

Older Age in David Medalie's *The Mistress's Dog*

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The elderly are commonly perceived as one of the frailest and most vulnerable groups in society. This view could be attributed to a decline in their physical and mental strength, as well as the disengagement from society and the diminishing sense of futurity associated with older age. While the first democratic South African elections in 1994 heralded what many perceived as a period of cultural and political rebirth and renewal, this event for some also led to a profound re-evaluation of previously stable ideologies. Given the fact that identity in older age is in part reliant on the creation of a coherent and meaningful life-story that revolves around an engagement with the past, this radical reconsideration of the past implies that the democratization of South Africa may reconfigure the life-story an ageing individual can claim as his or her own; this places a unique pressure on the configuration of identity in these older people. This article investigates the ways in which the advent of democracy in South Africa influenced the literary representation of older age, and examines this idea in relation to 'Recognition' and 'Tussenfontein', two short stories from David Medalie's collection, *The Mistress's Dog* (2010. Johannesburg: Picador Africa).

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Coined in 1903 by Ellie Metchnikroff, the term 'gerontology' derives from 'the Greek word *geront* meaning "old man" and "logos" meaning "study"' (Harris 1988, 80 original emphasis). Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs explain that old age 'can be viewed from two conceptually distinct perspectives'. The first focuses on 'ageing as a process or processes of biological change occurring after reproductive maturity has been attained', while the second sees ageing from 'the social and cultural position that later life and ageing occupy within society' (Gilleard and Higgs 2005, i). According to research conducted by Kinsella and Ferreira, South Africa has the proportionally highest older population in Africa (1997, 1). However, in a country with a population as racially diverse and economically disparate as South Africa's, defining and understanding what it means to grow old poses great difficulty. The primary focus of current studies on ageing in the South African context¹ has been on the economic and social welfare of the elderly, and although these studies are undeniably useful, they fail to clarify the cultural construction of the ageing identity in South Africa in the way that a literary study of the

representation of older age might. This article aims to elucidate the manner in which older age may be seen as a period in which the concept of time is collapsed and its meaning rendered problematic. I argue that in the post-apartheid South African context, the temporal aporia that characterizes older age is undermined to some extent by the ideologies of newness and youthfulness concomitant with South Africa's transition to democracy. David Medalie's representation of older age in the short stories 'Recognition' and 'Tussenfontein' exposes a situation in which older age in the South African context may still be seen as a period of growth, albeit a limited growth, despite the temporal cul-de-sac that characterizes the experience of later life in general.

In *Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions*, Haim Hazam argues that older age leads to a collapse of time, and that this has profound implications for the ways in which society as a whole understands the concept of futurity. According to Hazam, the aged constitute a group characterized above all by marginality, because of the everyday challenges that many elderly individuals have to face, and because of their decreased social capital. This decrease in social capital results from the fact that their position is one characterized by dependence – because they are removed from the labour market they are seen as not being able to contribute meaningfully to the functioning of society. This implies that there can be no future return on any investments placed in them, and allocating resources to their welfare is seen as an act of charity. The fragility of their position further results from their lack of access to symbolic construction and identification. The aged are seen as an 'amorphous body distinct from and alien to society' (1994, 18). Their placement at 'the brink of the unknown' as a 'buffer between life and death' (p. 81) separates them from non-aged individuals who still experience time as a linear progression, and for whom 'the opportunity for socially approved transformations is a culturally cherished privilege' (p. 74). However, the 'old . . . are not supposed to change as others do and, accordingly, are denied such opportunity'. To clarify: while the elderly are in fact 'undergoing rapid and important changes in roles, identities, abilities and bodily functions' (p. 75), the fact that these changes propel them more clearly towards death and not towards a further life stage means that they are caught in a permanent state of limbo. The changes they undergo are not related to a transformation into a new state of being, but rather to an acceptance of a state of non-being. This denies the elderly access to the symbolic, because their temporal understanding disrupts teleological perceptions of time, as they are moving irreversibly towards a future none of us can comprehend. Hazam argues that because of this, the 'importance of gerontology is not in its substantive contribution to the understanding of the nature of old age but in its allusion to the limits of our knowledge of the essence of human existence' (p. 94). Understanding old age thus has profound implications for understanding the human life course as a whole, as the elderly as a group represent the living embodiment of humanity's engagement with the ultimate point of futurity, namely, death. More so than individuals at any other life stage, the elderly have to negotiate their identities in relation to their proximity to death, and as a result, live with a heightened

