

Embroidered stories, remembered lives: the Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation storybook project

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Abstract

The ability to create records depends on a number of social, political and economic factors. Throughout history certain groups have been better equipped to produce and maintain records, leading to situations in which particular views and ideas about society have been privileged at the expense of others. Furthermore, the nature of the written word makes it difficult for groups without a written culture to challenge records, causing their memories to be disregarded. Since the 1960s there has been growing interest in finding these 'forgotten' voices of the past, some being those of women. Finding such written traces can be frustrating and painstaking, especially material traces which hold clues to women of indigenous or native communities. This article discusses whether the embroidered story cloths produced by the Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation are a means of giving previously silent native women a voice, allowing them to communicate and raise awareness despite their lack of education and certain language barriers. Do these projects have the transformative potential they claim, not only for the community in which they are created, but even on a national level?

Keywords: embroidered story cloths, gender, material culture, oral history, South Africa

Introduction

The power of the written and the printed word cannot be denied, and the development of the loose-letter printing press in the 15th century by Johannes Gutenberg is seen as

a pivotal event in the development of humankind. Unlike memory practices such as oral history, which are ephemeral and disappear as they occur, text-based documents are frequently deemed preferable by many Western scholars, as they represent ‘a valuable means of extending the temporal and spatial range of human communication’ (Jimerson 2003). In terms of archival selection and appraisal, preference had been given to written documents as a result of them being resistant to change (Cook and Schwartz 2001; Jimerson 2003; Taylor 1982/83).

However, the ability to create written and especially printed records depends on a number of social, political and economic factors. Throughout history, select groups have been better equipped to produce and maintain records. The impassive nature and insistent repetition of the written word have made it difficult for groups without a written culture and the necessary means to challenge these texts, giving rise to situations in which certain views and ideas about society are privileged at the expense of others (Jimerson 2003; *Women Creating the Future* 2003).

One of the foremost scholars on the marginalisation of black women world-wide in the domain of the written word is Carole Boyce Davies (1999), who points out that

[m]uch of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women. (Lutz in Boyce Davies 1999: 42)

In her study of colonial archives and the recognition of oral history as legal documents, Adele Perry (2005: 333) refers to the ‘tight binds between literacy, archives and the colonial authority in the making of history’. By the end of the 19th century, the absence of written records was used to validate colonial claims – an aspect which Perry refers to as the ontological link between ‘literacy and civilization’ as opposed to ‘orality and savagery’ (ibid.). She describes the exclusion of certain groups’ memories as not having been necessarily neutral or voluntary, but ‘borne of and perpetuated by violence and radical inequalities’ (ibid.). Diana Taylor (2003) adds her voice to this debate, describing the separation between the written and the spoken word as only one aspect of repressing indigenous embodied practice as a form of knowing, as well as a system for storing and transmitting knowledge. Non-verbal practices (such as dance, ritual, cooking and crafts) which long served to preserve a sense of communal identity and memory, were not considered valid forms of knowledge, and those who dedicated their lives to mastering cultural practices were no longer acknowledged as experts.

Another section of society that has been marginalised by the insistence on written records is women. Researchers (Strobel 1999; Taylor 2008; Wirz 2000) agree that searching the past for written evidence about women can be frustrating and at times seemingly futile, as one is 'confronted again and again [by] the phenomenon of women's invisibility' (Jay Kleinberg 1988: 5). If women in the past commented on society in written form, they were forced to make themselves and their work 'harmless' in order to be accepted. This meant that they had to conceal their criticism of society, avoid an authoritative or argumentative style of narration, and rather focus on portraying the domestic realm. This did, however, lead to the story of the development of human society being told largely from a male perspective, and resulted (for the most part) in women disappearing from archival records and being denied access to a 'mechanism through which they can give expression to their being' (Hatavara 2006: 153).

