

**Aspects of memory, identity and narrative in Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia***

by

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## ABSTRACT

I am a black South African in my late twenties; had I been slightly younger, I would have been a “born-free”. I was raised on the master narrative that South African history in the twentieth century was a struggle against apartheid. Memories of the struggle had been mediated to me via the school curriculum, national holidays, public commemorations, public spaces, popular literature and television. This social memory of South Africa’s black people having overcome the hardship, humiliation and trauma of apartheid makes little provision for the years prior to 1994 being remembered with fondness. And yet, this is exactly what Jacob Dlamini, almost twenty years my senior, dares to write about in his debut book, *Native Nostalgia* (2009). Having no effective personal recollection of apartheid myself, Dlamini’s text poses me with the challenge of making sense of the marked discrepancy between the master narrative of the struggle against apartheid and Dlamini’s individual sense of loss when reminiscing about his apartheid childhood. In this study, I investigate whether Dlamini’s nostalgia is merely a sophisticated veil acting as social amnesia in an attempt to conveniently rewrite the past, or whether nostalgia of a particular kind may be a useful tool especially for black South Africans to negotiate their identity between master narratives about nationhood and personal memories about the everyday and the ordinary. Does Dlamini present black South Africans with useful means for post-apartheid identity construction, and, as such, hold out the possibility for continuity in the tradition of postcolonial resistance?

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

I am a black South African in my late twenties. Had I been slightly younger, I would have been a “born-free”. I was raised on the master narrative that South African history in the twentieth century was a struggle against apartheid. Memories of the struggle had been mediated to me via the school curriculum, national holidays, public commemorations, public spaces, popular literature and television. This social memory of South Africa’s black people having overcome the hardship, humiliation and trauma of apartheid makes little provision for the years prior to 1994 being remembered with fondness. And yet, this is exactly what Jacob Dlamini, almost twenty years my senior, dares to write about in his debut book *Native Nostalgia* (2009). Having no effective personal recollection of apartheid myself, Dlamini’s text poses me with the challenge of making sense of the marked discrepancy between the master narrative of the struggle against apartheid and Dlamini’s individual sense of loss when reminiscing about his apartheid childhood. Is Dlamini’s nostalgia merely a sophisticated veil acting as social amnesia in his attempt to conveniently rewrite his past, or does he successfully argue that nostalgia of a particular kind may be a useful tool especially for black South Africans to negotiate their identity between master narratives about nationhood and personal memories about the everyday and the ordinary? Does Dlamini present black South Africans with useful means for post-apartheid identity construction, and, as such, hold out the possibility for continuity in the tradition of postcolonial resistance? In this study, I explore whether reflective nostalgia, the kind of nostalgia he purports to use, indeed offers such a possibility. In terms of theory and methodology, I shall apply the approaches and frameworks developed in the fields of and those associated with memory, identity and narrative to a literary analysis of Dlamini’s text.

Because my study is qualitative and literary-based, I have had to abandon the typical structure for a mini-dissertation in favour of one resembling an extended literary critical essay. At this point in the introduction, I have positioned myself in relation to my study by explaining my personal interest in and motivation behind conducting it; following this, I shall give the background to my study as a way of contextualising my research question to the reader. The body of my essay will take the form of a literature-review-cum-discussion in which I will investigate whether and to what degree Dlamini effectually uses nostalgia as a form of post-apartheid identity construction; the information contained therein will be organised under three headings: memory, identity and narrative. Under the memory heading, I will embed the book in the field of historical memory studies and South African historiography. Under the identity

heading, I will explore the impact of memory and history on national and social identities. And under the narrative heading, I will examine the role of narrative in memory-making and identity construction and explore the possibility of identity reconstruction when narrative functions within the framework of nostalgia. In my conclusion, I will assess to what extent Dlamini's proposal for identity reconstruction through nostalgia is successful and explore what possibilities such success might hold for the future of post-apartheid identity construction.

## 2 BACKGROUND TO STUDY

*Native Nostalgia* (2009) is written by historian, Jacob Dlamini, who currently holds an associate professorship at the history department at Princeton University and whose areas of interest lie in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial African history. He is a graduate of Wits and Sussex Universities, obtained his PhD from Yale University in 2012, was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Barcelona from November 2011 to April 2015 and was a visiting scholar at Harvard University from August 2015 to May 2016. His second book, *Askari*, was published in October 2015; Dlamini went on to receive the 2015 Alan Paton Award for it.<sup>1</sup>

*Native Nostalgia* published by *Jacana Media* in 2009 presents itself as a 176-paged, 210-by-148 millimetre paperback with a baby pink cover and shiny silver, dotted letters. The book is presented with black ink on white pages, is without any visual aids and takes the form of a “part-history, part-memoir, part-meditation and part-ethnography about growing up in Katlehong, a township east of Johannesburg” (as found in the blurb) (Native Nostalgia [sa]:[sp]).

In the book, Dlamini (2009) attempts to navigate his way through the complexities of post-apartheid black identity by looking at his childhood under apartheid through the precarious lens(es) of nostalgia. For his understanding of nostalgia, Dlamini leans strongly on the theory developed by Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). In her explanation of “reflective nostalgia” (49), Boym sources ideas from Freud, Bergson and Halbwachs. Boym's explanation of nostalgia takes the concept much further than its basic definition as “a

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: Board approves 17 appointments to Princeton faculty 2015:[sp]; Damon Galgut and Jacob Dlamini Win the 2015 Sunday Times Literary Awards 2015:[sp]; Jacob S. T. Dlamini [sa]:[sp]; *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* [sa]:[sp].

longing for home that no longer exists or never existed” (xiii). In his book, Dlamini argues why he remembers his childhood in the 1970s and 1980s apartheid era with attachment and a certain longing, notwithstanding the fact that apartheid is universally recognised as one of the greatest crimes against humanity in living memory. Dlamini makes the argument that despite apartheid’s infamous history of spectacular humiliation and violence, the lives of many black South Africans were quite ordinary and were not punctuated with instances of major spectacle. Dlamini assertively places himself within this category of ‘ordinary’ black South African and proceeds to regale the passage of his childhood in relatable and commonplace terms.

While Dlamini claims that his intentions are transparent, upon closer inspection, they are potentially problematic. To begin with, the mere suggestion that black South Africans might have lived (anything near to) ‘ordinary’ lives during apartheid, is justifiably contentious. The institution of apartheid, by any measure, was anything but ordinary. Apartheid purposefully ensured that black South Africans did not experience normal or ‘ordinary’ lives. By his own admission, abusive native laws, *dompasses*, and the severely unequal distribution of land and wealth (Dlamini 2009:15) characterised some of the extra-‘ordinary’ conditions under which black South Africans were expected to live. Even if there is merit to his assertion that very many black South Africans lived ordinary lives relatively free of spectacle, the context in which they lived, which in his case would be apartheid Katlehong, was anything but ordinary. From restrictions on which radio stations individuals were allowed to listen to (31), to the military occupation to which Dlamini’s secondary school was subjected (87), apartheid Katlehong was far from what one might regard as ordinary, at least by today’s democratic standards.

Eric Miyeni, a columnist for the *Sowetan*, for example, found Dlamini’s admission of nostalgia so absurd, in fact “sickening [that he] decided never to read [*Native Nostalgia*]” (Miyeni 2011:[sp]). Indeed, by professing that his life during apartheid was ‘ordinary’, Dlamini does little in the way of acknowledging the inescapable trauma experienced by so many black South Africans—the same trauma that Dlamini would also have indelibly suffered from. It would be inaccurate however to say that he makes absolutely no mention of the difficult circumstances under which he was living. He, himself, recalls that his high school was “under military occupation”; the school’s perimeter was delineated with barbed wire, soldiers patrolled the grounds, and he was required to present his ID to gain entry (Dlamini 2009:87). Further on in the book, he describes an incident in which a congregation of women, of which his mother is a part, is met with teargas which is administered by state soldiers during a night vigil shortly

after the congregation has begun singing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, which at the time was “the anthem of the revolution” (123-124). In fact, Dlamini professes that this kind of harassment was commonplace in those days: “Cops and soldiers often did that: fire teargas canisters into tents where old women were holding prayer meetings or halls where funerals were underway – just to see people choke on the fumes” (123). What is unsettling is the *way* in which Dlamini iterates these incidents—coolly and matter-of-fact-like. His language does not reveal any traces of underlying pain, anger or dismay for these injustices. Throughout *Native Nostalgia*, Dlamini (2009) consistently reminds the reader that “[a]partheid was without virtue” (13); however, the reader is left unsure as to whether Dlamini actually believes these assertions on an emotional level based on the language he uses in his account. By aiming *not* to showcase the more spectacular aspects of black, township life during apartheid, Dlamini possibly undermines the severity and impact of an entire collective’s experience – hence Miyeni’s outrage. Dlamini’s text might be viewed problematically as it does not take at face value the direct and inter-generational harm of apartheid on the lives and (self-)image(s) of black South Africans, including his own.