knowledge of their mortality. This means that their sense of the future is simultaneously increasingly concrete and abstract, as the unknown is that which defines, and also will soon undo, their identities. If older age is not seen as a separate component of human existence, but rather as a continuation of previous life stages, this ambivalent relation to the future impacts upon how humanity as a whole perceives the concept of futurity.

The transitional and post-transitional focus of this study is particularly apposite to the cultural construction of old age in South Africa. The birth of democracy was characterized by an ideological climate that favoured the idea of futurity, with its emphasis placed on the youthfulness of new beginnings. In broad terms, it attempted to reconsider a great deal associated with the past, subsuming what came before into an imperative that a 'new' South Africa look to the future. The societal focus shifted from seeing the past as something intrinsically coherent, to understanding it in relation to the implications it had for the future. If, as Hazam argues, older age is inevitably concomitant with the past, the instability of cultural identity caused by the social changes of this time period allows for an investigation into how this rhetoric of newness caused a shift in the construction of identity in older age. Clearly, the impact of this would be felt much more forcibly by groups that previously held a political advantage, such as the white protagonists of the short stories in question. Medalie alludes to the possibilities for change and growth inherent in older age in the post-apartheid context, despite the manner in which the collapse of time inherent in the condition of ageing appears to deny the elderly access to the future.

It has been argued that the socio-political instability of South Africa's transition to democracy is a historical moment best captured in literary terms by the medium of the short story. Andries Oliphant (1996, 59) explains that the 'short story's concentration and focus . . . renders it uniquely appropriate for capturing disparate moments and events' such as the 'fluid and transitory' nature of South Africa's liberation from apartheid. He is, however, careful to note that it is nonetheless problematic to view the 'proliferation of short-story writing' (Oliphant 1996, 59) during South Africa's transitional years as a new phenomenon that is somehow divorced from the country's earlier literary history. Instead, he argues for a 'broader framework incorporating the ongoing dialogue between past and present narratives that bridges the discontinuities and distances which range between' them (Oliphant 1996, 62). Medalie makes a similar point in commenting on a 'utopian tendency in post-apartheid criticism, which tends to be extremely proscriptive and frequently takes the form of telling writers that they should be making great leaps into new vistas of the imagination' (2010b, 35). This critical impulse, according to Medalie 'bears little relation to the actual concerns and characteristics of much post-apartheid literature, which is not only dystopian, but inclined rather to a preoccupation with the past than an embrace of the future'. He explains that 'the imperative which urges a complete transformation of the imagination, an entirely new type of literature to meet the making of a new society, seems to be misplaced'. This is because in 'historical periods, which feel strongly their own transitional status (the Edwardian age in Britain

is a good example) there is an inclination to look at the present with dismay, the future with trepidation and the past with nostalgia' (Medalie 2010b, 36). This can be seen by the fact that Medalie's ageing characters occupy an uneasy position in relation to what he has elsewhere described as 'a pervasive rhetoric of new beginnings and social and historical emancipation which greeted the end of apartheid' (Medalie 2010b, 35).

The short story 'Recognition' displays most cogently this altered relationship between the past, the present and the future associated with the ageing individual in transitional South Africa. The unnamed elderly widow of Kobus, a prime minister of the apartheid regime, is invited by the first democratic President of South Africa to a luncheon, along with other political widows. Ostensibly, this luncheon symbolizes the spirit of reconciliation that dominated the transition to democracy. As Magdalena, the narrator's friend, explains, the 'President wishes to make peace with the past . . . this is his way of showing that reconciliation can take place' (Medalie 2010a, 175). However, the narrator is suspicious of these ideologies of newness, as she feels that South Africa 'has become a young country' while she has 'become something left over from the past' (p. 173). This statement explicitly captures the manner in which the ageing individual is denied access to the future. Significantly, she does not consider herself a 'political person' and harbours ambivalent feelings towards South Africa's previous government, as she feels that 'the Party is no longer the one that [her husband] represented so loyally, and that he would not approve of some of the directions it has chosen' (p. 174). The narrator's loyalty is not to the politics of the apartheid regime, but rather to her husband and everything he personally represents to her. Her lack of political insight prevents her from seeing that distinction between the two is not as simple as it may seem. Arguably, this lack of distinction acts to reinforce the perception of older age as a period of stagnation, and as being divorced from the idea of futurity. However, the narrator is to some extent able to discard this egocentric position as the story progresses.

