



# History, memory and reconciliation: Njabulo Ndebele's *The cry of Winnie Mandela* and Pumla Gobodo- Madikizela's *A human being died that night*

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## Abstract

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*This article deals with two texts written during the process of transition in South Africa, using them to explore the cultural and ethical complexity of that process. Both Njabulo Ndebele's "The cry of Winnie Mandela" and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's "A human being died that night" deal with controversial public figures, Winnie Mandela and Eugene de Kock respectively, whose role in South African history has made them part of the national iconography. Ndebele and Gobodo-Madikizela employ narrative techniques that expose and exploit faultlines in the popular representations of these figures. The two texts offer radical ways of understanding the communal and individual suffering caused by apartheid, challenging readers to respond to the past in ways that will promote healing rather than perpetuate a spirit of revenge. The part played by official histories is implicitly questioned and the role of individual stories is shown to be crucial. Forgiveness and reconciliation are seen as dependent on an awareness of the complex circumstances and the humanity of those who are labelled as offenders. This requirement applies especially to the case of "A human being died that night", a text that insists that the overt*

*acknowledgement of the humanity of people like Eugene de Kock is an important way of healing South African society.*

### **Opsomming**

**Geskiedenis, herinnering en versoening: Njabulo Ndebele se *The cry of Winnie Mandela* en Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela se *A human being died that night***

*In hierdie artikel word twee tekste ondersoek wat geskryf is tydens die oorgangsproses in Suid-Afrika. Dié tekste word gebruik om die kulturele en etiese kompleksiteit van die oorgangsproses te verken. Njabulo Ndebele se “The cry of Winnie Mandela” en Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela se “A human being died that night” het onderskeidelik te make met twee kontroversiële openbare figure: Winnie Mandela en Eugene de Kock. Dié twee het op grond van hulle rol in die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis deel geword van die nasionale ikonografie. Ndebele en Gobodo-Madikizela wend narratiewe tegnieke aan wat verskuiwingslyne in die populêre uitbeeldings van hierdie figure blootlê en ontgin. Die twee tekste bied radikale wyses aan waarop die gemeenskaplike en individuele lyding wat deur apartheid veroorsaak is, begryp kan word, en daag lesers uit om op die verlede te reageer op wyses wat genesing sal bevorder, eerder as om ’n gees van wraak te laat voortbestaan. Die rol wat amptelike geskiednisse vertolk, word implisiet bevraagteken en daar word aangetoon dat die rol van individuele stories deurslaggewend is. Vergifnis en versoening word gesien as afhanklik van ’n bewustheid van die komplekse omstandighede en die menslikheid van diegene wat as oortreders bestempel word. Dit is in die besonder so in die geval van “A human being died that night”, waarin aangedring word dat die openlike erkenning van die menslikheid van persone soos Eugene de Kock ’n belangrike manier is om die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing te heel.*

## **1. Introduction**

This article will focus on two recent texts which examine the trauma of apartheid in a personal, as well as a political way: Njabulo Ndebele’s *The cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A human being died that night* (2003). Both these texts constitute complex attempts to understand the trauma which individuals underwent or inflicted under a South African government which created both the conditions and the means which made such events possible. Both texts take the form of narratives which reflect on the suffering created by apartheid – and suggest how the possibilities of alleviating such suffering lie precisely in the

textualisation – (con)textualisation – of it by those who experienced or caused it. The fact that these two texts are framed in story form is significant since, as Kelly (1993:142) says, “Unlike history, story keeps counting, continually bypassing the summative moment in which [traditional] history arrests and delineates time”. From this point of view story can be seen as a form which continually disrupts certainty and stasis the kind of disruption which the two texts discussed in this article seek to promote.

Susan Suleiman (1990:xv) interprets postmodernism as

... that moment of extreme (perhaps tragic, perhaps playful) self-consciousness when the present – our present – takes to reflecting on its relation to the past and to the future primarily as a problem of repetition. How does one create a future that will acknowledge and incorporate the past – a past that includes, in our very own century, some of the darkest moments in history – without repeating it?

The germaneness of her comments is striking, particularly the way her analysis of postmodernism can be applied to the post-1994 South African situation. Suleiman’s formulation may take us further down “the long road to freedom”, and through communal and individual suffering of such a magnitude that it can never be fully overcome. We can, however, to use Suleiman’s terms, self-consciously reflect on those times in order perhaps, to prevent a repetition of them.