Indeed, at present, under South Africa’s constitution, the Black South African majority no longer suffers from the same level of injustices of unfair persecution and institutionalised inequality that it did prior to the country’s liberation two decades ago. However, apartheid’s legacy of poverty and social injustice survives most visibly within impoverished black communities and perhaps less obviously in the fragmented mentalities of South Africa’s black demographic as a whole. As long as the very real mental and physical negative effects of South Africa’s traumatic past still endure, resistance writing holds relevance and maintains a valid place in modern South African writings, regardless of the ‘post-conflict’ context which South Africa enjoys today.

Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009) resonates with an ongoing tradition of postcolonial black resistance writing. By suggesting to the reader that black life during apartheid in Katlehong could have been experienced as ‘ordinary’ and by depicting to his readers the endurance of black South Africans in their uniquely quotidian rhythms, Dlamini intends to resist the legacy of the collective memory of apartheid as one of universalised black trauma—a trauma so accepted and standardised through mnemonic conditioning by South Africa’s national memory that it may have lost touch with the autobiographical recollections of ordinary individuals. In a post-apartheid context in which everyone is free and equal in the eyes of the law, it would



follow that the most effective form of resistance against perceived victimhood would be to deny the very existence of that perceived victimhood entirely.

In the 1970s, when Dlamini was a young boy and Steve Biko a young man, Black Consciousness sought to assert confidence in black identity by tackling everyday dehumanisation and racism schemes. In this way, the ideal was that the oppressed, self-alienating and self-negating black person would be reconstituted into “a self-confident, socially and morally competent person who, through his or her own will, [could shed] the derogatory labels heaped on him or her during the last several hundred years” (Abdi 1999:156). At the time, Black Consciousness was precisely the counter-offensive mode of identity reconstruction that the sorely oppressed and victimised black majority needed to raise their morale and steadily continue their struggle against apartheid. Forms of resistance writing as vigorously and militantly written as Biko’s *I Write What I Like*, seem outmoded for South Africa’s black youth, who, if the recent Rhodes Must Fall campaign is anything to go by, is already highly politically conscientised. Texts like *Native Nostalgia* that are subtler and more diplomatic reveal the dignity, character and sense of community in the everyday lives of ordinary black South Africans who lived under apartheid, and are what is needed in twenty-first century accounts of the past. Perhaps, *Native Nostalgia* is Dlamini’s postmodern(?) contribution towards continuing the legacy of black resistance writing in South Africa.

If we are to contextualise Dlamini’s motivation for redefining his blackness (his post-apartheid black consciousness) through his nostalgia, we should take note that it was about three years after the author’s birth that the face of apartheid was irrevocably redefined. The 1976 “Soweto uprising would become the cornerstone of the new nation’s collective memory and identity” (Baines 2007:283-284). The brutal nature of the events that characterised the uprising cemented the notion that apartheid was a senselessly violent institution whose lust for carnage could not be pacified even in the face of innocent youth (287). Ever since, the world has almost single-mindedly viewed apartheid as undeniably contemptible. While such images of wanton violence effectively helped in garnering support in the global fight against apartheid, the portrayal of black South Africans has since been severely tarnished. Since South Africa’s liberation, the notion of black South Africans as disadvantaged victims of trauma has endured. It is precisely this injurious master narrative from which Dlamini wishes to disassociate himself. And he does so by confronting black collective memory and identity with nostalgia, “the incurable condition of modernity” (Dlamini 2009:16).

Like any autobiographical account, Dlamini focuses on events and observations that have impacted the way that he sees himself today. Most interestingly, however, virtually none of these events or observations seem to have much to do with the atrocities the reader expects to hear about apartheid. The contents of his book touch a range of themes from the politics of language to issues of class to the texture of township life; however, there are none of the more recognisable features that characterise a book that is set in a black township during apartheid. Dlamini gives his take on what black township life was like for him during apartheid. The only troubling aspect is that Dlamini's narrative seems completely incongruous when placed in the context of what some *know* and others *imagine* apartheid to have been like. The most traumatic incident that he describes in the book involves his almost being burnt alive as a young boy at his home whilst taking a nap on his mother's bed. The incident, while unfortunate, is purely accidental, and, thus, lacks any kind of political or racial underpinnings. By contrast, it is interesting to note how Dlamini depicts one particular incident which demonstrates the severity of institutionalised racism in the past; he references a story told by Soweto writer, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, in which a group of reservist policemen corner Matshoba at Mzimphophe railway station looking for a pretext to extort money from him. Even though the group fails to find grounds to incriminate Matshoba, they proceed to rough him up. He resists in like fashion. Not long after, Matshoba's mother appears and joins in with the reservists, landing a few blows on Matshoba with her handbag. This incident could have served as ample fodder for Dlamini to explore the possibility of the internalised subjugation that his mother seemed to display by not standing up to the reservists with her son. Additionally, Dlamini could have investigated the psychological mechanics behind why black people like the reservist policemen would collaborate to subjugate other black people from their own communities. Instead, Dlamini reasons the glaring faults of these two parties away by explaining that Matshoba's mother would have rather seen her son submit to authority and survive than resist alongside her son and potentially guarantee his being harmed (Dlamini 2009:8-9) – a reasonable yet uninspired explanation.

Having been born in South Africa, during the tumultuous 1970s, the spectacular nature of apartheid life would not have been anything unusual for Dlamini. And as such, this might explain his casual and rational response to and analysis of Matshoba's accosting. Nevertheless, this counterintuitive narrativising of his life's story is precisely Dlamini's goal. Dlamini makes a concerted effort to convince his reader that the story of his life is as ordinary and easy to

relate to as that of ‘anybody else’s’. He rejects the cynical and generally negative representations that South Africa’s official history has afforded the identities of black South Africans. As he eloquently puts it (Dlamini 2009:105):

“... townships tend to be seen as zones of deprivation that can only ever be defined in a negative sense, in terms of what they do not possess. In the telling of most histories, townships are poor places, full of poor people who often make poor choices in life. They are spaces where only the fit survive. They desperately ‘need’ development and lack any order.”

In this way, it seems as though Dlamini’s book has come about as a way of redressing what he believes has been the poorly developed representation of black South African identity and a way of offering an alternative and competing narrative to a much popularised national-memory-turned-official-history. For Dlamini, “the radio dramas, the sense of community, the love which transformed township matchbox houses into homes, the social order manifested in class distinctions and rituals of politeness, and even the residents’ use of Afrikaans” (Coullie 2014:198) transformed his community from a “[zone] of deprivation” (Dlamini 2014:105) to *home*. Coullie (2014:196) succinctly sums *Native Nostalgia* up as “a personal response to past and present South Africa, to hegemonic versions of the past and to contemporary state sponsored endeavours to shape communal memory”.

### 3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Memory

For the purposes of this study, I use Aleida Assmann’s (2012) interdisciplinary conception of memory as it offers a deconstructive framework by which one might analyse the mechanics behind Dlamini’s narration. When discussing memory as a subject, it is important to bear in mind that the concept is “transdisciplinary”, which means that it cannot be discussed in isolation as it invariably crosses over into “a wide variety of disciplines” (Assmann 2012:167)—in *Native Nostalgia*’s case: history, psychology, sociology, politics and narratology.

Assmann (2012:175) refers to Maurice Halbwachs’s original conception of collective/social memory as the shared/common experiences of a specific social group/collective given shape

and stabilised through “processes of communication”. It was Halbwachs’s belief that collective memories “form[ed] the communicative and emotional cement of a [social] group”, i.e. the unique experiences shared by a specific social group which differentiates the group from the rest of society. Halbwachs was of the view that an individual could not synthesise a memory on his own as “memories are anchored socially” by the individual’s specific ‘memory community’. In present times, social groups such as races, nations or, more relevantly, township communities construct their collective memories by means of “symbolic media such as texts, images, monuments, anniversaries and commemorative festivals”. These historical and cultural commonalities give the social group its collective identity. Assmann (2012:175) notes that this sense of social cohesion comes about not as a result of “individual origins”; rather, it is “acquired through learning, participation in the rituals, and all the other practical ways in which people integrate into a community”.