As Western women form part of a culture which for the most part produces written sources, it has been possible to trace their lives and experiences in written form, in the form of letters or diaries, despite marginalisation in a paternal society (Burton 2005; Kolawole 1997; Manoff 2004). Women of indigenous or native communities, however, constitute some the most exploited and oppressed groups. Not only are they affected by the economic and racial injustices of colonialism, but they are also 'equally affected by [their own] traditions which relegate women to inferior status, and which demand fertility and respect for the extended family' (Clayton 1989: 7). One could argue that they suffer from 'double exclusion, double burden' and, in fact, 'double colonialism' (Mushengyezi 2004; Taylor 2010). It therefore comes as no surprise that material traces holding clues to the lives of these women are limited, tainted and/or virtually non-existent (Burton 2005; Chaudhuri, Katz and Perry 2010). Jennifer Robinson (1994: 198) points out that in the case of former colonies, 'missionaries, administrators, politicians, popular representatives, and travellers have all played significant roles in scripting both the landscape and the people living in this region'. Subaltern women as subjects have therefore already been 'positioned, represented, spoken for or constructed as absent or silent or not listened to in a variety of discourses' and their 'speech is already represented as non-speech' (Boyce Davies 1994: 20). Even when they broke the silence and spoke for themselves, African women were (and still are) ignored (Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 1997).

Apart from people in power who determine black women's ability to express themselves, Carole Boyce Davies (1994: 154) points out that 'location ... allows one to speak or not speak, to be affirmed in one's speech or rejected, to be heard or censored'. She describes black women as finding themselves in a location between public and private, as occupying 'border spaces' in society, 'locations or sites of flux, of change' 'between the limitations of spoken language and possibility of

expression' (ibid: 153–154). This 'convergence of multiple places and cultures' shapes their consciousness into that of 'crossing over' and 'perpetual transition', and with a 'plural personality' (ibid.) that makes it very difficult for them to carve out a rhetorical space in society.

The aim of this article is to '[l]ocate the voices of the silenced native' (Manoff 2004: 15) (women, in this instance) and to recover sources in which women's agency becomes evident – how they are enabled to communicate and create understanding of their role in the social, economic and political conditions that shape the human story, despite a lack of education, cultural differences and language barriers. The embroidered story cloths and storybooks produced by the Mogalakwena Craft Art Development Foundation (MCADF) will be used as a relevant example of how women have found alternative ways to leave 'written' traces of themselves. Situated in the northern part of Limpopo Province, between the Blouberg and the Mogalakwena River, this foundation was established in 1994 by Dr. Elbé Coetsee in an effort to alleviate poverty and unemployment in a remote Northern Sotho community. Today, the foundation employs more than 20 craft artists on a full-time basis and another ten on a part-time basis. The indigenous art and craft of this community and the skills involved in the practise thereof are promoted through their various projects and activities. Equally important, the craft artists, all females, are provided with a rhetorical space in which to make their own stories heard.

Material culture as an alternative historical source

Through the ages the telling of family histories and folktales has provided women with a mode of expression. When considering how information was gathered and decisions were made in the past, it is clear that females were in a much better position than men to control the dissemination of information relevant and important to the general wellbeing and proper functioning of a specific community. This is, in part, due to the division of work, which allowed women to have frequent contact with one another and to develop considerable group solidarity, as opposed to the men who worked in isolation in outlying fields (Rogers 1978). Important societal information that bound communities together was passed on orally from generation to generation by female community members – a phenomenon that is still prevalent in indigenous societies (Kolawole 1997; Perry 2005). However, due to orality not being recognised as a possible historical source for a long time, women had to find alternative ways of leaving more permanent traces of their activities and existence. As the majority of their lives had been confined to the domestic realm, it had often been through their activities on a domestic level and the material aspects thereof, that they could give greater permanency to their stories (Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin 2010).

Ian Hodder (1989) discusses an important development in the use of material culture as a source. He refers to attempts in archaeology to consider material culture

as meaningful by using an analogy with language as a ‘structured system of signs separate from practical and expedient activity’ (ibid: 259). However, the separation of meaning from the context of action led to a disjuncture or split between theory and practice. Hodder suggests that material culture be considered and treated as a particularly material form of text, since a text is a specific and concrete product, written to have some effect(s) on the world. For that reason it can only be adequately interpreted in relation to the ‘historical meanings which it manipulates and in relation to the non-arbitrary social and practical context in which it is “written”’ (ibid.). Therefore, the cultural practices and material products (such as needlework, pottery and other crafts) emanating from the domestic activities of women, serve as a testimony of their lives and achievements, in the same way that written documents produced within a formal political environment provide information on administrative and legal processes (Forbes 2003; Woollacott 2005).