The notions of history, memory, healing and reconciliation are crucial to the two texts dealt with in this article. Suleiman speaks of “some of the darkest moments in history” having taken place in our very own century, referring presumably to manifestations such as the Stalinist, Nazi and Pol Pot regimes, *inter alia*, but apartheid is also indubitably one of the darkest moments in twentieth-century history. As Suleiman implies, the difficulty with such painful events is not simply that they should be remembered, but that we – the human race – need to create a future which militates against the recurrence of such events.

In order to make constructive use of memory we need to challenge the fixed binaries and legitimating narratives which ruled our past: our underlying sense of history needs to become a fragmented one, constructed from many different accounts of the same times and events. “The deconstructive position does not reject historical reality but questions our access to it, our apprehension of it and, therefore, its meaning” (Munslow, 1997:102). Such a position questions the

authority of official narratives of history and, by implication, validates local and personal accounts of the past, giving such accounts validity on their own terms. As Said (2003:182-183) says,

Memory is a powerful collective instrument for preserving identity. And it's something that can be carried not only through official narratives and books, but also through informal memory. It is one of the main bulwarks against historical erasure. It is a means of resistance.

## **2. *The cry of Winnie Mandela***

*The cry of Winnie Mandela* contains the fictional accounts of four women, each of them looking back on her early years of marriage and the separation which occurred for different reasons in each case, but always because of the lack of constancy of the man who left her for apparently important practical reasons. Such reasons include political exile in order to participate in the struggle, or being given a scholarship to train overseas as a doctor – though one of the husbands depicted seems to have priapism as his only reason for abandoning his wife in favour of numerous other women.

Each woman interrogates her own history by telling her story while addressing and questioning Winnie Mandela in her role as another abandoned wife. The accounts are by no means uncritical of Winnie Mandela, but a sense is conveyed of how dauntingly difficult her personal life has been. Each woman tries to make sense of her own memories and comes to terms with her pain of abandonment, but the feelings are so intense that none of them can find closure. However, the text does implicitly illustrate the positive function of memory discussed by Papoulias (2003:117):

Indeed, for some cultural historians, memory is a process of self-making: it names 'the ways in which people shape and transform' not only their past but crucially 'each other through collectively authored stories'.

The women's stories are strongly intertextual and provide a transformational dynamic, though in this text the pain of the past is not relieved until the end – and even then the crucial problem of how power differentials between the genders might be adjusted in order to prevent such injustices is not really addressed. Ndebele's novel shows the emotional (and financial) deprivation of four women who are, finally able to speak about and make patterns – always incomplete – of their experiences. These experiences are personal, yet the forces that created them are, indubitably, the laws and

customs which, in many cases, still limit the power and mobility of black women in particular.

Ndebele uses Greek myth to provide a universal frame for events in South Africa, giving us some distance from the South African chronotope by invoking the story of Penelope, Odysseus' wife, as the woman who stayed faithful to her husband, despite many difficulties and a long separation from him. The hardships experienced by Penelope reflect and highlight the price that black nuclear families paid for the fight against apartheid, focusing the reader on the strength and courage which black women displayed in the face of loss as well as the social demands for absolute propriety: these women were required by their communities to remain faithful to their errant (and erring) husbands as Penelope was to hers.

The ambiguously presented figure of Winnie Mandela unifies the text, in that all four of the other women write putative letters to her, which both praise and question her stance, gaining strength from who she was while sympathising with what she had to endure in the long absence of her husband. Nelson Mandela's role in what Winnie became is also implicitly questioned, though the text does quote from the letter he wrote her from prison in which he shows a deep awareness of the burden imposed on her:

Your love and support, the raw warmth of your body, the charming children you have given the family ... the hope of enjoying that love again, is what life and happiness mean to me. I have somebody I love who is worthy to be loved and trusted, one whose own love and patient support have given me so much strength and hope ... Yet there have been moments when ... I have wondered whether any kind of commitment can ever be sufficient excuse for abandoning a young and inexperienced woman in a pitiless desert, literally throwing her into the hands of highwaymen ... (Ndebele, 2003:108-109).