Research into memory studies continually reveals the fundamental correlation between culture and memory. As Assmann (2008:97) puts it:

Through culture, humans create a temporal framework that transcends the individual life span relating past, present, and future. Cultures create a contract between the living, the dead, and the not yet living. In recalling, iterating, reading, commenting, criticizing, discussing what was deposited in the remote or recent past, humans participate in extended horizons of meaning-production. They do not have to start anew in every generation because they are standing on the shoulders of giants whose knowledge they reuse and reinterpret.

In other words, it is through various modes of deliberate and ritual memorialising of the past that individuals of a cultural group are able to perpetually reaffirm and temporarily solidify their cultural identity. Each subsequent generation is rooted by the cultural mores, values and interpretations of the preceding generation albeit in an ever-modernising and socially relevant context; and much like how an individual recalls the events of his or her past in a way that serves the purposes of his/her present self-image or intentions (Assmann 2012:167), it could be said that we draw on those cultural aspects of our past that best suit/are most advantageous to the purposes of our present contexts.

According to Assmann (2008:97), memory functions by way of simultaneous processes of remembering and forgetting. For certain aspects of a memory to be highlighted the rest must

be obscured. On a cultural level, memory is limited by “focus and bias” (97). In other words, what a cultural group remembers is contingent on what it wishes to highlight from the past as well as whatever will see its present image portrayed in the most compelling light. On a psychological level, there is a tendency for “painful or incongruent memories [to be] hidden, displaced, overwritten, and possibly effaced” (97). Assmann (2008:97) very insightfully adds that “the continuous process of forgetting” is essential to the generational progression of cultural memory; she compares this process to the way we as individuals *must* forget old, irrelevant knowledge to make room for new, more essential information that concerns present and future needs and ideals.

Looking at the limitations of his cultural memory, Dlamini makes it clear that he wishes to focus on aspects of his past that demonstrate the richness of the culture in which he grew up. And like any ego-driven individual, he focuses on those aspects which represent his childhood in the most dignified, humane and relatable light. On a psychological level, it could be argued that Dlamini leaves out much of what we understand apartheid to have been because such presumptions are not congruent with the self-image he wishes to portray; one imagines that these instances have been effaced because Dlamini does not seem to adopt the kind of perspective that one expects from someone who grew up during what was arguably apartheid’s zenith. He speaks with a thoughtful, focused ease, seemingly out of place for someone who one expects was a victim of inhumane circumstances.

While we can only speculate the intentions behind his writing *Native Nostalgia*, what comes across clearly is that Dlamini uses his text to respond to a need that would see his present self-image being emancipated from the negative associations of growing up in a black apartheid township. To Dlamini, it seems, the way to achieve this is by forgetting apartheid’s more spectacular injustices against South Africa’s black contingent which have come to characterise that period by ‘replacing’ them with narratives such as *Native Nostalgia* (2009) which focus on those aspects of black township life that afford complexity and depth to township communities. By choosing to highlight the ordinary and subtler aspects of his childhood while playing down instances of typical apartheid spectacle, Dlamini might be suggesting to the reader that it is perhaps time for the cultural memory of black South Africa to evolve and decidedly shift from the many narratives that have seen black South Africans as victims of trauma to narratives of black South Africans that look to empower them and celebrate the richness of their various cultures.

Assmann (2008:99) distinguishes between two types of cultural memory: active memory and passive memory. Assmann (2008:98) points out that “[i]f we concede that forgetting is the normality of personal and cultural life, then remembering is the exception”. She adds: “The institutions of active memory preserve the *past as present* while the institutions of passive memory preserve the *past as past*”. In other words, in order to keep certain memories alive, processes and “precautions” must be put in place to keep that memory in mind whether that memory is kept centrally in focus as in active memory or relegated to the periphery as is the case with passive memory.

Active memory lies at the heart of any collective’s cultural identity as it refers to the “actively circulated memory” or “canon” that works to continually reinforce the image of that collective. On the other hand, passive memory remains on the outskirts of the active memory where it remains obscured, allowing for focus to rest on the canon (98). Passive memory can be seen as the “archive” of cultural memory and it exists in liminal, dialogic and permeable opposition to the canon. While the canon highlights certain aspects of the past in order to preserve them and keep them relevant, the archive keeps a store of memory that cannot be immediately or effectively used by the canon, but which functions as a handy repository should an obscured narrative need to be brought into focus (103). Simply put, those memories that are significant but that do not fit the framework of the canon are relegated to the archive as the canon has fairly limited space at its disposal (99-100).

The canon comprises the “cultural messages” such as specific texts, monuments and commemorative days “that are addressed to posterity and intended for continuous repetition and reuse” (99). In this way, the canon serves to define the collective identity of a cultural group (100). Herein, the “cultural capital of a society” is housed and reproduced over and over again (100). Those selected cultural artefacts that make it into society’s canon do not do so easily, and, as a result, they are ascribed “the highest meaning and value”. The canon is essentially resistant to the fluctuations of time and the fancies of every successive generation; its power lies in its ability to be reinterpreted as relevant to present society (100). This is not to say that the canon does not evolve; it certainly does. The memories it houses *must* satisfy the needs of the present collective; it should be more or less open to necessary “changes and exchanges” with the archive (101). Nations state rely heavily on society’s canon for the dissemination and perpetual circulation of their nations’ cultural memories to keep their

citizens united under a shared national identity or a “collective autobiography” (101). Many nation states rely on the use of monuments, national holidays/commemorative dates and approved history textbooks to reinforce national identity among citizens.

The archive on the other hand stores memory which no longer has immediate relevance to a cultural group. However, it is possible for individuals to draw selected memories from the archive and revitalise their function by recontextualising them using a new framework (99). Where the canon is continually circulated, revitalised and designed to imbue meaning, the archive remains latent, unmoving and awaiting interpretation (103). It should be noted however that the archive is not merely a figurative memory landfill for those memory narratives that do not fulfil the criteria of the canon; far from it, in fact memories in the archive should be in some way relevant to the canon, whether these memories are in line with the canon or ideologically opposed to it. Information that appears to have entirely no place becomes forgotten (106). In this way, the archive straddles the space between active memory and forgetting (103). Finally, the information in the archive serves as reference points and precedents which dictate the way in which society *will have to* interpret the present when it becomes past (102). It is important to note that the archive of a society’s cultural memory often contains counter-narratives that at times even stand in direct opposition to those narratives which form the canon. In this way, there is a constant potential dialectical tension that exists between the canon and the archive (106).

Understanding how canon and archive function in cultural memory offers us insight into the challenges and pressures a counter-narrative like *Native Nostalgia* faces when confronted with a master narrative as dominating as South Africa’s national memory. Gary Baines’s work on master narratives in South African historiography offers a useful link to the theoretical literature on collective/social and cultural memory, its making and functioning, and its relation to personal and individual memory.

Baines (2007:301) asserts that at the point of South Africa’s major political changeover in government and politics in the mid-1990s, the African National Congress (ANC), in its aim to redefine the significance of South Africa’s past and to forge “a new national identity”, set out to construct an expediently reconfigured “foundational narrative” of apartheid which would be incepted into the nation’s collective memory. Similar to Assmann, he adds that the issue of what is highlighted and underplayed “is a product of the dialectical relationship between

remembering and forgetting” and that both processes are always both actively implemented (301).

According to Baines (2007:284-286,301), by fact of the crucial and iconic role that the events of the Soweto Uprising played in demonstrating to the world the brutalities of the apartheid regime, it becomes simpler to understand why various (political) groups would want to vie for a stake in the narrative of the liberation struggle which tells the story of a South Africa that transcended the dark days of apartheid only to be reborn as an integrated and multicultural ‘rainbow nation’. It is to be expected that there is a modicum of power that comes with being aligned with such a narrative because such a narrative is prized by and holds much sway with the people (301). In the race for historical supremacy, the ANC has succeeded in placing itself squarely and almost unilaterally as the primary impetus that spearheaded the liberation movement (301). In fact, much of what is remembered presently about apartheid is actually ANC-sanctioned social memory (291-292). The ANC was afforded the opportunity to reconstruct South Africa’s national memory at a pivotal point in South African history as the country was transitioning from a police state to a democracy. And in this way, the ANC was granted an invaluable opportunity to reinterpret history according to whichever narrative would best align the people with the idea that the ANC saw to the destruction of apartheid and brought about the peaceful unification of the country. This fairly recent master narrative is hard to contend without the contender being deemed “a right-wing reactionary” (301-302). Much of that is because of the noble and revered impetus of democratisation that was behind the motivation to end the regime.