For many centuries needlework was considered a form a labour reserved for women, and it was performed (for the most part) within the confines of the household, rather than being deemed a possible source of information (Parker 1989; Schmahmann 2006; Tangwe-Tanga and Maliehe 2011). This notion has since changed, and scholars now agree that the ‘centrality and significance of needlework and textile [in human history] warrants critical scholarly attention’ (Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin 2010: 41), not only as an alternative to discourse, but also as a form of discourse in itself. Due to political and socio-economic constraints, women were (and still are) denied access to certain forms of expression. However, more decorative needlework (such as quilting and embroidery especially) has been recognised for enabling them to construct their own discourses and ‘alternative texts’, thus providing them with a powerful rhetorical space. A quote in the introduction to *Women and the material culture of needlework and textiles 1750–1950*, ‘I quilt because I don’t want my history, my story to die. Quilting gives me a voice when I can’t write or speak’, indicates that needlework functions as a significant semiotic tool (Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin 2010).

The value of needlework extends further than enabling women to express themselves. As an economic, social and cultural product that has enjoyed wide circulation and consumption, needlework enables researchers to ‘recover and insert women into the fissures of the historical records’ as ‘social beings producing and reproducing cultural products, transmitting and transforming cultural values’ (ibid: 26–27). In the process a better understanding of political, class and gender constructions can be formed over time.

Roszika Parker (1989) provides a comprehensive overview of the way in which embroidery has been a vehicle through which the ideals of feminine behaviour have been expressed over centuries. She points out that within a patriarchal hierarchy embroidery is still identified with domesticity and low status. In the Victorian era,

handmade items of embroidery were painstakingly sewn by middle-class women, and could therefore not compete with articles which were mass produced in factories. According to the norms of society, these women, as upholders of moral standards in a fast-changing world, had to be protected from outside influences.¹ Due to its time-consuming and labour-intensive nature embroidery was seen as the perfect female occupation, forcing women into domestic seclusion and making it synonymous with female subjection and women's role as 'angels in the house' (Parker 1989).

Embroidery schools were established throughout Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the aim of uplifting young disadvantaged women not only economically, but specifically on a moral level (ibid.). Similar schools were set up in the colonies as a way to teach indigenous people the Western way of life (Rogerson and Sithole 2001). Some of the participants of the MCADF embroidered story cloth project indicated that they acquired their skills from their mothers or grandmothers, and there is evidence that needlework was taught at the Berlin missionary stations situated in the area. Ironically, this craft, which had to reinforce women's submissive position and seclusion from the 'outside world' and was supposed to expose native women in the colonies to Western civilisation, actually became their means of self-expression. As in the case of other embroidery projects in southern Africa, what was envisaged as a tool of subjection gave women a voice through which to expose the Western world to their way of life.

Story cloths as rhetorical tools

The term 'story cloth' is used in craft art literature to refer to a form of narrative, pictorial textile art which presents single scenes and narrative sequences in either embroidery or appliqué (Livingstone and Ploof 2007). Story cloths form a unique meeting point between oral tradition and needlecraft – two key elements in recovering women's voice. Due to their narrative content, story cloths have become a particularly effective way for women to convey their stories to a larger audience (McEwan 2003; Peterson 1988).

One of the best examples of a story cloth is the Bayeux tapestry which, despite the use of the term 'tapestry', is in fact an embroidered work. Since the early 18th century it has attracted attention from a large and diverse group of historians, ranging from art, textile, literary and military history, and is considered by some scholars as the most authoritative surviving record of the Norman Conquest of England. An 'illustrated' chronology of the event, it contains a wealth of information on the architecture, weaponry, clothing and minute details of the battle of Hastings (Bouet, Levy and Neveux 2004).