The depth of affection and empathy displayed here contrasts with Nelson Mandela's eventual divorce from his wife, and Ndebele highlights some of the faultlines which led to this in Winnie Mandela's lament for their loss of intimacy (Ndebele, 2003:88-90). The words she uses trace the process of alienation, beginning with "Waiting" and "the systematic invasion of whatever dreams we had of family life" (Ndebele, 2003:88). In what follows Winnie's repetitious use of words such as "home" and "order" develops this idea until it is overwhelmed by other frequently occurring words such as "disorder" and "disruption". Her litany culminates in phrases such as "shattered intimacy" and the conclusion that "You had to go away

to smash something to restore the order of love between us” (Ndebele, 2003:90). This final sentence, with its precarious positioning of violence and love in the same frame, highlights the disjunction between the political demands of a South Africa under siege by apartheid on the one hand, and the conditions necessary for a stable family life on the other. Equally telling lamentations by Winnie, centred around numerous repetitions of the word “home”, occur at other points in this text (Ndebele, 2003:66-77; 80-82; 88-90), giving the effect of a mourner whose loss is so great that it fills her consciousness and seems, at this point, all she is able to think about or articulate.

Yet, paradoxically, when Winnie was forcibly removed from her home and sent into exile in Brandfort (Ndebele, 2003:102 ff.), the process (as depicted in this text) involved empowerment as much as loss: “Brandfort was my first real taste of power; something close to absolute power. It came from my sense of having the ability to change things in a place that had no notion of change” (Ndebele, 2003:102). Winnie’s ability to transmute disempowerment into engagement, even at times triumph, is one of the reasons she has become such an inspiring figure, and her achievements in restoring some dignity to the black population of Brandfort are well known (Ndebele, 2003:103). Yet Ndebele’s text also raises the issue of Winnie’s abuses of power, with one of the putative letters written to her challenging her as follows:

So much ugliness was ascribed to you: kidnapping children; gruesome beatings and torture of children; disappearances and deaths, assassinations; defamations and denunciations; intimidation and terror (Ndebele, 2003:62).

By the way he sets out Winnie’s story, which repeatedly undermines any easy conclusions about her, Ndebele encourages us to wrestle with these conflicting depictions of Winnie, a provisional stance which may be the closest we can come to solving the riddle of her life. Through the contributions of his characters to this debate, Ndebele manages to represent Winnie as someone both empowered (ironically, by her struggles) and disempowered, by the structures of apartheid – empowered in that she is shown as finding new strengths in response to official harassment, but disempowered in that the limitations imposed on her life, especially her experience in prison, eventually created unbearable tensions which destroyed her moral stability.

Winnie Mandela was held for 13 months in solitary confinement in a tiny concrete cell in Pretoria Central prison, during which she was brutally tortured for “Forty days and forty nights” (Ndebele, 2003:100). A systematic and complete account of Winnie’s suffering during this period is not available, as Anne Marie du Preez Bezdrob (2003:143) indicates when she speaks of “the lack of empirical evidence” about this time in Winnie Mandela’s life:

I trust that readers will indulge my use of poetic licence to share the pictures that unwittingly come to mind as I try to place myself in another woman’s shoes. Some of the interpretations are mine alone, while others are based on pointers to Winnie’s thoughts, observations and perceptions, as recorded in various publications and paraphrased here.

Bezdrob relates how Winnie’s interrogators, led by Swanepoel, subjected Winnie to continuous interrogation over long periods, sleep deprivation, threats, humiliation and extreme verbal bullying, causing extensive physical and emotional suffering which, at times, made it difficult for her to remain conscious and caused her to pass blood in her urine.

Whereas a conventional biographer such as Bezdrob relates that the security police did not dare to physically assault someone of Winnie’s standing, Ndebele’s mixture of fact and fiction seems to suggest that she may in fact have been assaulted in that way too (Ndebele, 2003:99). However, Ndebele and Bezdrob are unanimous about the catastrophic effects these events had on Winnie’s personality. Bezdrob speaks of how researchers have linked trauma and victimisation to psychosocial dysfunction, often manifesting itself as post-traumatic stress disorder in the victims. Bezdrob (2003:217) adds that “A disturbing finding of the research was that people who have suffered trauma, victimisation or violence ... are ... at high risk of becoming perpetrators of violence, including torture and rape ...”.