From this, we might say that Dlamini is offering a version of his lived experience in the same way that the ANC fashioned a struggle and redemption narrative about the apartheid regime. This almost gives legitimacy to Dlamini’s intentions. It is to be expected that not every black South African automatically agrees with the narrative that the ANC brought about democracy to the country. While this is the most prevalent liberation narrative, one should bear in mind that a number of alternative tellings of any narrative exist but are archived, forgotten or made taboo by those who decide on history.

The cornerstone theory upon which much of Dlamini’s argumentation lies is Svetlana Boym’s conception of reflective nostalgia. Boym (2001:49) positions reflective nostalgia as being the type that is concerned with “individual and cultural memory”. She adds that while the



individual and cultural memory “might overlap in their frames of reference, [...] they do not coincide in their narratives and plots of identity”. This theoretical framework explains how the perspective of Dlamini’s personal memory diverges as sharply as it does from his collective memory as a black South African. Reflective nostalgia “[savours] details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself”. It “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and [temporalises] space”. It can also be “ironic and humorous” (49). This type of nostalgia allows for the coexistence of personal yearning and critical reflection (49-50). Reflective nostalgics, like Dlamini, revel in the bitter-sweet temporality of their memories and understanding that the idealisms of their memories can and will never be remotely recaptured (50). One could argue in favour of Dlamini’s arguments on reflective nostalgia for post-apartheid identity construction as “reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness” (50); this last feature justifies the possibility for Dlamini’s remembering his past as ordinary and valuable.

Boym (2001:53) suggests: “Perhaps what is most missed during historical cataclysms [...] is not the past and the homeland exactly, but rather [the] potential space of cultural experience that one has shared with one’s friends and compatriots that is based neither on nation nor religion but on elective affinities”. This would seem to make much sense in terms of *Native Nostalgia*. In the book’s introduction, we are introduced to two ladies from Thandakukhanya, Mrs Pamase Violet Nkabinde and Mrs Thembi Ngcobo (Dlamini 2009:2,4). Mrs Nkabinde is an elder and pioneer in her community and has lived in the township for virtually her entire life. She laments how life in the township has changed so drastically since the days of apartheid. Thandakukhanya which was once a peaceful community has become a site where violent and spectacular protests in the name of service delivery commonly take place, so much so that these demonstrations have caused three deaths “including that of a 71-year-old grandmother” and have seen the razing of a clinic (1-3). Mrs Nkabinde says that in the past Thandakukhanya was so peaceable that not even the 1976 student uprising roused the community’s residents to take up arms. She adds that her community was deeply religious and that leaders were educated and “groomed in the church”. All this is a far cry from where she lives *now* in a violent community which is littered with taverns, where there is no influx-control and which is served by a corrupt municipal council; such issues were not problems under the previous government. “Thandakukhanya [has] become foreign to her” now (4). Despite her contentions with present-day Thandakukhanya, Dlamini makes it clear that at no point does Mrs Nkabinde say that she misses the apartheid. While she feels alienated from her community and is frustrated by how

her community has turned out, she feels sympathy for and a level of solidarity with the protesters as she understands their grievances (3).

Mrs Ngcobo who lives on the other side of town from Mrs Nkabinde similarly remembers Thandakukhanya as a quiet and peaceful place (4-5). She remembers how her community would make use of legal avenues and procedural systems to make their grievances known and to resist against unfair legislation. However, like Mrs Nkabinde, she is not oblivious to why her community has become as lawless and violent as it is at present.

Further afield in the small village of Mvezo, Dlamini (2009:5) introduces the reader to the middle-aged, “jobless and disillusioned” Mr Vincent Ntswayi who claims “[his] life was better during apartheid”. According to him, South Africa’s transition into democracy has not improved his life in any meaningful way. Like Mrs Nkabinde and Mrs Ngcobo, Mr Ntswayi alludes to the notion that democracy has been preferable to apartheid, but that his perception of the life that he lived under apartheid was of a higher quality. The testimonies of Mrs Nkabinde, Mrs Ngcobo and Mr Ntswayi illustrate a notion that Dlamini (2009:17) asserts in his book which suggests that it might be possible to remember one’s life under apartheid fondly without condoning its injustices. For, as Dlamini (2009:12) puts it: “There are many South Africans for whom the past, the present and the future are not discrete wholes, with clear splits between them”. In other words, it is very possible for individuals to have personal memories which diverge from the national memory of their countries and even from the social memories of their communities.

Mrs Nkabinde, Mrs Ngcobo and Mr Ntswayi are effective examples of how it is indeed possible to miss the good parts of a bad time. It is possible to appreciate what was good about the past even when it falls within an overall negative context. Much like these three, there are aspects of Dlamini’s childhood which fill him with nostalgia. His being brought up in an historically precarious time, does not, as a reflective nostalgic, preclude him from being grateful for his past or having overwhelmingly positive memories about it. In any case, it is more than likely that he actually did have a happy childhood during apartheid, notwithstanding the horrifying nature under which black people like him had to live. He says it, himself, in *Native Nostalgia* that it is a fallacy to say that all black South Africans at the time experienced, suffered and resisted against apartheid in the same way (2009:18). “The differences between black families extend beyond questions of domestic bliss and strife. There were class, ethnic and gender

differences aplenty” (Dlamini 2009:19). He continues by saying that any history worth its salt should take such variables into consideration in its representation of black South African life under apartheid.

He adds that “[i]t is all too often taken for granted that the story of black South Africa is one long romance” (2009:12). His issue with the master narrative lies in how “the master narrative blinds us to a richness, a complexity of life among black South Africans that not even colonialism and apartheid at their worst could destroy” (2009:19). He argues that “the fiction that black South Africans lived, suffered and struggled the same way against apartheid” is in line with the agendas of racial nativists and political entrepreneurs who, on the merits of the aforementioned predication, perpetuate the notion that the experience of one black South African speaks for the experiences of *every* black South African (2009:20;21). To demonstrate his reasoning, Dlamini exhibits Judge John Hlophe as an example. As Dlamini (2009:21) points out, “Here is a man with no struggle history to speak of ...” whose reputation has often provoked controversy on numerous occasions due to his proclivity for playing the ‘race card’ at will. What Dlamini is asking is how a man can speak as fervently as Hlophe does about the spectacular injustices and violence meted out on the black masses under apartheid when his own history reflects very little of that very trauma and turmoil. Dlamini (2009:22) impresses upon the reader that not every black person who survived apartheid can automatically lay claim to having been a freedom fighter. Many a black South African lived a more-or-less quiet and relatively ordinary existence. As Dlamini (2009:19) freely admits in his introduction: “[o]ur family did not have electricity for the first eleven years of my life, but this did not mark my life as dim or lacking in any way. I still had a happy childhood”. And perhaps it is in that vein that we should consider that there might have been much to be nostalgic about even for the lives of black South Africans who lived under apartheid. Dlamini is attempting to balance the untold number of pessimistic stories about life under apartheid with a positive account, one that seeks to acknowledge the fact that living under apartheid was not a terrible experience *all* the time and for *every* black person.

Stevens, Duncan and Sonn (2013:32) explain that South Africa is a country whose archival records of apartheid have been beset with precarious sanitations, omissions and oftentimes obliterations of what life was actually like in South Africa. And because of this, in many instances, the personal memories of people who lived under the regime have to be privileged

over what might be recorded in the official record, especially since the official record of the time suffers from a heavy bias towards the sanitising of brutal and violent events that occurred during apartheid. These personal memories from ordinary South Africans, who experienced apartheid, aid in expanding upon the already-documented history, and give resonance to the silenced voices of the struggle and providing alternative perspectives to generally-accepted, recorded histories. In other words, personal memories pose a necessary challenge to the unquestioned foundations of official histories and the popular narratives that they are associated with.

