

# ‘Casting Shadows’: Militarised boyhoods in apartheid South Africa during the 1980s

Stephen Symons

University of Pretoria, South Africa

## Abstract

This article provides a series of insights into the structures and scaffolding of militarising White South African adolescents during the 1980s, including the processes of militarisation from childhood up until induction into the former South African Defence Force. Although this article traces the process and presents personal accounts of militarised childhoods, it ultimately questions how these indeterminate memories attempt to navigate a contested present, namely, a post-apartheid space.

## Keywords

Apartheid, conscription, counter-memory, masculinities, memory, militarisation, nostalgia, South African Defence Force, Whiteness

## Introduction

It is estimated that 600,000 White males were conscripted from South African society between 1968 and 1993 (Williams, 2008). This prompted the evolution of a complicated socialised obligation towards conscription, bolstered by an oppressive political and military regime. This article provides a series of insights into the structures and scaffolding of militarising White South African children during the 1980s, up until induction, as adolescents, into the former South African Defence Force (SADF).

I will point to the defining moments of the process of militarisation, originating in childhood, and suggest that the state relied on the tacit compliance of Christian National Education (CNE) and immediate family structures for the effective formation of militarised masculinities within apartheid South Africa of the 1980s. This period includes both the apogee and decline of the regime’s political and military machinery, marked by

demonstrative public opposition towards the SADF and the apartheid regime (Baines and Vale, 2008; Cock, 1991; Cock and Nathan, 1989). Black resistance within the borders of South Africa had reached a critical mass by the mid-1980s (Cock and Nathan, 1989). Organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), trade unions, uMkhonto we Sizwe (the military wing of the African National Congress) and whole communities posed a severe risk to internal security, forcing an over-stretched police force to rely on the SADF for assistance.

Although this article traces the process and presents personal accounts of militarised childhoods, it ultimately questions how these indeterminate memories enter and attempt to navigate a contested post-apartheid space. I argue that these memories assume the guise of counter-memory, often infused with a deep sense of nostalgia. Here, I rely on George Lipsitz's (1990: 213) concept of counter-memory, which unearths the past, exposing 'hidden histories' that have been excluded from dominant narratives, and Svetlana Boym's (2001) notion of nostalgia of a longing for a home that has ceased to exist or has simply never existed. Allied to Melissa Steyn's views on 'centralized' Whiteness and Daniel Conway's research on the militarisation of South Africa during apartheid, I argue that militarised childhoods and their related narratives tend to seed counter-discourses and memorialisations within a vastly altered present-day South Africa, specifically in the case of ex-conscripts who remain an influential minority within post-apartheid South Africa.

### Methodology

My primary investigation methodology follows a qualitative approach, employing a method of purposive sampling. I relied on two seminal texts as a reference in establishing my interview methodology, namely, Kvale (2008) and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) mode of narrative inquiry. I then conducted a series of 20 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with ex-conscripts from various arms of the SADF, including contemporaries of conscripts who did not enter the SADF for a variety (conscientious objection, religious or medical) of reasons. The intention of embarking on a series of interviews facilitated the evolution of more profound engagement with the participants and allowed their respective narratives to evolve naturally. A total of 38 interviews took place between 28 January 2016 and 13 January 2017. I adopted a phenomenological method, relying on narrative inquiry to underpin my qualitative research methodology. The interviews were preceded by a detailed questionnaire that was emailed to the participants.

In addition, I also relied on Van Dijk's (2001) notion that 'discursive power' poses two questions: How do dominant groups control public discourse? How these discourses of power control the mind and actions of dominated minorities? In this sense, Van Dijk's discourses of power play an essential role in the seeding of counter-memory among minorities.

### Formulating a militarised state of mind

Many White South Africans viewed national service as a necessary social duty and accepted White male rite of passage. The presence of the South African Border War cast

a pervasive shadow over White South African society during the 1970s and 1980s, framed by ominous phrases such as total onslaught<sup>1</sup> and rooi gevaar.<sup>2</sup> Cock and Nathan (1989: 3) echoes these thoughts, noting that Enloe's (1993) analysis of 'militarism' involves a gradual 'intrusion and encroachment' into civilian environments, affecting what Watson (2011) refers to as the 'social construction' of childhood, thus subjecting a child or adolescent 'to all the power dynamics [and processes it] engenders' (p. 44).

The apartheid state's process of coercion focused on the nation's White youth, an evident and captive starting point to entrench notions of threat, fear and rationalise the necessities for racial segregation. Macmillan (2011) argues that militarisation is 'not only the acquisition of bodily skills required to (potentially) take life', but also requires a correct 'disposition' (p. 65). Cock and Nathan (1989) note that militarisation is a 'contested concept' and part of a complex social process that takes place on an economic, political and ideological level (p. 2).