But now that apartheid has been dismantled, and now that her husband is deceased, she finds herself in new and unfamiliar terrain where she is not sure how she should define herself without her husband's guiding presence. As a result, she feels that she has 'a responsibility towards Kobus's memory' (p. 173) and is 'protective of his reputation' (p. 181). She explains this sentiment by saying that there 'is a kind of loyalty that must be suspicious of things that are new' (p. 173). She feels that the 'stability' (p. 175) of her life rests on what she has learned from her husband, which implies that her identity in her older age derives from the past, and not from the present or the future. However, the invitation to attend the luncheon for political widows forces her to re-evaluate herself in relation to the ideological changes occurring in the present. In this light, the unique pressure placed on the construction of identity in older age in the South African context seems significantly to curtail the involvement of the elderly in the future.

The fact that the luncheon takes place at the President's residence is extremely significant. This had previously been the narrator's home, and thus becomes a concrete site in which the past, the present and the future collide. Furthermore, it signifies the

intersection between the personal and the political: the home usually signifies the domestic and the personal, but a presidential residence is also a cypher for the political. Because this is the new President's home as well as the residence of the former Prime Minister, the narrator's husband, the house marks the intersection of past and present as well as the personal and the political. The narrator herself articulates this when she comments on how 'the sight of [the] redecorated room affected [her] more than all the other changes [she] had seen', and she wonders why they had not kept the 'Pierneef or the Van Wouw sculpture'. She naïvely explains that 'there was nothing political about them'. Furthermore, she says that she 'had redecorated [the room herself] a few months after Kobus became Prime Minister' (p. 178). She takes it for granted that her own reasons for having redecorated the room were motivated by taste rather than politics, yet assumes that whoever has redecorated the room subsequent to the transition to democracy has made explicitly politicized decisions. What is of significance here is the fact that the narrator fails to recognize that even though her own narrative regarding these works of art may be apolitical, others might perceive them entirely differently.

In this short story, Medalie seems to problematize the concept of reconciliation. He achieves this by contrasting the narrator's circumspect response to attending the luncheon with her friend Magdalena's enthusiastic and glib embrace of everything that is new. As the narrator says, 'There was something cringing about [Magdalena] . . . a smallness in her gratitude'. When Magdalena meets the new President, the narrator remarks that her friend 'was not behaving in a dignified manner' and that she 'was gushing over him'. The emphasis on 'the television cameras and microphones [that] were focused upon her' (p. 180) foregrounds the lack of sincerity in her response, suggesting that despite her desire to be associated with these ideologies of newness, Magdalena remains trapped outside of the sense of futurity they imply. In contrast, the narrator finds the experience so difficult that she has to 'think deliberately about her pride before [she] went in' (p. 177). The narrator realizes that by courting attention, Magdalena seeks to relinquish the past entirely and thoughtlessly, and that this detracts from the sincerity of her response to the President's gesture. The narrator feels that because her past has shaped who she is in the present, she cannot with good conscience act as though she is severed from it. However, she is moved by the graciousness of the President's sentiment. She indicates that she 'wanted to do more than thank him for inviting [her] to the luncheon. [She] wanted to thank him . . . for the symbolism'. This causes her to experience a sense of conflict, since 'gushing like Magdalena' means 'yielding something up to him that [she] was supposed to keep from him' (p. 180). Even though the narrator appreciates the gesture the President is making towards her, she still feels as though she has to retain her loyalty towards her husband, and towards the past. She feels that simply adopting Magdalena's superficial mannerisms would betray this loyalty, yet she still desires to express her appreciation of the President's humility. She is thus caught between two emotional tides that respectively pull her towards the future and lock her in the past, clarifying the ways in which the construction of identity in

older age is placed under a unique pressure by the rhetoric of novelty and rejuvenation associated with the birth of democratic governance in South Africa.