Judith Lewis Herman (1992:95) speaks of how prisoners may be damaged by prolonged trauma, especially if they had broken (or felt they had) under interrogation and divulged information. Such a prisoner would be left with “a burden of unexpressed rage against all those who ... failed to help her ... Thus former prisoners carry their captor’s hatred with them ... and sometimes they continue to carry out their captor’s destructive purposes ...”.

For Ndebele (2003:60) the essence of Winnie’s prison experience is evoked by the name of Major Theunis Swanepoel, “The terror of all detainees”, a security policeman who was her chief torturer whom

*The cry of Winnie Mandela* invokes no fewer than five times, at significant points in the text. Our introduction to Swanepoel suggests, bitterly, that his acts were Winnie's "apprenticeship to power", and that he taught her "how to thrive on fear and terror" (2003:61). The policemen who had sown disruption in Winnie's life by means of dawn raids on her home are called "Children of Major Theunis Swanepoel, the master torturer" (2003:89). In a crucial section in which Winnie is depicted as speaking to her "alter ego" (2003:101), her description of the notoriously violent Nelson Mandela Football Club which she founded (2003:98) is immediately juxtaposed with a long account of her own imprisonment and torture. She asks telling questions of herself, such as "Did I become your daughter, Major Swanepoel?" (2003:99) and "Why do I think about him so often, Major Theunis Swanepoel? It must be because I saw something frighteningly intriguing about him ... An unquenchable desire to be cruel. Deeply demanding without being fulfilling" (2003:100). Winnie ends this section as follows:

There can be no deeper experience of loneliness than exposure to unending pain and cruelty in the absence of those you love, who cannot be there to give you comfort and protection ... So when Major Theunis Swanepoel was finally tired of being cruel, and let us leave his citadel of torture, I carried inside of me like a pregnancy, the terrible weight of loneliness and the embers of rage.

'Oh, Nelson!' (Ndebele, 2003:100).

Another paragraph, soon after this, repeats these sentiments (2003:104), and the final reference to her torturer refers to her evasive testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings:

But you've got to hand it to me, I was magnificent at the TRC hearings! I, the child of Major Theunis Swanepoel, Queen of Brandfort, and terror of Soweto, who mastered to perfection the art of technical denial ... The hearing was my heaven and my hell (Ndebele, 2003:111).

Ndebele's narrative suggests that there is an intimate link between the damage inflicted on Winnie by Major Theunis Swanepoel and the scandal surrounding victims of the Nelson Mandela Football Club. As N.S. Zulu (2005:5) points out, several authoritative biographies of Winnie Mandela "adopt the view that she was taught to hate by the apartheid state. The biographies become compelling evidence of this ...". These narrative attempts to explain and understand the damage done to, as well as the damage done by,



Winnie Mandela, a hero of the struggle, run parallel with the other text discussed in this article.

*A human being died that night* deals with Eugene de Kock, a notorious figure in apartheid mythology, and explores, in a detached but sympathetic way, possible ways of healing wounds and reintegrating perpetrators into society. The touchstone suggested in the latter text is that of one's humanity: when perpetrators recognise the humanity of the victims they have harmed, they themselves may become entitled to be viewed as fully human beings. One way of describing what Ndebele's text does is to say that it depicts Winnie Mandela, despite her transgressions (perhaps even because of them), as a fully human being, encouraging a greater understanding of her life and actions, and discouraging over-simplified judgements about her.

The title of Ndebele's text speaks not of Winnie's story but of her cry, perhaps because a cry can be a very intense form of narrative employed by those wrestling with the inarticulacy induced by trauma. The plight of black women in general is highlighted by Ndebele from the start, with each of the four abandoned wives having to reinvent a coherent narrative of their lives as they struggle to live without their husbands. The tale of Winnie herself is presented by Ndebele as a paradigmatic struggle to find herself, as a woman of power, within the restrictive framework imposed on women by a male-dominated apartheid society. Deprived of both personal relationship and a legitimate sphere in which to exercise her powers of political and social leadership, Winnie is shown as destroying herself in her frantic bid for freedom.