In the documented contemporary projects, story cloths are, for the most part, created by women. In the majority of cases, their creation is born out of economic hardship and enables the creators to earn a living from the sale of the cloths. In

some instances creating these story cloths allows traditional craft art to be revived: examples are cloths created by the Laotian Hmong refugees in Thailand and the *sujuni* or *kantha* projects in India. In other projects the craft art does not form part of the women's traditional culture, but has been acquired through contact with other cultures, which is true for the majority of story cloth projects in southern Africa.² As mentioned earlier, the MCADF project, started in response to limited employment opportunities in the area, has made the women less dependent on government grants for the unemployed, thus playing a vital economic role.

An important aspect of story cloths is that they are prevalent in societies with limited or no literacy. These societies rely on oral traditions (folksongs or legends) to hand down information from one generation to the next. The majority of the craft artists who form part of the MCADF are still illiterate according to a Western categorisation, since they have no schooling, while only a small number completed primary or secondary education. The stories depicted on the story cloths stem from oral discussions amongst the craft artists, based on their collective memory, which are then transferred by drawing on the cloth. The women subsequently 'fill in' the details by way of colourful embroidery. Annekie Joubert (2009: 101), who has done extensive research on the story cloths produced at Mogalakwena Craft Centre, describes this process as a mode of communication through which the craft artists 'stage live events in silent visual forms' using 'the "multiple language" of iconic and arbitrary signs'.

Despite a lack of education, the craft artists recognise the value of literacy as a tool for understanding. For that reason, embroidered texts or *ekphrasis* (words or cryptic annotations) have been included since 2000 'to give, directly or indirectly, "voice" to the embroidered pictures' by means of a brief explanation of each scene (ibid.). The words are written by those members who have basic literacy skills in Pedi. In some cases words are translated into English (Livingstone and Ploof 2007). Recall the earlier statement that black women occupy the boundaries of society: the act of these women telling their stories orally and wanting them told to a world community in written format, indicates that numerous boundary crossings have to occur – 'boundaries of orality and writing, of geography and space, engender fundamental crossings and re-crossings' (Boyce Davies 1994: 20).

The scenes and stories are depicted either as single story cloths that serve almost as a snapshot of an event, or as storybooks in which the narrative stretches over time and therefore consists of a series of story cloths sewn together. The content of the MCADF story cloths is mainly concerned with the women's culture and everyday life, and these embroideries offer a unique glimpse into the daily activities of their communities, many of which still maintain traditional customs and practices (Joubert 2009). The cloths, which serve to catalogue a culture, are sold to collectors all over the world. Topics include food collection and preparation; skills and professions;

education; rituals and rites of passage such as initiation, marriage and cleansing rituals after a period of mourning; the various religious groupings; leisure and entertainment, such as the traditional dances called *mokankanyane*; sport; dress and adornment as well as folk tales, many of which have a moral or ecological lesson.

The influence of both traditional and Western culture on many aspects of the women's lives (e.g., healthcare, religion, homemaking and clothing) is visible in the story cloths. In the depiction of their homesteads both traditional homemaking methods and modern brick homes can be seen.

Here, recently acquired plastic ware shares the kitchen shelf with traditional, earthen pots. Pension day is a highlight in the women's calendar, and women selling *mopani* worms set up stalls in front of shop windows exhibiting the latest gadgets. In terms of healthcare, visits to modern clinics and hospitals as well as traditional healers are depicted and the craft artists have indicated that they make use of both services.

In terms of dress and adornment, Western clothing is worn alongside traditional cloths, even in the performance of certain traditional song and dance rituals (*mokankanyane*), where contemporary white trainers ('tekkies') are worn with the more traditional dress.

The majority of the scenes depict aspects of the craft artists' daily lives, in which they do not necessarily feature personally. However, on 27 February 2013, as part of



Figure 1: Traditional and modern homes



Figure 2: A visit to the *ngaka* (traditional healer)

the celebration of International Women's Day on 8 March, an exhibition entitled 'A glimpse – Women and Fashion in Africa' opened at the Mogalakwena Gallery in Cape Town, curated by Coetsee and the cultural anthropologist, Susanne Tassé-Tagne. The exhibition included story cloths of a more autobiographical nature, namely hand-embroidered self-portraits of the craft artists in their favourite 'diapora', allowing for personal expression with the women depicting themselves and the way they dress.