The narrator explains that '[p]eople are not satisfied with changing the present nowadays, they want to change the past too'. She feels that she has 'to protect what [she] know[s]' (p. 174), which leaves her caught in a liminal position in which she desires to reciprocate the humility displayed by the President as well as to hold on to the past that has shaped her. However, she finds herself unable to act in a manner that honours her appreciation of his intention while still reflecting her aversion to Magdalena's glibness. She states that she 'was not very pleased with [her] responses' as she feels that 'they were a little ungracious' (p. 180). In contrast to this failure, she is indeed able to offer an honest gesture to the woman seated next to her at the luncheon. For most of the lunch, she is unaware of the fact that the woman is the widow of an activist who had died in police custody while her husband had been the Minister of Justice. When she discovers the identity of the woman, she feels 'the need to say something, something appropriate to the occasion, but it was difficult to know what to say'. First, she repeats to the woman what Magdalena initially expressed to her on the telephone. She says that the President 'has done a great thing' in bringing them 'together so that [they] can make peace with the past and recognize [their] common humanity'. Seeking to establish a connection with the woman, she states that they 'are all widows' and that '[e]ach of [them] has suffered a loss'. In response to this, the woman 'seemed to stare at something behind [her], something in the far distance' (p. 181), and asks her whether she came to the luncheon 'to make peace with the past'. The narrator realizes that '[i]f there was one gesture [she] could make, it was to tell her the truth'. She tells the woman that she 'came to make sure that no one is going to take the past away from [her]'. The narrator is only able to connect with the woman seated next to her in an honest manner when she discards the sort of politically correct stock phrases that Magdalena mistakenly believes the occasion demands. When the narrator tells the woman the truth, the woman 'looked directly at [her]' (p. 182), rather than 'star[ing] at something behind' her (p. 181) as she had previously done.

True reconciliation, Medalie seems to suggest, relies on the idea of recognition. Significantly, he is careful not to discount the value of grand reconciliatory gestures, as can be seen by the narrator's appreciation of the President's invitation. However, the characterization of Magdalena points out how easily responses such as hers can become hollow and meaningless, when these responses are severed from one's acknowledgement of the past. Reconciliation should not mean relinquishing the past that has shaped the present, and does not imply rushing towards the future, but lies rather in recognizing the ways in which one's own past cannot be denied or erased. The point is that to 'recognize [their] common humanity' does not necessarily mean that they have to 'make peace with the past' (p. 181). Magdalena, in her gushing and glib embrace of the future, removes herself from the past and comes across as insincere and superficial. However, when the narrator makes her private, small gesture of reconciliation towards the woman seated

next to her, and in so doing exposes a sentiment that may, by some, be regarded as selfish and as contrary to the ways in which the occasion seems oriented solely towards the future, she connects with the woman in an honest and sincere manner.

Significantly, Medalie is careful to emphasize that such gestures cannot automatically erase all the differences between individuals, as it is 'impossible [for the narrator] to know what to make of the expression' on the woman's face. However, when the woman states that they 'perhaps...have something in common after all' (p. 182), it becomes apparent that recognition is perhaps more valuable than ostensible reconciliation. Recognition, in this context, relates to the way in which the narrator sees herself in the other woman's pain, and to the way in which she makes herself vulnerable in revealing her own pain to the woman. While reconciliation is an impulse that binds individuals together, it inevitably involves compromise. In contrast, to recognize oneself in someone else means to acknowledge the common thread of humanity that connects all people, despite differences in race, age and political belief. The rhetoric of reconciliation potentially glosses over the compromises that have to be made, but recognition acknowledges the inevitability of differences while simultaneously searching for that which connects people to others, despite these differences.