### Conscription as compliance

Irrespective of the cultural and political differences of apartheid-era White English and Afrikaans citizens, the ideological mechanisms of militarisation required the compliance of all White South African familial structures. In this regard, the National Party government employed a coercive rhetoric of fear, portraying the threat of communist expansion in Southern Africa as a means to justify conscription and national military preparedness (Cock, 1989; Gear, 2002; Patterson, 2009). Allied to Afrikaner society's strong views on patriarchy, puritanism and authoritarianism, national service was perceived as a necessary civic duty, whereas White English-speaking South Africans adopted a mostly passive and compliant attitude to conscription (Conway, 2012: 76–79). Baines (2009) rightly notes that 'ex-conscripts are not a homogeneous group', and that there were rare instances of individual and consolidated acts of defiance (p. 331).

Attempts by English-speaking Whites at positioning conscription as a necessary national service were often underwritten by referencing the past exploits of family members who had served during the Second World War, having answered the call to defeat Nazism. In this regard, the scourge of Nazism was conveniently substituted by the pervasive threat of communism, aided by propagandistic government discourse. Most English-speaking conscripts felt that 'conscription was constructed as an accepted, necessary trajectory of white masculinity in apartheid-era society' (Lazenby, 2012: 43).

White Afrikaners tended to be more committed, framed by largely hyper-masculine Afrikaner historical narratives. Past heroic exploits and a sense of superior cultural identity were employed as a means of presenting national service as an honour-bound duty that demanded unswerving loyalty. Therefore, the SADF acted as a forge for White Afrikaner ideologies, which dominated how conscription was rationalised and marketed to Whites. The regime's narrative of external threat was a means of self-preservation, aspects of a long-standing laager mentality that was woven into the intimacy of family structures, childhood and the social fabric of White society.

## Filial obedience: The family as an agency for militarization

### Paternal attitudes towards conscription

Ahlbäck's (2014) study of Finnish conscripts draws attention to the importance of 'filial obedience' and notes that the conscript 'essentially set[s] out to defend a power structure that was not dominated by him and his comrades but by their father[s]' (p. 132), whereas Sasson-Levy's (2002) seminal research on Israeli conscripts notes that the military plays a fundamental role in defining citizenship and 'the ideological construction of patriarchy' and 'definitions of masculinity' (p. 92). Conway (2012) and Morrell (1998, 2001a) note these notions of 'filial obedience' have their roots in childhood and are bound to various guises of masculinity. Ahlbäck (2014: 132) asserts that conscripts are both the sons of fathers and the regime, where their sense of masculinity acts as a fulcrum. Conscription was advocated as a performative culmination of a social obligation that had its origins in childhood (Cock and Nathan, 1989; Conway, 2012; Lazenby, 2012), so boys would enter adolescence and manhood, ever conscious of their role as potential warriors and protectors of the nation.

Fathers often created an impression for their sons 'that the army would make a man of you', yet many fathers of conscripts had little or no immediate experience of military service; hence, their views of the military were primarily based on the emotionally distant experiences of Second World War or Korean War veterans (Morgan and Kunkel, 2007). Interestingly, one wonders whether apartheid-era fathers would have so readily complied with conscription if they had been veterans of a previous armed conflict.

Prof. Seegers, at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Special Hearing: Compulsory Military Service (Conscription) in July 1993, drew attention to the compliant role of family:

The attitude of parents are [sic] very, very critical, but not only parents but where the rest of your family is. What have your brothers done? What do your sisters think, and what does the rest of the family [think]?

Draper (1999) draws attention to the role of parents 'in the development of children's attitudes towards conscription' (p. 11), yet when those pressures are articulated in the present, they produce morally confusing spaces of memory. For both English- and Afrikaans-speaking parents, the image of a patriotic father ready to offer his son to the military is a simplistic and generalised view. Ugolini (2016) notes that many fathers of English First World War conscripts did indeed feel the need to question and, in some instances, facilitate resistance to the call of duty. Much like the experiences of SADF conscripts, these ambiguities were often allied to connotations of silence, fear and even shame, as is demonstrated by the following ex-conscript's statement:

What I do recall is telling my Dad years later that I had taken a stand as a conscientious objector once in the SA Navy, refusing to bear arms for the institution. I had hoped he would be proud. But I think he was ashamed. (James)

### Maternal attitudes towards conscription

Women also played a crucial role in perpetuating the creation of gendered binaries, where the role of the male as protector carried a unique set of burdens for the conscript. Cock (1991) draws attention to the subtleties of gender relations in apartheid-era South Africa, and its determinants, that 'operate mainly to privilege men and subordinate women' (p. 26). As Ahlbaüch (2014) notes, the role of mothers was more ambiguous, whereby the son was loved by his mother, and in turn felt obliged to act as a 'protector', interwoven with emotions of pride and moral duty (p. 132).

