

Alexandra Negri

Shells on the Shores of Memory

A Diachronic Study of *Coloured* and Indian
South African Narratives

Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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1 Introduction: Memory after Violence

This new country, post-apartheid South Africa, is a site of affirmation, where speaking begins and silencing ends. It is also marked by contradictions where the textures of this newness remain contested, questioned and are constantly being refashioned.

Pumla Dineo Gqola

This study argues that a powerful model for understanding the interconnections between Indian and *Coloured* South African literature is one that digs both “wider,” along the continuum of South Africa’s diachronically linked historical periods of colonialism (slavery and indenture), segregation apartheid, and transition, and “deeper,” into the synchronic political, social, and psychological processes that undergirded the latter. Drawing on insights from post-structuralist deconstruction, cultural studies, and phenomenology, it shows how the shared themes of trauma, violence(s) and vulnerability, and interconnected notions of truth(fulness) and (non)speech in both *Coloured* and Indian South African narratives point to a pronounced concern with the supposedly nation-healing narratives produced by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission during the transitional period. However, while Indian and *Coloured* narratives about the colonial and the transitional periods are primarily concerned with the inaccessibility of truth and/or reconciliation and the experience of embodied shame, the *Coloured* and Indian removals literature “sandwiched” in between is considerably less concerned with the body as the locus of trauma, instead focusing on the theme of spatial humiliation, and thus attesting to the resilience of what Es’kia Mphahlele has described as “the tyranny of place” (12).

Much of the impetus for writing this book came in response to the fact that despite post-apartheid South Africa offering a veritable kaleidoscope of *Coloured*, Indian, and black narratives within which the dimensions of past, present and future as well as the enveloping realms of community and nation unfold, and in spite of the fact that the field of literary studies is no longer marked by a glaring paucity of critical texts outside the “old” South African canon of white writers, there has been no substantial attempt to contrast and study the interrelations between South Africa’s *Coloured* and Indian narratives. While it is thus true that narratives by *Coloured* and Indian South African writers have been given increased critical attention in literary studies in South Africa over the last decades, particularly with respect to *Coloured* writers writing in Afrikaans, a comparative approach is usually still absent. Moreover, this monograph proposes a diachronic approach to the literatures discussed, to the extent that Indian and *Coloured* narratives about different periods in South African history are drawn together in order to show how portrayals of the colonial period, the apartheid period, and the transitional period, respectively, overlap and/or diverge. This monograph, then, aims at discussing the manifold ways in which *Coloured* and Indian South African narratives (produced in the main post-apartheid) approach the experi-

ences of colonialism (slavery and indenture), apartheid, and transition, attempting in the process to reconcile the tensions that have arisen between ethnic and national identity, the past and the present, and notions of trauma, truth(fulness), and (non)speech.

In this context, it must be remembered that the ethnocentric undercurrents that have stubbornly surged up from underneath and rippled through South Africa during recent years are indicative of the precarious fragility of non-racialism. While instances of retrogressive denial and distortion by parts of the general population and political leaders are by no means representative of the attitude of the majority of South Africans, they nonetheless indicate that even in the “now now” the inevitable legacy of colonialism and apartheid has only partially been de-constructed. Some examples will suffice to illustrate this point: Alluding to the 2012 Marikana massacre, which resulted in the death of 41 miners at the Marikana platinum mine, 34 of them shot on 16 August 2012 when the SAPS (South African Police Service) opened fire with live ammunition on a group of strikers, Democratic Alliance MP Dianne Kohler Barnard shared a Facebook post by Paul Kirk in which he praised PW Botha: “Please come back PW Botha – you were far more honest than any of these ANC rogues, and you provided far better services to the public – we had a functioning education system, functioning health system and the police did not murder miners on behalf of government toadies as they do now.” In March 2017, Western Cape premier Helen Zille prompted public outcry with a tweet in which she wrote: “For those claiming legacy of colonialism is ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water etc.” In response to the gale-force storm which hit Cape Town on 7 June 2017, BLF (Black First Land First) leader Andile Mngxitama blamed white South Africans for it, posting on Twitter that “the Cape Storms are going to kill black people [b]ecause colonialism and apartheid have placed blacks in harm’s way in order to provide protection to whites.”

Now that over two decades have passed since the unravelling of apartheid, it seems that South Africa is not only in crisis, but *still* in transition – a ‘post-post-transition’ that extends the post-transitional period of the 1990s into the very present. Given the disturbing reality that racist feelings towards ‘other’ ethnic groups seem to have seeped into the new South Africa, Pumla Dineo Gqola accordingly warns that “[o]ne of [its] most disturbing contradictions [...] has been the surge of xenophobia against other Africans [and that] [t]his xenophobia can only exist in the refusal to remember history, [i]ts presence point[ing] to the ability of memory processes to coexist with processes of forgetting and erasure” (211).

Almost a century ago, Maurice Halbwachs inaugurated the idea that the active past that forms our individual identities is always connected to the societal and collective dimension of our experiences (*The Social Frameworks of Memory*, first published in 1925), paving the way for the systematic study of social and group identity. While Halbwachs’ ideas have been revised, explored and expanded from multiple angles, his guiding idea of the inter-personal relationality and societal embeddedness of memory and processes of remembering remains strikingly relevant today. There is agreement in