Yet Ndebele's text is not just about Winnie Mandela and, through the interaction between the women portrayed here, it points to the tensions between societal norms during apartheid and the flesh-and-blood feelings that are evoked by situations of abandonment and loss of relationship. How is it possible to reconcile the enforcement of traditional values regarding the behaviour of women with the deep suffering felt by so many women as their basic sources of support, love and companionship are removed? This is the nub of the problem: the women are expected by their communities to conform to the Penelope paradigm, but this expectation is clearly an idealised one – the archetype of the abandoned woman who remains faithful to her absent (and often erring) husband is a narrative imposed by patriarchal societies, for the benefit of men only. And, in this text, Penelope herself – in a radical rewriting of the original myth – leaves her husband after he has returned: she

relates how, when Odysseus returns, he leaves her after their first night together “to perform cleansing rituals to forestall possible civil strife following his brutal slaying of my shameless suitors” (Ndebele, 2003:119-120). But, she says,

... it has never been told that when he returned, I was gone. I went on my own cleansing pilgrimage. Odysseus should not have left me like that on that special morning while I was still learning to savour his return. He should have shown more sensitivity (Ndebele, 2003:120).

The text ends on an optimistic note, with the five women travelling through South Africa in a minibus together, celebrating their self-awareness and strength and asserting their right to equality by exercising the social, emotional and geographical mobility traditionally denied women. On their way, they give a lift to a white hitch-hiker, who turns out to be Penelope. She says that Odysseus was unaware that he had to reconcile with her, as well, and she is now on “a pilgrimage of reconciliation” related to what she calls the unfolding of consciousness in the world, but related specifically to herself,

as the world learns to become more aware of me not as Odysseus’s moral ornament, but as an essential ingredient in the definition of human freedom. I travel around the world ... attempting to free [women] from the burden of unconditionality I placed on their shoulders (Ndebele, 2003:120).

By implication this unfolding of consciousness, together with the camaraderie experienced by the women exchanging stories, has a healing effect on all of them. As Ndebele says in one of his essays about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “What seems to have happened is that the passage of time which brought forth our freedom has given legitimacy and authority to previously silenced voices” (Ndebele, 1998:20).

### **3. *A human being died that night***

In her text *A human being died that night* Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a professor of psychology, describes her personal experience of a series of interviews (a total of 46 hours) which she conducted with Eugene de Kock, former head of the apartheid death-squads at Vlakplaas, while he was in prison. She wrestles with her own revulsion towards him, yet at one point she is so moved by his suffering that she touches his hand which, she says, has a cold feel to it – his “trigger hand”, as he subsequently describes it. She avoids

easy judgements of good and evil, saying that “South Africans face the challenge of how to embrace the past without being swallowed by the tide of vengeful thinking” (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:103).

She ponders issues of forgiveness and reconciliation, and challenges South African society as a whole to provide the impetus and the structures which will bring healing and transformation:

The question is no longer *whether* victims can forgive ‘evildoers’ but whether we – our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media, and academic institutions – are creating the conditions that encourage alternatives to revenge (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:118).

In other words, the way for South Africa to overcome the limitations of history imposed on it by authoritarian structures and master narratives which were persecutory to most of its citizens is to work towards new paradigms – those of reconciliation and transformation, at both a personal and societal level. Gobodo-Madikizela also promotes a particular attitude to memory:

If memory is kept alive in order to cultivate old hatred and resentments, it is likely to culminate in vengeance, and in a repetition of violence. But if memory is kept alive in order to transcend hateful emotions, then remembering can be healing (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:103).

Gobodo-Madikizela quotes Pearl Faku’s reaction to De Kock after De Kock’s apology for his deed. (Mrs. Faku is the mother of one of the men murdered in the Motherwell bombing.):

‘I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well ... I would like to hold him by the hand, and show him there is a future, and that he can still change’ (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:94).

Gobodo-Madikizela admits that this response seems to be unique, but she nevertheless builds on it, calling it “something divine” and seeing it as an illustration of her thesis that forgiveness “begins with the person”, and thus constitutes some kind of restoration of the offender’s humanity. However, one cannot but think of the many relatives who withheld forgiveness under similar circumstances, such as the Mxenge family, the mother of Charity Kondile, who refused even to meet Dirk Coetzee and Chris Ribiero who said “If my parents’ killers get amnesty it will be like having my parents killed for the second time ...” (Graybill, 2002:49).