Drewett (2003) argues that the state had clear views of males as 'protectors' and women as the 'protected' (p. 95). The delineation of gender roles also pressured females to acquiesce into stereotypical roles on the home front. Maternal compliance to conscription was often enveloped by a deeply felt reticent silence that is carried into the present, imbued with feelings of regret and helplessness:

I always knew my boy would have to go to the army. Sometimes I would watch him playing in the garden and imagine him in his uniform. At that moment, I wished I could have frozen time and that he could be that boy playing in the garden forever. I knew there was nothing I could do to stop it. I suppose I felt helpless... (Susan)

Dominant hegemonic masculine discourses in apartheid-era society perpetuated a subordination of the feminine, where the narratives of mothers, sisters, girlfriends or wives were 'blurred out of the narrative' (Ahlbaüch, 2014: 220). This resulted in a sense of helplessness, but in some instances suffused to a sense of conflicted pride:

I cried for days when Johan went to the army. My husband had no idea how upset I was. I would cry when he went to work. Johan was my only son, but when I saw him in his uniform, I felt so proud of him. At first, I didn't recognise him. He looked so grown up. (Dean)

Women acted as gendered participants in the militarisation of their sons, underwriting what Ahlbaüch (2014) refers to as a type of 'narrative homosociality' that actively 'conceals any emotional dependence on relationships with women, not least mothers' (p. 232). The peripheral role of the caring mother remained a subtle ideological construct of a hyper-masculine state, which encouraged a sense of silent compliance, reiterating the ascribed maternal role as a carer and future role of the son as a protector. Cock (1989) draws attention to 'indirect linkages', such as Nazi Germany, whereby the state simply equated femininity with domesticity (p. 53). Mothers were required 'to stay at home, produce babies' and exist in a state of 'complicit silence' (p. 53).

These 'complicit silences' were part of an intricate and blurred series of 'contradictions', including cultural and social determinants based on class, language and parental attitudes. Furthermore, these 'contradictions' were myriad and extended to the CNE schooling system and various religious denominations within apartheid-era South Africa.

## CNE as an agency of militarisation

The influence of the SADF on White schooling from the mid-1970s allowed for the development of Connell's (1995) complex 'configuration' of masculinities 'structured by gender relations' (p. 44).

Schools functioned as 'nurseries' (Frankel, 1984: 99) or vectors for impressing ideological agendas in the preparation of White males for military service. Msila (2007) notes that apartheid-era education was never a 'neutral act' (p. 146), clearly influenced by a dominant and racially divisive political discourse that entrenched White privilege. CNE within White schools was buttressed by Protestant-Christian (Calvinist) principles that adhered to a predominantly authoritarian Afrikaans paradigm. CNE not only espoused the values of the Nationalist regime, opposing a long-established British system of education, but also attempted to instil a system 'grounded in the life and world-view of the Whites, most especially those of the Boer nation as senior White trustee of the native...' (as noted in Article 15 of the CNE policy of 1948).

Pervasive notions of a country under threat infiltrated childhood, manufacturing socio-psychological pressures rooted in threat and fear, irrespective of race. Both Black and White children were taught to fear each other. These constructions of fear were fuelled further by the school cadet system, what Seegers (1993) referred to 'as national service by imitation' at the TRC. Cadet programmes were implemented at White secondary schools as a coordinated effort between the SADF and provincial education departments to prepare White males for national service, and officially brought under SADF control in January 1976.

As a gendered domain within the school system, the martial intentions of cadets had an obvious appeal for many adolescent males, yet, as Conway (2012) states, also engendered courageous acts of resistance which were in the minority, but ultimately presented 'an alternative performance of citizenship and gender identity' (p. 86), leading to the formation of anti-conscription organisations in the 1980s such as the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). Cock (1991) notes that the SADF hoped the cadet corps would 'develop a sense of responsibility and love for their country and national flag' (p. 69) and in turn develop an awareness of the 'malevolent revolutionary forces' that threatened South Africa (Paratus, 1979). A further excerpt from Paratus (1979), the official magazine of the SADF, outlines the state's attitude towards cadet programmes:

The cadet system has brought a new awareness among schoolboys of the nature of the onslaught against South Africa. They recognise and understand the threat and are highly motivated to undergo training to aid them in combating it.

Cadets relied heavily on teacher compliance and the authoritarian nature of White apartheid-era schools. Non-compliance was rare and usually occurred within the liberal preserves of English-speaking high schools. As Conway (2012) notes, conscientious objectors and war resisters threaten the very foundations of 'gendered militarised norms' and delegitimise the state's claim on acts of courage and even patriotism. In some instances, 'cadet duty at school was cited as a moment where future objectors experienced a sense of not fitting in' (p. 95) and also 'provoked an inner dialogue that resulted

in the ultimate breach symbolized by objection to conscription' (p. 96). The following account gives voice to Conway's concept of an 'ultimate breach':

I saw right through what the government was trying to achieve at high school with the cadet programme. I would go so far as to say it inspired me to become a member of the ECC, and ultimately avoid conscription. They (the government) had the opposite effect on me. (Mark)