Medalie's choice of an elderly individual as protagonist of this short story is particularly appropriate, as the narrator's age allows the author to bring into sharper focus the reconfiguration of identity which inevitably accompanies a transitional period. However, the ageing protagonist is not merely a symbol through which the author portrays the societal tensions that accompany the process of democratization; she is also imbued with sufficient agency to regulate the conditions under which she rewrites her previously stable identity. The value of this representation lies in Medalie's careful negotiation of past, present and future. While the narrator's sense of identity derives primarily from the past, her recognition of this fact allows her to enact personally, and in miniature, the discourse of reconciliation that constitutes the socio-political climate of her present. For this reason, the narrator, despite her conservatism and, in some respects, her moral blindness, does not emerge as a caricature. Rather, Medalie's nuanced depiction of the aging narrator allows him to inscribe older age with social currency – as a period of potential personal growth, and a future with definite value. However, Medalie is careful to emphasize that even though it may be possible to associate the narrator with futurity, her relationship to the future remains fragile and fraught. The temporal construction of identity in older age is decisively restructured by its encounter with the ascendant ideology of youthfulness associated with the demise of apartheid and the birth of a democratic society, but this encounter reveals that unambiguous limits are implicated by unexpected opportunities.

While 'Recognition' is set at the brink of the transition to democracy, the short story 'Tussenfontein' takes place at an unspecified point in the post-apartheid era. While Libby is not the protagonist of the short story, her character provides considerable insight through its relationship with the past, and navigation of the future. This short

story moves between the past and the present in order to reveal the intricate manner in which the sexual awakening of Sam, its protagonist, is inextricably tied up with darkness and pain. 'Tussenfontein' expresses most eloquently the fraught relationship between the past, the present and the future evident in Medalie's fiction. This relates to his understanding that nostalgia 'denotes a specific way of enfolding the past into the present, and indeed the future' (Worby and Ally 2013, 458). However, in this story, it is ironically the younger Sam who struggles with the past, while his elderly friend navigates its complexities with apparent ease.

Libby, an elderly woman Sam has known all his life, has emigrated to Australia, but still visits South Africa annually. From the opening passages, the story emphasizes that she is 'famous' (p. 12) and 'notorious for nostalgia' (p. 13). Hazam (1994, 31) notes that older individuals are stereotypically associated with nostalgia, and that 'we are often told that in order to understand and communicate with them it is imperative to appeal to their nostalgic recollections'. In this sense, Medalie's depiction of Libby seems to reinforce this stereotype, as the elderly woman is shown to understand the world through her nostalgic recollection of the past. However, as the story progresses it becomes clear that rather than trapping Libby in the past, her nostalgia functions to imbue her with access to a limited sense of futurity. Alastair Bonnett and Catherine Alexander comment on the fact that the 'spatial working of memory and nostalgia has long attracted the attention of geographers' because 'the yearning for the *place* called home provides the most characteristic trope of the nostalgic imagination' (2013, 294, original emphasis). It is thus appropriate that Libby's nostalgia centres on Tussenfontein, the farm on which she used to live. Libby's nostalgia for Tussenfontein is furthermore sparked by her relocation – nostalgia functions by 'emphasising distance and disjuncture,' both in time and in space (Cunningham Bissell 2005, 216), and her emigration to Australia appears thus to fuel her nostalgic disposition.

Libby's presence causes Sam to relive his own past. The reader learns that Sam's first erotic feelings in his youth centre on Libby's handsome and charismatic adopted son, Danny. From Danny, however, Sam learns not only of 'desire' but also of 'the cruelty of unequal affections'. One day the boys are swimming and Sam longs for Danny's attention, but Danny disregards his presence. In turn, Sam ignores Danny's quiet and reserved brother, Wayne, who, attempting to attract Sam's attention, 'slips as he jumps in and hits his head on the side of the pool' (p. 18). Wayne acquires a permanent 'large whitish scar on his forehead' and even in his adulthood 'suffers from migraines and seizures' (p. 19) as a result. Many years later, he and Sam become lovers. The past that Sam remembers is clearly very different from that about which Libby is so fondly nostalgic. Their contrasting recollections of and responses to the past allow Medalie to make a more general comment on the way in which nostalgia functions in the South African context, and the implications this has for the future.

Throughout the story, Sam attempts to account for and understand Libby's nostalgic disposition. In doing so, he questions whether or not nostalgia is a valuable emotion.