A view which can be seen as a counterpoint to the approach of Gobodo-Madikizela is the approach of Jeremy Cronin (1999:4), who argues that

[t]here is no personal (or indeed religious/Christian) morality outside of some form of social collectivity, with its institutions, rituals, texts (sacred or secular), and a myriad of other discourses. The human subject and the social collective as subject define each other, collectivity forges and sustains individual subjectivity and makes moral agency possible.

Cronin stresses the importance of the societal frame – the collective – and sees society as an interaction between the personal and the collective. The kind of assumptions from which a truth and reconciliation process starts will influence its structures and its outcome: the particular dynamic which we experience as operating within society will govern the kind of transition we achieve. Cronin's point here seems to be that if we fail entirely to see society as a dynamic then we may fail in our search for truth and reconciliation. Cronin warns against the dangers of ignoring the inherent imbalances in South African society by the creation of a “sleight-of-hand rainbowism” (Cronin, 1999:12).

Neville Alexander (2002:134) believes that “the greatest weakness of the *TRC Report* lies in the fact that it did not analyse or investigate the system of apartheid with all its institutional linkages. Instead, the object of its inquiry was restricted to the pangamen of the system”. *A human being died that night* is a narrative that foregrounds the case of Eugene de Kock, one of the “pangamen of the system”, but because it carries a concern with how perpetrators of gross human rights violations in general might be dealt with, it is also driven by a concern for the community in general. It deals with an aspect of transition which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, being “a ‘victim-centred’ process” (Posel, 2002:151), was unable to address in any depth – the question of how individual apartheid offenders who show contrition and a willingness to change might be accommodated within post-apartheid South Africa. *A human being died that night* is more tough-minded than mere “sleight-of-hand rainbowism”: it is a way of confronting history, a way of facing the traumatic past of this country that implicitly challenges the notion of a single TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) narrative and suggests how heterogeneous (and incomplete) any organic process of reconciliation must be. Alexander (2002:133) believes that the real value of the TRC is the prospect that it will “initiate a public process of engaging with the past in popular as well

as academic and other formal forums". Gobodo-Madikizela's text initiates one such alternative process, and her dramatisation of the case of one "pangaman" may militate against what Posel (2002:168) calls the "increasingly familiar refrain among white South Africans that apartheid was merely a 'mistake' for which no one was responsible, that somehow the system propelled itself impersonally ...". Several commentators have suggested that the work of the TRC is only a start, and that the structures of civil society need to create fresh perspectives and structures which will prevent premature closure of debate on the issues raised by the TRC (see Posel, 2002:168-169; Alexander, 2002:135; Graybill, 2002:156-157; Asmal *et al.*, 1996:214; Wilson, 2001:221).

Both *The cry of Winnie Mandela* and *A human being died that night* offer ways of re-engaging with past issues that have become only too familiar, inviting us to review our fixed perceptions of these issues. As Moore *et al.* (2003:47) suggest, refocusing our hermeneutic may make it more interrogative:

Brushing history against the grain may encourage novel articulations, fomenting alternative political possibilities. Forming new affinities across embattled lines of difference may be one means of challenging oppressive forms of racism and naturalism.

Both Ndebele and Gobodo-Madikizela challenge ingrained ways of thinking in their attempt to establish alternative political possibilities. Ndebele frames the person and actions of Winnie Mandela in a way that blurs the commonly oversimplified judgements either for or against her. Gobodo-Madikizela's account interrogates popular views about the inhumanity of De Kock's actions by acknowledging his suffering, and refusing to allow his actions – or her reactions to him – to dehumanise her.

For her, the issue of humanity is crucial – as the title of her text suggests. Thus, "when perpetrators express remorse ... they are revalidating the victim's pain – in a sense giving his or her humanity back" (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:128). By the same token, the victim may become empowered by this, in that he or she may accept or reject the perpetrator's remorse and the victim "becomes the gatekeeper to what the outcast [perpetrator] desires – readmission into the human race" (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:117).