Afrikaans high schools tended to take the cadet programme more seriously, including inter-school shooting competitions, and much like sports such as rugby, cadets was promoted as an activity that prepared boys for manhood. Conway (2012) draws attention to how the cadet programme was an unlikely marriage between 'militarised rituals and Total Onslaught rhetoric . . . interwoven with British imperial discourses' (p. 60). Therefore, narratives relating to cadets often present an exclusive masculine world bound to idealised notions of playing soldiers in preparation for the future performance of national service:

I feel bitterly disappointed that we were blind to what was really happening. Yes, cadets were a joke, but we were all being conned into becoming soldiers, yet remained obedient. (Craig)

Craig's brief statement reveals the ambiguity of a militarised state of mind, its social insensitivities and how it contaminated childhood, where compliance was perceived as the obvious and only route to follow. However, as memories of the cadet experience enter the present, the incongruities, absurdity and even disappointment of compelling children to don uniforms draw apparent comparisons to similar histories, most notably the rise of Nazism:

I hated cadets and the way the teachers wore their uniforms, showing off their rank. Thinking back on it, we must have looked like the Hitler Youth when we used to march down the main street of our town. (Peter)

Furthermore, Msila (2007) points out that CNE was aided by indoctrination 'programmes' such as veldskools<sup>3</sup> that were established in the early 1970s under the 'pretext of nature study'. Veldskools were essentially paramilitary camps for both sexes that only existed in the former Transvaal. Veldskools provided regimented forums for the dissemination of SADF propaganda, fear-mongering, and a means to prepare White youths for national service (Evans, 1989).

In addition, registration for compulsory military service took place within the high school environment and acted as a performative and patriotic rite of passage for all 16-year-old White males. The ground for Cock's (1991) notion of 'ideological coercion' had been well prepared (p. 69). Ms Burton gave the following account of the registration process at the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (1997):

It's another way in which young people were drawn into the system. Those who were still at school . . . were registered at the school . . . so it was at that stage already that young men [boys] and their parents had to face the fact.<sup>4</sup>

### Schoolboy rugby: The scrummaging of hyper-masculine stereotypes

Masculinity is sign-posted within the apartheid-era school environment through school sports such as rugby that are espoused as exclusive masculine domains (Messner, 1990). This aggressive naturalising of masculine dynamics within sport points to an intimate connection between military organisations and hegemonic representations of masculinity. Du Pasani notes that ‘rugby was regarded by Afrikaner males as “the king of sports” . . . an important vent for male aggression’, and that ‘sports heroes were idolised in a similar way to war heroes’ (Morrell, 2001b: 166).

Schoolboy rugby played a vital role in creating a seamless transition from the sports field to the parade ground. Conway (2012) notes that ‘the use of the body in sport’, particularly rugby, ‘was militarised’ in White apartheid-era society and ‘used as a key means by which militarised masculinities’ were constructed and asserted in childhood (p. 74).

Despite its British imperial origins, rugby was claimed and labelled as a sport for Afrikaners, initially as a means to challenge British cultural imperialism, but ultimately as a sport that epitomised and fixed idealised notions of Afrikaner masculinities in the minds of schoolboys. Weekly rugby practices were compared to military basic training, culminating in Saturday matches that are still referred to as clashes or battles, demonstrating ‘the interconnections between school sport, the body, war and masculinity’ (Conway, 2012: 71):

Back in the 80s rugby was everything at our high school. No one played hockey; it was called mof(gay)-sticks. Going to practice on Mondays and Wednesdays was like basics, they drilled us hard, it was full-on. I felt like I was going to war on Saturday mornings. (Danie)

Conway (2012) asserts that rugby acted to ‘shape men’s [and children’s] bodies’ for military service (p. 71). Yet, it did not only work to mould the mind set or physicality that military service in the SADF demanded, but also served as a benchmark from which masculinity could be measured and affirmed.

### The role of the Dutch Reformed Church and other agents of militarization

Here, I want to draw attention briefly to the role of the church, specifically the Afrikaans Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), as an active participant of the regime’s Total Strategy. The NGK was supportive of state policy, whereas the more politicised English-speaking churches, such as the Anglican Church, were often active voices of protest and social conscience, including leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Hill, 1997: 97).

According to the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development’s (1997) Special Hearing on Compulsory Military Service transcripts, Reverend Du Plooy referred to an ‘unholy marriage’ between church and state, elaborating on how the NGK, at synod level, ‘co-operated fully with the SADF on issues of military and national service’ and acted as an ‘ally’ (Vol. 4, Chap. 8: point 18). The church, therefore, served as an interlocutor between White families and the SADF, playing a crucial role in winning the hearts and minds of South Africa’s White population, commencing with children in Sunday school. Reverend Neels du Plooy noted,



The Church's main task was to strengthen the spiritual defensibility of its members. The Church was now totally convinced [of] the fact that we were fighting the war... we were fighting a just war. (O'Malley, 2015)

Yet, for many White boys, it was the regime's military tattoos and air shows, essentially functioning as festivals of a militarised society, which cemented a strong masculine sense of patriotism and awe in the military.