Stevens, Duncan and Sonn (2013:37) acknowledge a move towards “the reclamation of history”, which suggests that not only is history important for understanding our present situations, but it is also important in that alternative histories act as agents for decolonisation. According to Smith (cited in Stevens, Duncan & Sonn 2013:37), “Telling our stories from the past, reclaiming the past, giving testimony to the injustices of the past are all strategies which are commonly employed by indigenous peoples, struggling for justice [...] [and is] a powerful form of resistance”. And it would not appear far-fetched to say that Dlamini’s narrative represents his own type of resistance – a resistance that seeks to liberate his account of everyday black life from the negative associations of black South African identity. Stevens, Duncan and Sonn (2013:38) explain that remembering the past is valuable to the process of history-making as it “opens up opportunities for the recovery of historical memory [...], that is, for recovering and affirming ways of being and doing that have been silenced, distorted and/or eroded because of domination and colonisation.”

Coullie (2014) explores the ethical validity of using nostalgia as a framework to contextualise apartheid memory. She suggests that in situations where a community stipulates its memories of the past, it is necessary to gauge the ethical merit of that community’s intentions. In other words, she suggests that it is important for a community to question whether it is ‘using’ or ‘abusing’ its memories of the past (196). In addition, Coullie (2014) examines Dlamini’s attempt at counteracting the state’s use of apartheid memory, and the ethical implications of this attempt (196).

The act of remembering carries ethical implications in that a community stipulates the people and events of the past that they believe are ‘worth’ commemorating while simultaneously neglecting/denying those people and events of the past that are not deemed worthy of

commemoration (199). Coullie (2014:199) associates ethics with “thick relations” or those close relations we have with “family members, friends[,] lovers” and our imagined community—a term coined by Anderson (1991) which refers to individuals whom we may not know or may never know personally but with whom we have a kinship or a sense of community. In this way, it is important that our tellings of the past sensitively represent or are at least relatively in line with the stipulated memory of our thick relations.

With memory naturally comes the claim to truth which is why popular memories are often relentlessly contested. Depending on who is doing the remembering, a memory will either be perceived as true to the actual events of the past or not. It is precisely that truth claim which sets memory apart from the virtually unfettered scope of imagination—the latter is not concerned with presenting the most compelling version of truth. Ethical remembering wilfully forgoes “ritualised commemoration” which often “fix[es] memories in a kind of reverential relationship to the past” (200). The challenge with using memory ethically is making sure that memories of oppression are transmitted to posterity in such a way that the gravity of the injustices of the past are not casually passed over but also do not become points of debilitation which disallow a community to “to reconcile[...] with the past, so as to be liberated from past anger or hatred” (200). In this way, our memories of the past should be recounted as ‘accurately as possible’, but with a view to heal posterity and not to divide it (201).

Dlamini’s feelings of nostalgia for his childhood in Katlehong are indicative of the fact that he finds the present in many ways “wanting” (201) and “out of joint” (Dlamini 2009:4). His discontent has little to do with South Africa’s present-day problems of unemployment and income disparity (Coullie 2014:201), and more to do with the “loss of community and mutual care [that he] experienced during apartheid” (Coullie 2014:201). More especially, he is disillusioned by how South Africa’s national history has left no room for the credible interpretations of counter-narratives such as *Native Nostalgia* (2009). As he puts it (18):

I challenge facile accounts of black life under apartheid that paint the forty-six years in which the system existed as one vast moral desert, with no social orders, and as if blacks produced no art, literature or music, bore no morally upstanding children or, at the very least, children who knew the difference between right and wrong – even if those children did not grow up to make the ‘right’ moral choices in their lives.

It becomes clear here that Dlamini's problem with South Africa's official history is that it highlights the plight and victimhood that black South Africans faced during apartheid at the expense of dignified portrayals of them as individuals who had agency and who for the most part most lived ordinary, relatable lives. In this way, Dlamini's contention with popular memory of the past is fundamentally an issue of identity. And if this be the case, is it not perfectly intuitive to consider that he uses nostalgia as a deconstructive device that will virtually assure him a positive post-apartheid reconstruction of his personal and collective identities?

Coullie (2014:201) goes further to suggest that what Dlamini specifically misses in our "present-day profit economy" is the concept of *ubuntu* (African humanism) which sees an individual recognising, respecting and valuing the inherent humanity in his neighbour. That same inherent humanity exists within the individual and makes him and his neighbour equals because it is their humanity that makes them the same (Coullie 2014:202). As Coullie (2014:201) puts it: "*ubuntu* values human interrelatedness and mutual respect, and deems each person's very being dependent on such connections".

Dlamini's contention with post-apartheid historiography is that hegemonic, post-apartheid accounts of South Africa's past do not recognise altruistic ideologies (like *ubuntu*) which guided the actions and interactions of township-dwellers. These official narratives tend to ignore the dynamic, complex and multifaceted nature of township life in place of narratives that reinforce stigmas and negative stereotypes (Coullie 2014:202).

### **3.2 Identity**

Abdi (1999) offers insight into why it is unrealistic for even post-apartheid texts that deal with black South African identity to avoid engaging with the legacy of South Africa's apartheid past. He suggests that the deliberate distortion and deformation of black South African identity in apartheid South Africa is a direct legacy of colonial, European cultural hegemony and institutionalised systems for African underdevelopment (148) which were perpetuated by European settlers in southern Africa from as early as the seventeenth century. Subsequent generations of black South Africans have fallen victim to the negative psychological effects of such discriminating systems and have developed "cases of false identity, alienation and self-negation," (152). However incongruent these imposed negative black identities are, their

legacy fully impacts on the lives and psyches of the black population (153). One could suggest that Dlamini's self-image in this instance indeed unavoidably suffers from all three of the aforementioned negative psychological effects; and this might explain how he is able to recount his personal memory in as significantly incongruent a manner as he does in relation to the master narrative of South Africa's liberation struggle.

Whether or not Dlamini would be for or against perpetuating conventional and stereotypical representations of black identity, there is no reality in which Dlamini could avoid dealing with the issue or attempt to remain neutral. What one might find troubling in *Native Nostalgia* (2009) is that Dlamini does little in the way of acknowledging, as Abdi does, the factors that have informed the construction of black identity in modern times.

Looking at the psychological mechanics behind how identity can be linked to nostalgia, Hook (2012) expands upon the notion that nostalgia can be used as a legitimate mode of identity formation. He states that, in relation to identity, nostalgia can be used as a form of protection and that nostalgia can also function as a way of maintaining and regulating self-esteem and self-worth (230). In this way, Dlamini's heavy reliance and emphasis on nostalgia could be seen as a safety net with which he pacifies the inadequacy and humiliation brought forth by social memory and collective identity.

Hook (2013:259) explains how personal narratives often act as ego-speech and, in that way, texts that follow a personal narrative unavoidably function as "defensive formations". He explains that "a personal narrative, we might venture, is essentially a story that the ego tells of itself – even via the medium of others – *to itself*." Ego-speech is "a form of communication whose function is first and foremost that of conveying to others – and thus bolstering for the speaking subject – a likeable self-image of themselves." This type of communication seeks validation and confirmation for the speaker through acknowledgement and recognition from others so that the ego feels substantiated.

Hook (2013:260) also explains another type of ego-supporting speech that is often referred to by Lacanians as 'empty speech'. It refers to "a type of talk that is less interested in the truth of the objects of which it speaks than in the speaker's strategic gain in making claims or establishing a position relative to the object in question." In addition, "it protects the ego against

disturbing or painful truths, and it operates to generate effects of closure, wholeness and understanding to give a semblance of *identity*". And, is it not an integrated sense of identity that Dlamini seeks to affect in the telling of his childhood? As becomes inevitable when constructing a narrative, Dlamini is likely selective about which anecdotes and information he includes and excludes in his book, and it is apparent that he does all this in order to paint a very specific picture about what his childhood was like. From the colourful descriptions he affords the people in his community to the many entertaining anecdotes he freely offers his reader, Dlamini seems determined to depict a life that was rich in complexity. However, as one progresses through the book, one cannot help but realise that there is almost no mention of the brutalities of apartheid. It could be that Dlamini preferred not to focus on the negative realities of his childhood, but it could also be that Dlamini is deliberately manipulating the way we perceive him and the way he grew up. We should not forget that Dlamini makes it very clear that he abhors the idea of being seen as a figure of unredeemable victimhood and that there was more to the life that he and many other black South Africans lived in black townships. His narrative then works at constructing a positive identity for him. And as mentioned above, the type of empty speech he engages in probably works to protect his ego against truths and realities that might compromise the ego's sense of self.