Another indication that story cloths could serve as a way to express women's personal feelings is when a few of the craft artists conveyed that they would like



Figure 3: A performance of *mokankanyane*

to embroider a story cloth depicting the men of the community (interview with MCADF craft artists, 14 January 2013). One of the craft artists, using a biblical metaphor, indicated that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a man to get to heaven, thus giving voice to the difficulty many of these women have to endure in raising families as single parents, having been abandoned by their husbands or partners.

The contribution of story cloth projects

As mentioned earlier, a division between public and private spaces in the early 19th century led to women being denied access to the public sphere, which forced them to perform much of their creative output in the private or domestic sphere, where their lives had more meaning. According to Eger et al. (2001: 3),

[w]omen's place in the public sphere has been debated throughout history and is still the subject of controversy. The language of public and private spheres has been a central organising trope for women's historiography and for feminist theory; ... the dichotomy between public and private is, 'ultimately, what the feminist movement is about'. The

categories of public and private have been interpreted as equivalent to those of male and female and understood in terms of an ideology of separate spheres.

Although the idea of being limited to the domestic sphere (i.e., a 'separate space') and doing the menial household work associated with it has been a focal point of Western feminist criticism, Susan Cahill (1994: xvi) has found that this is not necessarily 'women's nemesis, the cause of suffering and failure', and that women's 'autobiographies and memoirs exhibit few of the fatal splits between private and public identities, between life and literature that wilt and wither many stories of emerging selfhood'.

In black women's experiences, however, the domestic setting does not have the same meaning as for white women, and 'home is not necessarily a comfortable or safe space' (Boyce Davies 1994). During apartheid the state intervened far more often and with greater violence in black homes and neighbourhoods than in white ones. Furthermore, there is a high rate of domestic violence in black communities, making black women's private space almost more fragile (Blunt and Rose 1994). It is therefore vital to 'recognise safe spaces where Black women's speech can be heard' and to 'produce what can be identified as a new space, an area of transformation and change where we ... can begin to unravel the ordering and structuring of dominant cultural codes' and to create 'spaces where critical positioning, or the process of identification, articulation and representation can occur' (Boyce-Davies 1994: 17-18). This is a process Boyce Davies (ibid.) likens to the 'reacquisition of the "tongue"' which brings women closer to 'reconnection and at times re-evaluation'.

Despite previously denied political and civil rights being granted to women of colour, 'this persistent patriarchy that performs physical, psychic and discursive violence against women' (Samuelson 2007: 9) still exists, and even in redressing the apartheid past, the 'exclusionary and discriminating patterns are reproduced' (McEwan 2003: 439). This was recognised in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where women's stories were often not heard, either due to oversight on the part of the convenors or for fear of reprisal within their own communities. For that reason the Amazwi Abisifazane memory cloth project was begun in an attempt to address the direct impact apartheid had on black women. In a country that has suffered under a totalitarian regime, which disrupted people's lives and destroyed communities, having a safe place where these women could recall traumatic events in their lives has made it possible for healing to take place. Boyce Davies (1994: 154) points out that 'remembering is what heals; the oral tradition is what mends and gathers the tribes back together. Remembering or the function of memory means re-remembering or bringing back all the parts together.'

In terms of the significance which the MCADF story cloth project had for the craft artists, interesting details surfaced during interviews and conversations. The craft artists do not attach too much value to the notion that the ability to express themselves

and to give voice to their personal feelings can serve not only as a creative outlet, but also as an emotionally beneficial experience.

For these women, the contribution that telling their stories makes to their lives links to a much more basic need – that of economic survival. When putting food on the table is a daily challenge, emotional needs and freedom of self-expression are often placed on the back-burner. For outsiders, the possible ‘inability’ of a project such as the MCADF embroidered story cloths to serve as a tool of expression, may seem like a failure (Blouberg Municipality Annual Report; Van Schalkwyk 1995). Being able to find employment locally, which would enable them to stay with and look after their families and would make them less dependent on government grants, dispels any notion that these story cloths are mere economic commodities. Furthermore, the members enjoy the support they receive from the group – they can share their joys and sorrows with the other craft artists. As a result, they do not feel the need to express themselves through their storytelling (Krüger and Verster 2001).