Popescu (2008) notes, 'milestones in Afrikaner history' have always been celebrated with 'pageants, festivals, and parades' (p. 43). Air shows and military tattoos were impressive displays of the SADF's position as Africa's military superpower. They also performed a crucial role in reassuring White society that a strong, capable and world-class defence force was on standby to defend the country's citizens. Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari (1999: 14) note that military parades are displays of 'instruments of violence of which a nation-state enjoys sole possession and legitimate use'. In the case of the SADF, these displays and celebrations of 'instruments of violence' also functioned as less than subtle warnings to future or current enemies.

The SADF's defence budget was particularly high when compared to its economic output during the 1980s, averaging 16.4% of total government expenditure over the decade. This firmly positioned South Africa as the military super-power of the continent and was reflected and promoted by means of military parades, exhibitions and air shows. These displays of military power served as vital points of public relations for families and their children beyond the experience of conscription.

## Entering the present

We all experience memory differently in the ambiguity of the present. Connerton (1989) rightly notes 'that images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order' (p. 3). For many ex-conscripts, their memories are continually butting up against the present, running contrary to dominant social discourses, hence my use of the term counter-memory to construct a theoretical framework to examine the childhood memories of ex-conscripts. How ex-conscripts remember, silence or forget their militarised childhoods and experiences of induction into the SADF remain vitally important reflections of White male ambiguity in a contested South Africa (Baines and Vale, 2008; Doherty, 2014; Draper, 1999; Edlmann, 2015). Their memories are undoubtedly rife with contrast, contradiction and are by no means homogeneous, yet remain inevitably bound to a deeply unsettling past.

Whether their memories assume the guise of collective or individual counter-memory, nostalgic reminiscing, or become 'covert' (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 2010) or 'humiliated silences' (Connerton, 2008), they remain revealing expressions of White males who still play an important role in South African society. According to Anwar (2017), only '23% of the shares traded on the exchange are held – directly and indirectly – by black South Africans'.<sup>5</sup> Despite the protestations of ex-conscripts to the contrary, that they have been systematically marginalised by the Black majority, White males of the conscription era remain a potent economic force within the post-apartheid

landscape, still firmly gripping the financial reins of power in many sectors of the market.

Several studies have addressed a distinct decentralisation of Whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa. These largely unsettled spaces of Whiteness have forced males of the conscription era to re-evaluate their roles and sense of identity and usefulness within South African society. The pressures placed on the 'grand white narrative' (Steyn, 2001: 59–63) and 'loss of the familiar' (p. 150) for Whites within the democratic era, particularly among ex-conscripts, have allowed continued undercurrents to flow, most notably internalised and then articulated as counter-memories and memorialisations of a bye-gone age. Steyn (2001) refers to the normality of male conscription in White society as an expected rite of passage during apartheid and echoes Sasson-Levy's (2002) assertion that it is not merely the individual but his entire family who were conscripted into the military, whereby its associated militarisms effectively infiltrated domestic environments.

Interviewees expressed difficulty in attempting to articulate their militarised childhoods in the present:

How do I possibly explain the surreal nature of my boyhood in the 80s. No one understands except my army buddies. It's probably better I just don't talk about it. I must admit I sometimes reconnect with them on social media. (Mark)

Therefore, the militarised childhoods of White South African males and their immediate families have entered the post-apartheid space in various guises, ranging from deeply personal recollections to broader connections of memory, most notably as digital or virtual forms of social memory, that echo Connerton's (1989) notion of commemorative ceremonies as a form of social memory. Interestingly, for many ex-conscripts, their militarised pasts have become memorialised within the digital realm of the Internet, expressed on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. These memorialisations are imbued with the nostalgia of a lost childhood, presenting an idealised and even romanticised social order of things, ever reticent to accept the present. Sedikides and Wildschut (2016) argue that nostalgia may act as a buffer against 'psychological threat' (p. 130), in that outbreaks of nostalgia are triggered by threat. Here, I would argue that nostalgia is a temporary balm, and indeed, in the case of ex-conscripts, it distances rather than incorporates. This distancing, originating in childhood, becomes a string of incidents stretching into the present, which Steyn (2001) notes 'still provide the seed ground for reevaluating the assumptions inculcated by the culture of their childhood, and the points of take for counter discourse about whiteness' (p. 56).