At times he feels that ‘Libby is wise. She knows that nostalgia is what helps us find our way back – it’s all we have’. But at other times, he thinks that ‘nostalgia is just a story we tell ourselves so we don’t have to admit that we will not be able to find our way back’ (p. 12). Sam is particularly perplexed by Libby’s nostalgia because of the fact that her past is also filled with the pain of displacement. The love she has for the past has ‘been able to survive a widowhood when [she] was in her forties, her having to sell Tussenfontein, the move to Johannesburg, the emigration to Australia’. Yet her memories remain ‘sturdy children’. In contrast, Sam cannot ‘slip in and out of the past’ as it ‘wants to hold him in an awkward embrace’ (p. 13).

According to Bradbury (2012, 343), ‘[n]ostalgia is commonly defined as the painful longing for a lost home, a yearning to return’. Critical work on nostalgia accounts for it in a number of ways. It is ‘frequently portrayed as a reaction or response to more general forces’ (Cunningham Bissell 2005, 216). It is understood in this regard as a ‘sociological category’ that ‘identifies a particular sentiment as a symptom, and uses that symptom to diagnose and explain an underlying social malaise’ (Worby and Ally 2013, 460). Because of this, nostalgia is often described as ‘a discourse sparked by transition and discontinuity’ (Cunningham Bissell 2005, 221). This is particularly significant in the South African context, as the transition to democracy was a momentous shift in national character that should, according to this definition, have sparked a proliferation of nostalgia. However, nostalgia for the past in the discourse of South African history becomes a fraught issue, because of the hatred and anger associated with apartheid governance. As Medalie comments in ‘The Uses of Nostalgia’ (2010b, 36), ‘Backward glances are suspect because there is a possibility that they may be deemed a reactionary response to change. This is, of course, even more so when the past which provides the source of the nostalgia is apartheid South Africa’. The furious reaction by some individuals to Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* exemplifies this idea. Combining autobiography with critical examination, Dlamini provocatively expresses nostalgia for Katlehong, the apartheid township in which he grew up. His nostalgia is for his childhood and the community he grew up in; it is emphatically not for apartheid. Despite this, Eric Miyeni (2011), a columnist for *Sowetan Live*, writes that he finds the premise behind the book ‘so sickening’ that he ‘decided never to read it’. As Judith Coullie (2013, 1) explains, however, *Native Nostalgia* ‘follows convention by contending that apartheid was without virtue; it defies the norm by insisting that the life that Dlamini lived in Katlehong is worth remembering with nostalgia . . . because it was an ordered world in which ethically laudable principles governed social interactions, principles and practices’. The temporal structure of the relationship between older age, the past and the future complicates the manner in which nostalgia functions in the South African context. If, as Hazam argues, older age is characterized by a temporal aporia in which the past gives meaning to the present, and if nostalgia is a dangerous practice in the post-apartheid South African context, then the condition of the nostalgic individual becomes doubly problematic. This is because the older individual would then be denied access

to both the past and the future. However, the manner in which Medalie presents Libby's nostalgia seems to suggest that remembering the past may be seen as an enabling activity that has the potential to reconfigure both the past and the future. Medalie gives expression to these issues through contrasting Sam's and Libby's relationships to the past in 'Tussenfontein'.

Bradbury comments on the fact that 'the longing for home, for the past . . . pivotally entails a *longing for be-longing*, for insertion into networks of people' (2012, 343, original emphasis). Because of this, Libby's nostalgia can be seen as a positive phenomenon, as it serves as a connection between her and the people with whom she shared her past. Furthermore, Sedikides et al. (2008, 307) write that '[r]egarded throughout centuries as a psychological ailment, nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength'. It is therefore possible to read Libby's nostalgia as a way of navigating her present, and by implication her future, in that it allows her to come to terms with her new and strange life in Australia. It additionally helps her navigate her way through the 'new' South Africa to which she returns, as it mitigates her discomfort with the changes that have taken place in her absence, such as the 'electrified fences' and 'security systems' (p. 15) many South Africans feel compelled to install.

