The TRC was an attempt to archive the crimes of Apartheid. It was also in itself an act of culture, intentionally trying to construct a narrative to replace Apartheid division and the multiple versions of South African identity which arose in the years leading up to the transition to democracy. What impact does it have when a political elite imposes a certain kind of collective memory and calls it South African? People will continue to preserve the narratives that form the collective memory of their social groups regardless. However, what is at stake is not only institutionalised forgetting but also how memory shapes policies toward different groups, policies that will impact generations to come. A heteronormative memory, or a memory that does not consider material inequality has an impact on how the new South Africa is governed. These authors do not reject the idea of a shared collective trauma forming a part of South African memory. However, by representing diverse and changing collective memories, they show the limits of this ideology as the singular South African narrative of memory.

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