One may argue that in some instances, these counter-memories are expressed as essentialised failures to accept a lived past. The memories of ex-conscripts and the pervasive militarisation of White apartheid-era society are one of many reflections of present White South African society and exemplify a sense of Whiteness that is indelibly marked by the divided histories of all South Africans. A number of the participants of this study saw their racially insularised childhoods as the 'accepted order of things' (Petrus), something that remains an unexamined aspect of their past. Petrus commented

that his childhood was framed by ‘the National Christian Education doctrine pushed by both schooling and religious institutions’ (Petrus).

As Boym (2007) notes, ‘The imperative of a contemporary nostalgia is to be homesick and sick of home – occasionally at the same time’ (p. 18). Here, Boym touches a nerve as she illuminates an important ‘paradox’ that notes, ‘the stronger the loss, the more it is overcompensated with commemorations, the starker the distance from the past, and the more it is prone to idealizations’. These ‘idealizations’ also allow for a series of contradictions within the present as is demonstrated by the following account:

I remember from an early age (probably around ten years old) of friends, family, and neighbours older sons having to go the army. As a small boy, there was also the anticipation of ‘adventure’ and the excitement of being a soldier. Yet I was suckered into National Party propaganda, that we were in a fight together with the rest of the ‘decent’ Western world to prevent the spread of the evil tentacles of communism. (Joe)

However, Pickering and Keightley (2006) note that this idealisation of the past, in this case childhood, ‘can be viewed as potentially dangerous in that it closes down the transactional value of the past in the present and results in various degrees of social amnesia’ (p. 923).

On occasion, I encountered manifestations of a selective ‘social amnesia’ during the interview process, whereby memories of childhood were often presented as a type of disaffection with the ‘velocity and vertigo of modern temporality’ (p. 923). However, Pickering and Keightley (2006) assert that only viewing nostalgia ‘as a defining feature of amnesiac culture necessarily entails the degradation of social and cultural memory’ (p. 923) and thus dismisses the gravitas of an individual’s memories. I, therefore, draw attention to the importance of taking cognizance of Connerton’s (1989) observations regarding the difficulty of ‘extracting our past from the present’ in that time passages tend to ‘influence, or distort, our experience of the present’ (p. 2).

Yet, the formative memories of a militarised childhood remain foundational in their perception of the present for White South African men of the conscription era. These memories are inextricably bound to personal, cultural and social perceptions of the world and are in a state of continual modification. In some cases, memory retreats into palpable silences. It is perhaps Karl Jaspers’s (2000 [1947]) notion of moral guilt that best explains the silenced shame of many of these men. This begs an important question: Should these silences be considered part of the macro-crime of apartheid? What is understood is that the White apartheid-era male’s childhood remains a private contest of shame, guilt and ambiguity.

## Conclusion

By recalling the past, the present inevitably acts as a lens, altering and compressing how memory is articulated in the present. How these narratives are changed, condensed or distorted is largely due to the influence of a liminal present. Once these narratives enter the present, they attempt to navigate a terrain where both identity and recognition are in a state of flux, where identity is constantly being renegotiated.

Participants spoke of the difficulties they encountered in attempting to position their childhood in the present. They employed phrases such as ‘surreal’ and ‘dreamlike’ when imagining the ‘absurdities’ of a militarised childhood and the pervasive influence of the state in every aspect of their lives, including schools, their homes and the church.

How these men remember or forget their militarised pasts continues to ripple throughout South African society. Family and close friends remain at the epicentre of where memory impacts the present, and whether memory is given voice or silenced, its effects continue to ripple throughout broader South African society, irrespective of race or gender. These memories continue to serve as centres of Whiteness or comfortable frames of reference. Whether they are discarded or remain templates for behaviour, the collective weight of memory endures, directly or indirectly, as a cumulative burden for all South Africans.

Stuart Hall’s (1997) notion ‘that identities are necessary constructions and necessary fictions’ begs the question, Where do the memories of a militarised childhood begin or end? (p. 301). Grice argues that identity (and memory) is composed of a ‘series of total temporary states which belong to the one and the same self, or person’ (Perry, 2008: 73–94). Memory, therefore, becomes a blur of oscillations between past and present. These ‘temporary states’ allowed for memories of militarised childhoods to form what one may refer to as ‘collages of white memory’. Here, a participant refers to his memories as either ‘pieces’ or ‘fragments’:

My childhood memories of the 80s seem like fragments of glass now, scuffed by time. To be honest, no particular memory of my childhood sticks out. I remember colours, the brown of my cadet uniform, the sound of the letterbox, knowing my call-up papers would arrive soon. It was the best of times, but also, as Dicken’s says, the worst of times. There’s a certain amount of anger at how things turned out though. It’s best we don’t talk about it... (Sean)

Herein lies the point of this article, in that memories of White militarised childhoods often tend to enter the post-apartheid space, as counter-memories, inevitably acting to challenge and run counter to the ‘hegemony of dominant discourse’. Lipsitz (1990: 212) views counter-memory as a means of shifting historical focus from dominant narratives to previously silenced spaces. These connections between past and present allow for discontinuities or interstices through which other memories can emerge and directly challenge long-standing institutionalised memories (Hall, 1997; Lipsitz, 1990). Yet these challenges often remain centred by their sense of Whiteness, and Steyn (2001) rightly notes that Whiteness is continually ‘clutching for power, along with the whites’ (p. 164).