### 3.3 Narrative

Ndebele (1986) offers some crucial insights into understanding Dlamini's intentions concerning the manner in which he chooses to narrate the memory of his childhood. Ndebele (1986) laments the spectacular turn that black South African writing has taken over the previous few decades. He suggests that such sensational writing is a direct legacy of the "obscene social exhibitionism" that characterised apartheid native law and interracial interaction (143). In his opinion, displaying favour for spectacular forms of writing at the expense of thoughtful, perceptive and analytic content puts South African writing at risk of appearing superficial and hollow. He suggests that a move towards rediscovering ordinary depictions of black life in black South African social narratives during apartheid could offer necessary complex nuances to stories that depict black South African social formation without depth or dimension (152). Simultaneously, it would diminish the reductive and patronising effects of simplistic and overly dramatic literary formulations which have become the convention when addressing black South African apartheid life (156).



It is not surprising that after the end of apartheid and the commencement of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), South Africa's historiography would need revising to better reflect the country's newly established political climate. A lot changed quickly after apartheid's abolition. For one thing, the TRC officially commenced in 1996, about two years after apartheid ended and already the country – terribly divided – was expected to reconcile its previously advantaged and disadvantaged social groups, which was a tall order. While it might be said that the TRC did invaluable work in laying the foundations for reconciliation in South Africa, the truth is that the conversations about the past have never really stopped and hopefully never will. The TRC provided a good platform from which members of the population who once had no voice, could now tell their stories from their personal perspectives.

In the two decades following the TRC, South Africa has seen a shift in silenced narratives which dealt with the very real injustices of apartheid on the oppressed to subtler, more nuanced silenced narratives which focus more on the effects left on the psyches of the oppressed. For instance, *Native Nostalgia* might have been received very differently if it had been published in 1999 as opposed to 2009. This continued excavation into unvisited narratives could be seen as a symbolic extension or the legacy of the TRC (Brink 1998:30). In this way, the testimonies never really stopped; they merely take place—unofficially—in the form of deeper and more insightful discourses, like Dlamini's book.

While history is perhaps more likely to be sourced for accepted and officialised narratives of collective groups, the mechanics of fiction writing appear better suited to deconstruct the contents of an individual's episodic memory. That Dlamini's text finds itself being less of a biography and more of fictionalised memoir comes about in the way Dlamini manages to virtually omit any form of narratological contradiction in terms of his account on his growing up in 1970s apartheid Katsieng. His very noticeable omission of the general markers which would give the reader context about what apartheid was 'actually like', make his account of his childhood seem like wishful thinking to some degree. It could be said that with the use of nostalgia, he relays the story of his youth through the lenses of a child. However, this argument would be far more believable *if* the type of nostalgia he claimed to use was *not* reflective nostalgia. According to Boym (2001:50), reflective nostalgia necessarily means that he is expected to look at his memories reflexively. In other words, he is expected to be thoroughly interrogating in his perspective of his childhood while growing up. Even if he was a child who was sheltered for the most part from the horrible realities of apartheid, that does not mean that

now as he writes his text as an adult he cannot contextualise his childhood experience through the lenses of one who understands the social complexities of the time and place in which he lived, if not for himself, then for his social group.

According to Brink (1998:36), “reinventing the imagination involves primarily [...] a peculiar machination of memory. And memory, which is always selective, comprises not only acts of recovery but also processes of suppression.” In this way, we might observe that the mechanisms of memory could easily fall prey to the mechanisms of fiction in the sense that both operations need a certain degree of imagination to function effectively. History and fiction might not be very different at all as White (1978:81-82) states in *Tropics of Discourse*: History is a literary artefact and its content is “as much invented as found”. One should consider what degree of remembering and forgetting one should employ when plotting a narrative. Fiction makes it easier to address sensitive subject matter by creatively and rightfully doing away with the noise that might have shrouded it. In Dlamini’s case he does away with depictions of the spectacular in order to allow himself to make his point and give his idea room to breathe so that his subtle observations are not drowned by the domineering and silencing nature of the apartheid experience of which Ndebele (1986:149-150) opines.

Nuttall (1998:75) observes that it appears that South Africa’s past is tailored to fit the country’s present vision of reconciliation and unification. Unfortunately, such tailoring means that what has been accepted as the official history has a very particular political slant with a rather inflexible narratological trajectory. Any alternative narratives that find themselves in even minor opposition to the official narrative are generally silenced and viewed as anti-transformational as they are seen as detracting from a national narrative which functions to unify the present population and lay the ideological foundations for a lasting democracy (Baines 2007:301-302). For the sake of peace and unification, the unresolved conflicts of the past are often willingly denied (Nuttall 1998:75). In South Africa, the standard by which citizens identify the country’s transition from police state to fledgling democracy are signified by Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. The reinforced narrative of Mandela’s journey around which South Africa has formed its post-apartheid national identity seems to be the fulcrum that keeps the national identity from deteriorating and giving way to the divisive inclinations of the country’s past. In fact, it is worth noticing that as time progresses Mandela’s status as deity becomes more fixed. One need only recall the instituting of the first Mandela Day on 18 July 2010 or the ten days of mourning that followed the struggle icon’s passing. It could be argued

that posthumously, Mandela's memory is treated with messianic reverence. This is important to note because once a hero has been essentially canonised in the hearts and minds of his people, his story is virtually untouchable and unquestionable. Nuttall (1998:78) sums up South Africa's most prominent perception of Mandela: "In the political frame, Mandela is the freedom fighter, the leader of the struggle against apartheid, the transgressor, and redemptive first president in the new democracy." She adds that his story serves as the standard "template" against which ordinary South Africans can position and construct their own autobiographies. Nuttall (1998:76) expresses interest in "how this messy activity of memory, this intricate crossing of the individual and the social, has been subject, in South Africa, to particular pressures, and distortions". Dlamini's text unsettles accepted narrative frames about what life must have been like for a black person in a township during apartheid, but in so doing, he adds much-needed complexity and depth to the official history.

Nuttall (1998:79) speaks of 'freeing memory' which she refers to as the legacy left by the TRC which scholars generally agree started the process of healing and reconciliation in South Africa. The initial testimonies of the TRC were very intense in nature, revealing crimes against humanity and some of the worst atrocities in living memory. Then, as the years went by, one could say that the TRC was continued unofficially through arts, culture and the humanities. Subsequently, the types of narratives one would engage with about apartheid focussed less on the raw, literal meanings of the apartheid experience and focussed more on the more subtle, obscure experiences that, if the spectacular had not been taken out of the way, would not have had the chance to be expressed. As the years have rolled on, one by one the silent narratives which were deeply embedded in the recesses of the suppressed apartheid public memory are finally having life breathed into them. One such testimony is *Native Nostalgia* (2009) which, had it been published before the year 2000, might have not been received with even a modicum of open-mindedness.

Where Nelson Mandela's narrative in a *Long Walk to Freedom* was used during early post-apartheid as the template narrative by which South Africans measured the efforts of their own lives, nowadays, there are a greater number of contemporary narratives with which South Africans can identify. The autobiography still holds a significant place in South African literature and it will continue to do so for as long as there are silent narratives that need unearthing. Like Mandela's autobiography before, *Native Nostalgia* (2009) might serve as a

modern type of “role-model autobiography” for the post-apartheid generation even if it is only for a select few (Nuttall 1998:79).

It appears that Dlamini aims to “write out [the] silences” about the way he grew up, how he was raised and the way he is looked at because he grew up in a township during apartheid (80). The act of writing his memoirs could be seen as a way “for [his] individual self to cleave away from a self that is more collectively defined” (81). In this case, that collective is black, supposedly damaged and previously disadvantaged.

Nuttall (1998:80) asserts: “Whereas autobiography is writing from a beginning towards a destination, memoir has often to do with a portion, usually an obsessive or troubled one, of a life – a pathological experience, or an experience of victimhood. This is frequently accompanied by a pressure on the ending to stage a recovery.” I would say that Dlamini’s text partially falls within the definition of memoir as much of it takes the form of a discourse in which Dlamini unpacks the ideologies and motivations behind the events that took place in his life as he was growing up. Much of the discourse seems dedicated to changing the reader’s mind-set about township life and convincing the reader that it would be silly to pity Dlamini for his childhood which just so happened to have occurred during apartheid.