Thanks to this support structure, the women who participate in the project identify strongly with the foundation. This is evident from the fact that it was only in 2005, 11 years after the establishment of the foundation, that individual members began putting their names on the story cloths. Up until that time they felt that the foundation served as their voice. The importance of community life and the women’s strong sense of belonging to this specific community are also evident in the fact that they themselves decided, at a meeting, that all members would receive equal pay, regardless of their individual output. When Coetsee questioned this decision, the members pointed out that each woman’s total contribution to the community – not only her output as a craft artist – was considered.

The Craft Art Centre and the foundation are therefore central to the lives of the women of Mogalakwena, not only as a source of income, but as a safe haven. This much is evident from the responsibility they take, for example, in cleaning their work area. After a storm in January 2012, which uprooted and split open trees, the women took over from the team of male workers hired to do the clean-up: according to them, the men were too slow and not thorough enough.

Furthermore, the many years of marginalisation and their denied presence and agency in the construction of a collective memory led these women to believe they could not make a positive contribution to society (McEwan 2003; Strobel 1999). In the MCADF project, this sense of unimportance is evident in the fact that the imagery in the initial story cloths was very small, with the women perceiving their role as negligible. This has changed over time and today large, colourful images fill the cloths. Coetsee recognises the individual craft artists’ abilities and interests, and assign projects accordingly, which assists in building their self-confidence. The acknowledgement these women receive for their work on a national and international level, along with the economic benefits they enjoy within the safe and friendly

environment of the group, have helped to develop their identity based on a sense of worth (Olick and Robbins 1998). This is, in fact, the first step towards selfhood, which, coupled with greater opportunities for self-expression (e.g., the 'A glimpse – Women and Fashion in Africa' exhibition) will lead to greater independence on other levels.

In terms of the contribution the study of story cloths can make to scholarship and research, the story of the MCADF provides a different perspective on feminist studies in South Africa. First, this field of study recently became concerned not only with the politics of difference between the genders, but also the 'politics of diversity among women, a space that is fragmented, multi-dimensional, contradictory and provisional' (Blunt and Rose 1994: 7). In the South African context, apartheid forcibly separated white and black women, but despite this 'radical split [...] into distinct economically and politically opposed classes' (Van Schalkwyk 1989: 254), they met on a daily basis in the workplace. Cherry Clayton (1989: 1–7) and David van Schalkwyk (1989: 254–256) point out that it 'is therefore doubly unfortunate that white women, in their capacity as employers, or at least overseers, of black women should themselves be one of the most exploitative and oppressive classes in society' (Van Schalkwyk 1989: 254–256), shattering 'any complacent notions of sisterhood in South Africa' (Clayton 1989: 1–7). In her novel *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, the white Afrikaans author, Elsa Joubert, investigates 'the possible forging of a common consciousness between these two races of women in South Africa', 'who at this level would normally be separated by the cultural and social dogmas of our society' (Joubert in Van Schalkwyk 1989: 256). She concludes that although such a meeting is possible, it is not 'without its ideological and literary complexities' (in Van Schalkwyk 1989: 255).

The establishment of the Mogalakwena Craft Centre and the Development Foundation show the possibility of women of both races forging a mutually beneficial relationship. When the Coetsees bought the farm in the 1980s, South African history was characterised by racial tension, distrust and fear, not very different from the late 1970s when Joubert wrote her novel. The meeting between two vastly different cultures that took place between the local women of Mogalakwena and Coetsee attests to hope and a friendship forged across racial and language barriers. This is not the superficial and fleeting encounter of an 'outsider'³ who does not necessarily have a long-term vested interest in the project, but is predominantly due to Coetsee's genuine interest in the women's lives and wellbeing. An aspect of great concern to the women is the impact of HIV/AIDS on them and on their families' lives. Coetsee recognises this, and therefore part of their remuneration includes two visits annually, either for the women or their children, to a local doctor. Workshops in first aid and AIDS awareness are also presented, empowering the women to make informed decisions about their own and their children's health. This willingness to help them

face various challenges has earned Coetsee the trust of the women and a bond of friendship has grown to the extent that the local black women have given her a Northern Sotho name: Mmasechaba, meaning 'Mother of the nation,' shows the high regard the local community has for her (Richards 2011).