I would, therefore, argue that the construction of these counter-memories is ‘symptomatic’ of a post-apartheid space where White males of the conscription era are often still ‘clutching for power’, to echo Svetlana Boym’s (2007) notion that nostalgia ‘is not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion’ (p. 8).

The militarisation of apartheid South Africa’s youth was pervasive, yet it was ultimately self-limiting and has resulted in a purposeful forgetting embedded within silence. Yet, Edlmann (2015) observes, in citing Ben-Ze’ev et al., that ‘social silences rest in constructed spaces that sit somewhere between remembering and forgetting’ (p. 112). The discarding of memory is closely linked to Connerton’s (2008) concept of ‘forgetting as a humiliated silence’ (p. 67), specifically in that the act of forgetting may be a

necessary attempt to bury experiences ‘beyond expression and the reach of memory’ (p. 68). The reasons for this mode of necessary forgetting are indeed complex, and it would be remiss of me to propose a generalised view that ex-conscripts want to employ forgetting as a means of relinquishing responsibility or erasing humiliating experiences. This need to relinquish responsibility is portrayed by Michael’s statement, which demonstrates his pressing need to forget not only his experiences as a conscript but his entire childhood. For Michael, his youth is best forgotten:

This may seem strange, but my reasons to avoid my past, and better still completely erase it has less to do with trauma but more to do with how I feel about being white. On one level, I want to forget that I’m white, that I grew up in white apartheid South Africa, went to a white school, went to a largely white university was called-up into a white army. All this stuff about race has exhausted me over decades. It feels all too South African and I want to put it behind me. I don’t feel ashamed, perhaps part of me does, but I feel thoroughly exhausted by my white skin. I’ve made plans to leave the country which might well help me forget. (Michael)

In some cases, these narratives might enter what Edlmann (2015) refers to as ‘discursive laagers, rife with counter-memory’ (p. 112). Yet, over time, the changing of ‘cultural codes’ could allow those who have preferred to forget or purposively silence themselves to become ‘memory agents’ of change and facilitators of open conversation. A further scholarly examination of White militarised childhoods will perhaps allow us to understand and navigate the palpable silences and memories of White South African society more effectively, particularly those of ex-conscripts. What is understood is that militarisation impacted all sectors of society. Although it primarily aimed to prepare White boys for military service, it altered the nation’s psychology indefinitely, engineering a deep-set fear of others. Sadly, these fears continue to cast a long shadow of division that extends from its genesis in childhood into the present of all South Africans.

#### Notes

1. The concept of Total Strategy was a concerted effort on behalf of the apartheid government during the era of P.W. Botha (State President from 1984 to 1989) to convince both domestic and international role-players, including citizens, governments and investors, that a Total Onslaught by communist forces, assisted by the Soviet Union, was threatening the existence of democratic South Africa, and therefore the Western world (Coleman, 1998).
2. Afrikaans for red danger, pertaining specifically to the threat of communism.
3. Afrikaans for bush schools.
4. Visit <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/conscrip/conscr01.htm> for the full transcript of Ms Burton’s testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Cape Town on 23 July 1993.
5. Also see: <http://ww2.oldmutual.co.za/old-mutual-investment-group/insights/magazines/tomorrow-2016/who-owns-the-jse> for a report by Old Mutual titled ‘WHO OWNS THE JSE?’.

#### References

- Ahlbäck A (2014) *Manhood and the Making of the Military: Conscription, Military Service and Masculinity in Finland, 1917–39*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Anwar M (2017) *White People In South Africa Still Hold The Lion’s Share Of All Forms Of Capital. The Conversation*. Available at: <http://theconversation.com/white-people-in-south-africa-still-hold-the-lions-share-of-all-forms-of-capital-75510> (Accessed 5 August 2018).