Nuttall (1998:83) suggests that autobiographical work since 1994 tends to function by way of “work[ing] through the past by telling intelligible stories about it.” However, Dlamini’s own text departs from this trend in that it is not concerned with, as Nuttall puts it, “the rudiments of hope, of the redemption of suffering, and of transcendence over evil ....” No, these are precisely the sensational qualities that Dlamini is against when he analyses his childhood.

Lawler (2008) examines the role that narrative and storytelling plays in making sense of the lives that we live and in constructing our identities, both personal and social. She posits that a *life* story is of no use to either the giver or receiver(s) if it is not intelligible in terms of space and time (Lawler 2008:33). By that, she means that the aspects of a story or narrative must be common and sensible enough to be mutually and effectively understood by the two or more parties concerned in the communication process. If the aspects of space and/or time associated with the *life* story being told are not consistent with what the receiver(s) already know(s) about the conveyor, it can be concluded that communication has not effectively taken place. It becomes clear that the degree of credibility of a story determines how well, if at all, a story is

received. As Lawler (2008:38) puts it, “individual narratives must conform to intelligibility rules which are socially and historically specific”.

Lawler (2008:33) explains that narratives function by way of explaining and validating the relations that we as individuals share with each other and the social world at large. We understand the world around us inasmuch as we believe the stories that we have been told about it, be they social, cultural, literary or scientific. Likewise, we construct our social identities by way of the stories we tell others about ourselves. For example, I may view the formation of the world from a creationist perspective and my life as a series of tests set out for me by my Creator. Alternately, I might take on an evolutionist position and view the events of my life as a series of randomised events underwritten by fundamental scientific phenomena.

Lawler (2008:34) astutely observes: “That we are unable to be the authors of our own lives is an effect of the fact that no plot ever originates with us. To be sure, we may re-work and change all the plots, but we are using them as resources nevertheless.” In other words, there is never really an original story that we can tell. Every story we tell about ourselves is sourced and referenced from others. What we do in effect is merely stitch our life stories into the much larger social narratives. Our race, gender, sexuality, religious affiliations, place of birth etc. inform the different social narratives to which we may ascribe. Plainly put, “[the social world] comes to us already ‘storied’” (38).

She adds: “There is no narrative which can tell *everything*. What is told is selected because it is understood as having a meaningful place in the narrative. But it is then *given* meaning through its very inclusion in the narrative” (2008:34). In *Native Nostalgia* (2009), this aspect becomes most telling. The book deviates so decidedly in tone and account from the accepted norms and conventions that hallmark apartheid history that, at points, I realised that if the book had not been so explicitly positioned in the latter periods of the apartheid era, I might not have had any idea when or where the events of the book took place.

In one way or another, we all make the decision to either embrace the master narratives which constitute our identities or negate them; either way, we *must* react to these master narratives about ourselves. In Dlamini’s case, he chooses to convey his displeasure at having to swallow a foundational narrative which sees blackness (especially in a post-apartheid South African

context) as necessarily meaning a life that is imbued with systemic disadvantage, undesirability and trans-generational pain.

It would be naïve, however, to believe that the book would be accepted by all with all of Dlamini's good intentions. A prime example is Eric Myeni who formally stated that he would never read the book as he disagrees fundamentally with the idea of a black man who grew up in an "apartheid-designed township" extolling virtues of the simple life he led back then or as Myeni puts it, Dlamini describing his experience in terms of "fun" (Myeni 2011:[sp]). Myeni says that if a Jewish survivor of the holocaust were to write in a similar vein to Dlamini about the "fun" that he/she had had living in a "Gestapo-designed ghetto", his/her comments would certainly be met with outrage and incredulity. He suggests that Dlamini is an apartheid apologist whose choice of narrative undermines black suffering under the regime while assuaging white South Africa's guilt. He adds that denying South Africa's painful past is even worse than being defined by it.

Lawler (2008:36) suggests that refusal to be an audience to a narrative entails a refusal to understand. While there may arguably be just cause for a receiver to deny the speaker's narrative audience, "such a refusal is always a violent act in that it stands as a refusal to offer the person any understanding." From where I stand, it seems as though Myeni has less of a problem with Dlamini's book in terms of what it says than with the author who wrote it. Myeni has a problem with a positive portrayal of apartheid township life coming from a black person who grew up in a black township, someone who should 'appreciate' the struggle and 'know better'.

Lawler (2008:37) explains that a common misconception held among academics is that memory is a product of the individual. She cites Prager who argues that individual memory is very much influenced by the cultural and interpersonal relationships of said individual. In the simplest sense, memory comprises a dynamic between "self and the outside world" (Prager cited in Lawler 2008:37).

As we have established, our life narratives do not exist in a vacuum, independently of our social worlds; we integrate our narratives into one or more pre-existing collective narratives. By this logic, we can conclude then that there are limitations on the life stories that we can construct

about ourselves seeing that “the social world is always-already storied” (Lawler 2008:38); otherwise, the credibility of our narrative is at stake.

Perhaps this explains why individuals like Myeni might not find any merit in Dlamini’s childhood perspective. Apartheid is formally remembered almost exclusively as the greatest scourge to have ever ravaged this country. Historical literature, testimonies, interviews, archived photographs, national monuments and national holidays among other forms of commemoration serve as constant reminders of the country’s past and why the atrocities committed therein should be condemned. So when Dlamini presents a narrative about how wondrous yet ordinary his childhood was during some of apartheid’s worst years, individuals like Myeni scoff at the notion. This is because Dlamini’s text goes plainly against the grain in comparison to the myriad narratives about apartheid, both during and post-, which overwhelmingly state that apartheid was in fact as horrible as it sounded. Observe here how for individuals like Myeni, *Native Nostalgia* (2009) which speaks pleasantly about apartheid township life, does not make sense in the time and space of the apartheid concept. For those like Myeni, Dlamini’s narrative comes perhaps too soon to be even considered objectively because the wounds of the past especially for those who lived through the oppression might still be raw. Perhaps if Myeni had been born about a half century after apartheid’s official demise, being so far removed from it, he might have been more open-minded about Dlamini’s book.

Lawler (2008:39) states that “[m]emory is reconstructive [...]: what is remembered depends on what ‘makes sense’ in the context”. She adds: “To remember is not like watching a video” (Lawler 2008:39). By that, she means that one’s stream of memory of a certain event is not going to remain uniform in different contexts. The memory will be edited or at the very least tweaked in terms of content and tone depending on who one is addressing. If we agree that a memory is regularly reconstructed to suit an individual in their present context (i.e. present space and time), it would follow then that there is an agenda attached to the version of the memory that the individual puts forward. In the case of *Native Nostalgia* (2009), this means deducing the possible motive(s) that Dlamini has for recounting his childhood as positively as he does.

Steedman as cited by Lawler (2008:40) states: “all stories are ‘the same story in the end: the story of how the individual came to be the way she is’”. This implies that there is a story behind

the story. In other words, what is important is figuring out what might have influenced Dlamini to write his book in the way that he did. Dlamini has stated on more than one occasion in his book that he feels compelled to denounce the negative associations of trauma and privation related to black South Africans. It is possible that his outlook on his past has changed a number of times from his childhood until now. As we have established, what we know for sure is that his motivations have much to do with his perceptions of his present identity.

I would say that Dlamini's text lends itself credibility in that he makes certain to tell the reader that his account, while a reflection of his lived experience as a child, is still merely a subjective interpretation and cannot credibly represent the experience of the majority of black South Africans who lived in black townships during apartheid. Haraway as cited by Lawler (2008:41) observes a problematic of autobiographical writing that sees "a spurious objectivity that claims to be able to see the world 'as it is', while really being the subjective position of those with the power to claim objectivity". Dlamini has every right to make truth claims about his lived experience; however, he maintains the understanding that his experiences may not represent those of the many and that his perspective may well be flawed. The argument that he is making is that alongside the master narrative of apartheid, there is room for dissenting narratives.

According to Lawler (2008:42-43), readers expect a reasonable degree of correlation between the facts, as espoused in the formal literature, and the interpretations of lay accounts. Not only that, but the author's interpretations should be somewhat congruent with the memories and accounts of those who have shared similar life experiences as "life narratives can never be individualised, atomised accounts, but must include some account of the lives of others". As mentioned before, narratives never belong to an individual teller but always to a greater collective as narratives always integrate and inform others. She adds that "[t]his must go beyond an emotional identification ('yes, it was like that for me') to a more 'objective' identification ('yes, it was like that')" (Lawler 2008:43) and that "[t]he contract between ourselves and others demands some minimal level of agreement [...] so that people cannot simply claim to be whatever or [whomever] they want" (Lawler 2008:43). Readers may be surprised with what Dlamini writes about his childhood home as no one really expects to hear a black person recount their time living under apartheid as a positive one. It goes against what most of us have come to understand about apartheid's past injustices.