Second, the initial national narrative post-1994 stressed 'redress, acknowledgment, social flexibility, and building a culture of human rights' (Herwitz 2011) and great strides have been made in recovering marginalised histories. However, scholars have lately noticed a tendency to offer a 'sanitised representation of contemporary South Africa' (McEwan 2009: 739); a 'new form of grandiose history writing' which transforms 'unacceptable racial exclusivity into acceptable class exclusivity' (Herwitz 2011). In her work *Remembering the nation, dismembering women? Stories of the South African transition*, Meg Samuelson (2007) alerts readers to the danger of a national history fashioned during the transition that has its edges sewn in too neatly, thus rendering invisible both women and the everyday. She proposes using images of sewing, quilting, patchwork and tapestry to raise awareness of the world of the 'ordinary', so often omitted during the TRC hearings, as these allow us to 'trace forms of "living on"' 'denied in the closure sought by the nationalist teleological script' (ibid: 239). These needlework practices act as 'metaphors of becoming, rather than of being; they favour process and creative reworking over completion and complacency', 'deferring the desire for a seamless closure in the name of reconciliation' (ibid: 240). In the process they remind us of the 'provisionality and fragility of social construction: stitches and patches can mend and thereby make fabric re-usable and life liveable, without promising the attainment of ordinary wholeness that the national Mother is called upon to represent' (ibid: 240–241).

Conclusion

According to Cahill (1994: xvi) the vitality of the autobiographical narratives and life histories of women comes from the fact that they concerned with 'primary lived experience – events like birth, childhood, poverty, desire, work and love, sickness and death – and that of narrative made about such experience'. She points out that this 'connectedness of self and story, of contemplation and action' refutes the notion of women's experience as 'essentially private, divorced from the making of history and happiness' (ibid.). Cahill quotes William Dean Howells (ibid: xviii), who called autobiography the ability to tell your own life story, 'the most democratic province in the republic of letters'. She concludes that these accounts of women who have faced 'one crushing sort or another: sexual, racial, economic, classists' enable us,

in part, to taste and to learn from its discoveries of freedom and meaning against the background of this long century of daunting polarities. We find much to learn in its kind humour and in the urgency of its written memories. We are moved to consider

what they discovered: that we do not exist separately from one another; that every life story, including our own, counts; that this news is good and generative. They widen our consciousness of common grounds and wonderful differences (ibid.).

In the South African context, the ability to ‘counteract the archival violence of the past’ and ‘democratise the archive-building process’ is only possible if African women are recognised as ‘producers of knowledge’ (McEwan 2003: 742). It is recognised that without ‘sustained remembrance’ and ‘ceaselessly debated memory’ (ibid: 747) it will be difficult to construct a shared memory in post-apartheid South Africa or to continue the process of creating historical accountability and a viable democracy. Story cloth projects that enable marginalised women to tell their stories have the potential not only to improve the material conditions of these women’s lives, but also to counter the erasure of their historical agency (McEwan 2003).

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Notes

1 Blunt and Rose point out that the emergence of the division between public and private spaces from the early 19th century onward in Europe and North America should be seen as part of the cultural project of an emerging middle class. ‘Elaboration of the private as a domestic haven of feminine grace and charm, and of the public as the arena of aggressive masculine competition, is seen as a development that enabled the bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from other social groups. This distinction was as much material as symbolic’ (Blunt and Rose 1994: 4–5).

2 The projects at Letsitele and Winterveld include both men and women.

3 ‘Outsider’ is used by Brenda Schmahmann (2006) in her study of the emergence of a number of embroidery projects in South Africa, as opposed to ‘insider’, i.e., someone from the community. She considers the input from ‘outsiders’ as possibly hampering the process of creating managerial – and attaining creative and economic independence: two aspects vital to ensuring that these projects empower communities not only economically, but also socially.

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