- Baines G and Vale P (2008) *Beyond the Border War. New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late Cold War Conflicts*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Baines G (2009) Breaking silences and telling stories: Renegotiating the meaning of the border war in post-apartheid South Africa. In: Boll J (ed.) *War: Interdisciplinary Investigations*. Vol. 49: A Volume in the Probing the Boundaries Project 'War, Virtual War and Human Security'. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 35–47.
- Boym S (2001) *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Boym S (2007) Nostalgia and its discontents. *The Hedgehog Review*. Available at: <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>.
- Clandinin D and Connelly F (2000) *Narrative Inquiry*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cock J and Nathan L (1989) *War And Society*. Cape Town: D. Philip.
- Cock J (1991) *Colonels & Cadres: War & Gender in South Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press.
- Coleman M (1998) *A Crime Against Humanity: Analysing The Repression Of The Apartheid State*. Johannesburg: Human Rights Committee.
- Connell R (1995) *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Connerton P (1989) *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connerton P (2008) Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies* 1(1): 59–71. doi:10.1177/1750698007083889
- Conway D (2012) *Masculinities, Militarisation and the End Conscription Campaign*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (1997) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission - Special Submission on Conscription*. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/conscrip/conscri01.htm>.
- Doherty C (2014) *BOSBEFOK: Constructed Images And The Memory Of The South African 'Border War'*. PhD. Johannesburg, South Africa: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Draper C (1999) *Psychological Experiences Of Military Conscription In South Africa During The 1970'S And 1980'S*. Honours thesis. Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town.
- Drewett M (2003) Battling over borders: Narratives of resistance to the South African border war voiced through popular music. *Social Dynamic* 29(1): 78–98.
- Edlmann T (2015) Working on the thresholds of memory and silence: Reflections on the praxis of the legacies of apartheid wars project. *Acta Academica* 47(1): 98–115.
- Enloe C (1993) *The Morning After*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Evans G (1989) Classrooms of war: The militarisation of white South African schooling. In: Cock J and Nathan L (eds) *War and Society*. Cape Town, South Africa: David Philip, pp. 283–297.
- Frankel P (1984) *Pretoria's Praetorians: Civil-Military Relations in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gear S (2002) *Wishing Us Away: Challenges Facing Ex-Combatants in the 'New' South Africa*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.
- Hall S (1997) *Representation*. London: SAGE and Open University.
- Hill M (1997) *Whiteness*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jaspers K (2000 [1947]) *The Question of German Guilt*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Kvale S (2008) *Interviews*. London: SAGE.
- Lazenby N (2012) 'Afterlives': Resurrecting the South African border war. Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Lipsitz G (1990) *Time Passages*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lomsky-Feder E and Ben-Ari E (1999) *The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Macmillan L (2011) *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South* (ed. JM Beier). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Messner M. (1990) BOYHOOD, ORGANIZED SPORTS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITIES. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18(4): 416–444. doi:10.1177/089124190018004003
- Msila V (2007) From Apartheid Education to the Revised National Curriculum Statement: Pedagogy for Identity Formation and Nation Building in South Africa. *Nordic Journal of African*

- Studies 16(2): 146–160.
- Morgan L and Kunkel S (2007) *Ageing, Society and the Life Course*. New York: Springer.
- Morrell R (1998) Of boys and men: Masculinity and gender in Southern African studies. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24(4): 605–630.
- Morrell R (2001a) *Changing Men in Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press.
- Morrell R (2001b) *From Boys to Gentlemen*. Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press and University of South Africa.
- O'Malley P (2015). Chapter 8: Special Hearing: Compulsory Military Service (Conscription) - The O'malley Archives. [online] Nelsonmandela.org. Available at: <<https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02167/04lv02264/05lv02335/06lv02357/07lv02387/08lv02395.htm>> [Accessed 7 December 2015].
- Patterson M (2009) *Constructions of childhood in apartheid's last decades*. PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.
- PARATUS - The Official Magazine of the SADF (1979). A Forerunner to National Service - The Cadets 30(7): 24.
- Perry J (2008) *Personal Identity, Memory, and the Problem of Circularity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pickering M and Keightley E (2006) The modalities of nostalgia. *Current Sociology* 54(6): 919–941. Available at: <http://csi.sagepub.com/content/54/6/919> (accessed 19 February 2016).
- Popescu M (2008) *Mirrorings: Communists, Capitalists and Voortrekkers of the Cold War in Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflicts* (eds Baines G and Vale P). Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press.
- Sasson-Levy O (2002) Identities at the margins: Masculinities and citizenship in the Israeli army. *The Sociological Quarterly* 43(3): 357–383. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41804763>.
- Sedikides C and Wildschut T (2016) Nostalgia. In: *The Wiley Handbook of Positive Clinical Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons, pp. 125–136. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316360490\\_Nostalgia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316360490_Nostalgia) (accessed 14 November 2018).
- Seegers A (1993). Towards an understanding of the Afrikanerisation of the South African state. *Africa* 63(4): 477–497. doi:10.2307/1161003
- Steyn M (2001) *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used to Be: White Identity in a Changing South Africa*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ugolini L (2016) Middle-class fathers, sons and military service in England, 1914–1918. *Cultural and Social History* 13(3): 357–375.
- Van Dijk T (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis In: *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (eds Tannen D, Schiffrin D and Hamilton H). Oxford: Blackwell: 352–371. Available at: <http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/Critical%20discourse%20analysis.pdf>
- Vinitzky-Seroussi V. and Teeger C (2010). Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting. *Social Forces* 88(3): 1103–1122. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40645884>
- Watson A (2011) *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South* (ed. JM Beier). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams D (2008) *On the Border*. Cape Town, South Africa: Tafelberg.