Gobodo-Madikizela was a commissioner on the TRC, and her stance throughout is compassionate but unsentimental, rigorously

interrogating the practical force of word and gesture in the reconciliation process. She ends as follows:

Mercy [to perpetrators] should be granted cautiously. And yet society must embrace those who, like Eugene de Kock, see and even lead on the road of shared humanity ahead. Our capacity for such empathy is a profound gift in this brutal world we have created for one another as people of different races, creeds, and political persuasions (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003: 139).

Each of the texts covered in this article deconstructs a popular view about the history of a well-known figure, and offers instead an open-ended process of reconsideration about how our society might deal humanely with those who have offended against it. (I do not, however, mean to portray Winnie Mandela as simply an offender.) *The cry of Winnie Mandela* and *A human being died that night* influence the way readers perceive and react to the South African situation by encouraging debate on the changing views about our past and encouraging the creation of unpredictable futures. History is a fusion of collective memories that are transformed in the telling and retelling, redefining the way a society sees its past and colouring its actions in the present. It is time, says Ankersmit (1989:152), for us to “think about the past, rather than investigate it”.

#### **4. Conclusion: history, memory and reconciliation**

History, which is viewable only from the present, is undeniably a construct with political agendas, and cultural politics remains an asymmetrical discourse (Milner, 2005:194). Asymmetries within the two texts dealt with in this article reveal the conflict between the needs of the state to preserve itself from civil strife on the one hand (leading to what Wilson [2001:209] calls “the new historicity of a reconciling political elite”), and on the other hand, the desire to ensure that justice is seen to be done in the case of offences which affect human rights. Three members of the Research Department of the TRC have written about the difficulties of dealing with historiographical issues and report that they sometimes “deliberately tried to sidestep historical debate and opted for a flat narrative”. However, they also indicate that they “do not subscribe to simple empiricism, and incline rather towards historical analysis” (Cherry *et al.*, 2002:25).

One can hardly hope to escape historical issues entirely, and the activities of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission represent a society attempting to reconcile its members within the

context of a historiographic narrative. However, the Commission often had to deal with events that were uncertain, and deeds of which there might, by definition, be very little surviving evidence: it is axiomatic that criminal investigations become more difficult to pursue the more distant in time the commission of the crime. History, however, is not a crime scene and the RC was, of course, not merely a court of law, though it also partook of that quality. History does not provide a contained context within which the alleged acts were committed: both time and place are in the past, and many things may have changed subsequently. In the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, much of the evidence presented may indeed have been concrete, but the manner of its presentation was often verbal or documentary, and the full history of dramatic and tragic events is occluded from the contemporary viewer. Kirmayer (1996:175) seems to view memory as a complex kind of ontological alchemy: "The notion of memory is an hypostatization, turning a family of diverse processes into a thing by conflating the stories we tell about our past with the many ways in which we are changed by experience". Jameson's (determinedly non-poststructuralist) arguments on history insist that "history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that ... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (Jameson, 1981:35).

The TRC process gave the country a new history, made up of many individual acts of memory and intended to dislodge the former versions of history which perpetuated divisions and skewed perceptions among South Africans. The complexity of such a process is confirmed by Aletta Norval's term "memory-work":

The memory-work of the TRC is not unlike that which occurs during the interpretation of dreams. When dreams are interpreted, they are placed into new contexts in which they cease to be puzzling. The process through which political events are recorded and recounted in the forums of the TRC – the process through which they are reinserted into the public domain – allows them potentially to undergo such aspect change. In short, they are resignified and understood differently (Norval, 1999:500).

Norval's reframing of the TRC process within the field of psychology suggests how "memory-work" offered healing to victims of apartheid through the shift in perspective which many psychological modalities attempt to offer. Ideally, the resignification of their memories – their

nightmares, rather – would have freed the victims from the paralysed terror that nightmares usually entail, allowing them to reframe their experiences. The insertion of their memories into what would now be a saner public domain would restore a sense of control and a sense of being companioned, both of which are denied in nightmares.

According to Jack Kugelmass (1996:200),

[Memory] should be understood less as a thing that can be passed intact from one generation to the next ... or even as a constant force within the trajectory of the group ... than as a continual process of engagement and disengagement, of remembering and forgetting ...