Svetlana Boym (2001, 5) differentiates between what she refers to as 'reflective' and 'restorative' nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia involves a critical engagement with the past, while restorative nostalgia idealizes that which has been lost. Seen in this light, Libby's use of nostalgia to mitigate her response to post-apartheid South Africa can be read in a negative light, as it emphasizes her inability to deal with the present, keeping her sense of her South African self riveted to the past. This detrimental aspect of her nostalgia can be seen in the narrator's comment that Libby knows the new South Africa only as 'a disparaging, unimpressed tourist'. Sam is astonished that despite her love for Tussenfontein, she has 'within a relatively short time . . . transformed herself into an inhabitant of another country' (p. 15). This seems to him like a 'double proprietorship: Libby owning the new, just as she possesses the past' (p. 20), a somewhat totalizing gesture which incorporates the future as well as the past.

The idea of Libby's *possessing* the past is revealing, as it implies that her nostalgia allows her to affirm her monopoly on the past at the expense of versions of the past belonging to others. Sam's suspicion of her nostalgia allows Medalie to present an alternative to Libby's monolithic narrative of the past, as Sam's memories of Tussenfontein are more painful. This suggests that the past should rather be seen as something fragmentary and elusive, shifting in meaning in relation to who is doing the remembering. Libby's nostalgia effectively divorces past from present, while Sam's circumspection alludes to the ways in which the past is inextricably woven into the present. In 'The Uses of Nostalgia', Medalie points out the differences between what he refers to as 'an evolved nostalgia' and 'lesser forms of nostalgia'. The former 'may serve to fashion a dialectical relationship between the utopian and dystopian impulses which proliferate in South African literature', while the latter reveals 'a present still in

thrall to the past' (2010b, 43). At first, it proves difficult to recognize Libby's nostalgia as belonging to the reflective, healthier kind. However, a careful consideration reveals an alternative reading in which the story's depiction of her senescence contradicts this idea, and seems to imply that her nostalgia might indeed be viewed as enabling her as an individual. Although when visiting South Africa, she appears unwilling to participate in the reality of the present, and so resorts to nostalgic recollection, this nostalgia arguably has not prevented her from moving forward with her life and crafting a new identity for herself in Australia. While Medalie is critical of Libby's distinctly uncritical preoccupation with the past, he is nevertheless able to use her character to undermine stereotypical notions of older age as being oriented entirely to the past and never to the future. He achieves this by depicting her as having agency and mobility in her older age and by undermining the mistaken perception of the past, the present and the future as discrete temporalities, whereas in lived reality they are thoroughly imbricated, gesturing towards the potential for change and growth which remains potential in older age.

'Recognition' and 'Tussenfontein' allow Medalie to explore the ways in which the socio-political changes associated with the transition to democracy imbue older age with an ironic sense of futurity. Both stories represent the past, the present and the future as overlapping in older age. In 'Recognition', the demise of apartheid, with its concomitant ideologies of newness, disrupts the narrator's previously stable identity. In 'Tussenfontein', Libby's sense of self is shaped by post-apartheid concerns such as crime and emigration. In both cases, the elderly characters are portrayed as out of place in post-apartheid South Africa. However, Medalie is careful to inscribe this fragility with a powerful, albeit ambiguous, sense of futurity. In 'Recognition', the narrator's liminal position allows her to approach totalizing rhetorical constructions of reconciliation with circumspection, and in doing so, to discard her egocentricity to some extent. In 'Tussenfontein', Libby's nostalgic disposition enables her to navigate her way through a painful past, a difficult present and an uncertain future. Despite the ways in which older age may be perceived as a time of extreme vulnerability, Medalie represents it as still retaining a potential for personal growth. Although the narrator in 'Recognition' and Libby in 'Tussenfontein' initially appear to be obsolete in relation to the dominant narratives of transitional and post-apartheid South Africa which elevate novelty and youth, both characters are revealed as possessing sufficient agency to shape the ways in which they experience the futurity of their older age.

Note

1 See Kimuna and Makiwane (2008); Makiwane, Ndinda and Botsis (2012); Peltzer and Phaswana-Mayufa (2012); Sadie (1994), and Sagner (2000).

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