Munslow (1997), who sources many of his ideas on deconstructionist historiography from Hayden White, suggests that not only is the content of history important but also *how* that history is told. He asks: “[t]o what extent [...] is the form of written history as significant as its factual content?” (67). To answer that question, we should remember that history as we know it is essentially an amalgamation of narratives usually recorded and told through the lenses of historians. And in this way, many histories are essentially a product of the historian’s imagination. As a result of creating narratives to make sense of and interpret the past, historians “unavoidably impose themselves on the past” (67). In this way, “every history is always something more than the events described” (75), and any version of past is always open to doubt.

The deconstructionist view of history holds that “the past exists as history only because a narrative or story structure has been imposed by the historian on the evidence” (68). The narratives of historians are the conduits through which we are able to access the past. (69) History then becomes “a kind of literature” (69) in which the *way* a story is told exercises great influence on how the content of that story will be received. For example, even if two historians impart the same historical content from the same source of evidence, their different modes of emplotment will impact how the plot points of the story interact with one another and how their narratives will be received by the reader. Depending on whose narrative the reader follows, the reader will come to understand certain information in the text to be ‘more important’ than others. No one can have complete and unfettered access to the past; one can only have access to a particular point of view. In this way, history offers explanations of the past at best; what it cannot offer or validate is whether those explanations constitute the truth (69). Munslow (1997:69) suggests that “[i]t is probably best to view historical narratives as propositions about how *we might* represent a past reality”. However, he notes that there are historical narratives (like many about apartheid) which are so universally recognised and accepted that they evolve past the statuses of proposed histories and manage to “become *the* past” (69). However, even universally accepted histories unavoidably fall prey to the inherent ideologies of the historians writing them (70).

Munslow (1997) proposes that a deconstructionist history is one that does not believe in its own unquestionable claim to the truth as the historian is aware of the fundamental limitations and unreliability of his point of view (70). The deconstructionist historian is aware that “[f]or every history that aims to get at the past as it actually happened, there is always another version,

which, like the first, is by definition another fiction” (70). In fact, it is the trademark of the deconstructionist historian to study, question and destabilise established emplotments that influence the way the past is remembered and interpreted (73). Munslow (1997:70,74 ) asserts that history and fiction diverge in their applications of narrative in the way that history makes use of “retrospective emplotment of historical events and narratives” anchored by evidence which links the present to the past.

#### **4 OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUDING STATEMENTS**

Reverting to my research question, I wish to assess to what extent Dlamini succeeds or fails in his attempt to use nostalgia as a tool for post-apartheid identity construction. I question, again, whether Dlamini manages to make use of his nostalgic lens effectively when reviewing his past in order to reconfigure both his present personal and collective identities positively or whether he uses nostalgia as a sophisticated mode for denialism of the past where the negative aspects of black apartheid life are euphemised.

Assmann (2008:2012) reminds us that memory is not conceived in a vacuum; it is anchored socially to varying degrees. In this way, what and how we remember is very often influenced by what and how we have been conditioned to remember about the past by our various social groups. Memory keeps us rooted to the past, making the complete disavowal of one’s past impracticable. However, through the processes of remembering and forgetting, one is able to reconfigure the memory of one’s past rather substantially. Both processes are inexorably part of forming memories. Dlamini’s particular mix of remembering and forgetting allows him to paint a picture that effectively conveys to the reader how he remembers the past.

Baines (2007) traces the political motivations behind why the ANC positioned itself as synonymous with South Africa’s liberation and democratisation. In addition, while there are any number of narratives about any single event, it is those with the means and the opportunity who decide which narrative should come to personify the nation. Dlamini (2009) similarly comments on how the party’s enthusiasm to portray South Africa as a working model of a reconciled rainbow nation and a representative melting pot has worked to essentialise black South Africans as a demographic who before liberation were dispossessed, disenfranchised and disadvantaged, and, as such, undermines any claim to agency or dignity that black South Africans may have about their lives in the past. However, Dlamini’s motivations for structuring

his narrative in the way that he has do not appear very different from the ANC's; both entities wish to present themselves in a certain way and can only do so by shaping the stories that they tell about themselves in specific ways.

Boym (2001) introduces reflective nostalgia as the kind that is self-reflexive and self-aware; nostalgics of this ilk are decidedly conscious of the reality that the past cannot in any way ever be recaptured. In fact, they relish the inaccessibility and bitter-sweet yearning of their fragmented reminiscences. To these nostalgics, critical reflection is part and parcel of having genuine appreciation for the past. The reflective nostalgic understands that he has some positive memories about his past, and that these memories are worth treasuring, even if the greater context of the past is abysmal by comparison. The testimonies of Mrs Nkabinde, Mrs Ncgobo and Mr Ntswayi illustrate the possibility of longing for certain, positive aspects of a time and place that on the whole is remembered negatively. Dlamini (2009) asserts that it is unreasonable to think that all black people experienced apartheid in the same way. It should be expected that the way in which black people engage with their memories of the past would be far more complex

Stevens, Duncan and Sonn (2013) advocate in favour of the personal testimonies of victims of apartheid over official histories from the past as numerous sanitations and revisions characterise recorded history during apartheid, which saw the experiences of ordinary black South Africans being silenced. Stevens, Duncan and Sonn (2013) assert the importance of personal memories as those they serve to counteract and resist the silencing and essentialising effects of the official narrative. In this way, Dlamini 'reclaims his past' by sharing his personal memory, and, thus, resists against the silencing and essentialising of his own past.

Using Coullie's understanding of ethical memory (2014), Dlamini falls into the category of an ethical historian as he uses the memory of his past positively. He honours the memory of his thick relations by representing them in respectful, sensitive and encouraging terms and affords them a dignity and humanity that would only be expected from someone who actually lived the experience he writes about. Furthermore, Dlamini's text serves as one that aims to heal and not divide posterity by how sensitively and thoughtfully it recounts the past. His nostalgia also serves to commemorate a time when community ties and altruism (tenets of *ubuntu*) were ubiquitous with his experience of township life. And, worse still, he finds that South Africa's

official histories do little in the way of portraying the significance and nature of such relationships and interactions within township communities.

Abdi (1999) asserts that when examining black identity, one cannot overlook the impact that centuries of black subjugation would have had on black individuals. He traces the damage done to black identities as far back as the colonial era and delineates how this damage manifests itself in the psyches of black people today. Hook (2012) explores the possibility for nostalgia to function as a form of protection and a mode of formation for an individual's identity. He explains the mechanisms behind ego-speech (Hook 2013), and how its primary objective concerns the individual coming across favourably in the eyes of others.

Ndebele (1986) foreshadows Dlamini's thesis as he advocates for a mode of writing that shifts its focus from the spectacular events of apartheid to one that focuses, instead, on the everyday lives of ordinary people. Brink (1998) is interested in the similar processes of recovery and suppression that underlie the way in which we remember and imagine. Nuttall (1998) explores the ways in which narratives about apartheid have become subtler since the initial testimonies of the TRC. *Native Nostalgia* (2009) could be seen as a direct legacy of those original hearings. Lawler (2008) examines the functions of narrative and asserts that a narrative is only effective when its content and delivery are both mutually intelligible by both the speaker and receiver. She adds that no story can tell every side of a story, making whatever is included in a narrative the direct result of the author's agenda

Dlamini makes a strong case for why black South Africans should be remembered with greater dimension than is currently afforded them. For all intents and purposes, it would be appropriate to refer to Dlamini, in this instance, as a deconstructionist historian—in other words, one who is aware of the power inherent in *how* a story is told and not just in its content. Like such a historian, he questions the validity of and deconstructs the master narrative, and holds out that there are more ethical ways to remember the past.

In view of what I have argued, it would appear that Dlamini does not simply wish to expunge the pain of his past; he wishes to use nostalgia as way of introducing, adding and integrating relevant and richer dimensions of black life to the existing master narrative as way of decentralising its influence over South Africa's national memory. All in all, *Native Nostalgia*

(2009) offers a much-needed balance to the master narrative and will hopefully encourage other writers to fill in the silences regarding the complexities of their experiences under apartheid.

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