For Asmal *et al.* (1996:214) memory is to be understood and deployed in a more pragmatic way, and the task of memory is, in large part, to help our society reconstruct a credible history which will facilitate the process of reconciliation:

Facing the past will also ensure that we achieve justice for those who did not live to see the new country ... It will provide a basis for genuine reconciliation built on a realisation, among the privileged, that they must face new facts about an uncomfortable past.

This essay suggests that full reconciliation, however desirable, may indicate an unrealistic degree of optimism and should be seen as only one of several possible positive outcomes of truth commissions (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003:133). Given that relative stability is as much as we can reasonably ask of our society in the short to medium term, we have to hope that, for example, conflict (of a creative kind), will also ultimately, contribute to change and even reconciliation. History and memory, which are a crucial part of the basis for reconciliation, should not be made to serve the narrow interests of only currently desirable communal and political values, nor can they always be regarded as the solid and indisputable narratives suggested by Asmal *et al.* above. As Michael Lambek (1996:239) says, memory is anything but “a purely ‘natural’ or ‘autonomic’ activity”, but is rather “always and inevitably culturally and socially mediated and hence subject to evaluation along a number of dimensions whose relative importance are open for debate”.

Such an approach treats memory not as a neutral representation, more or less accurate, of the past, but as a



claim or set of claims, more or less firm, more or less justified, more or less appropriate, about it (Lambek, 1996:239).

This approach is not to question the testimony of the victims who appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it does invite an exploratory view on how such testimony may be used, collectively, to negotiate with the past in a dialogic way, though without negating those forensic views of memory which entitle victims of apartheid to respect and empathy. Of equal importance is the dialogic movement between personal and public memory, given that the former may fade in time if not preserved in ways such as writing and oral tradition, while public memory, lamentably, appears to be more authoritative and may be inscribed in a more solid form, often in relatively durable texts such as history books, place names or monuments of stone. The “study of memory may well be a privileged area for seeing how public, historically created, cultural representations join private representations ...” (Bloch, 1996:231). However, the contextualisation of recovered memory on any level must entail a degree of reframing and reshaping of memory, and it is essential that personal memory be respected and not subtly colonised and fixed by public discourse. Times of social and political transition, as currently experienced in South Africa, offer unique opportunities for the reshaping of narratives of history, and such narratives are crucial to the shape and stability of society. As Perelli (1994:39) has it, “A narrative of the past, with central premises and a general outline shared by the different groups of society, is a powerful unifying force in any country”. However, in the shaping of memory more subtle and important issues than unity are at stake, as Herman (1992:1) suggests: “Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.” The phrase “politics of memory”, used by Perelli as well as other writers on memory, suggests that, like historiography, the shape that discourses of memory take within any particular society is governed by political as well as social forces. In order to create a dynamic discourse of memory, numerous voices and agendas need to be actively involved in the fashioning of various historical narratives, and the logic of this article suggests that the voices of writers such as Ndebele and Gobodo-Madikizela, with their deconstructive weight, can provide valuable contributions to this dynamic.

LaCapra (1985:11) insists that “documents [including literary works] are texts that supplement or rework ‘reality’, and not mere sources that divulge facts about ‘reality’”. The effect of these interrogative

texts by Ndebele and Gobodo-Madikizela is to facilitate a scepticism towards textuality itself – to see one of the most creative functions of texts as the “rupture [of] unilinear constructions of historical knowledge in order to dispute specific sites of subjectivity” (Dipiero, 1993:111). Both Ndebele and Gobodo-Madikizela show a willingness to accept and exploit such ruptures – to negotiate “those transactions between inner and outer worlds, the times of history and of memory, from which history might learn” (Radstone & Hodgkin, 2003:132). *The cry of Winnie Mandela* and *A human being died that night* are self-reflexive texts which make creative use of documentary sources to construct open-ended narratives. In doing so they privilege story over history, implicitly disputing traditional, naturalised notions of history as either univocal or subject to ownership by one particular group or sector of society.

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**Key concepts:**

Gobodo-Madikizela: *A human being died that night*  
memory; role of

Ndebele: *The cry of Winnie Mandela*  
Truth and Reconciliation Commission

**Kernbegrippe:**

Gobodo-Madikizela: *A human being died that night*  
herinnering; rol van

Ndebele: *The cry of Winnie Mandela*  
Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie