

# *ALTERNATION*

Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in  
Southern Africa Vol 22, No 2, 2015  
ISSN 1023-1757

## **Memory Studies**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **Media and Cultural Studies**

- \* *Alternation* is an international journal which publishes interdisciplinary contributions in the fields of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa.
- \* Prior to publication, each publication in *Alternation* is reviewed by at least two independent peer reviewers.
- \* *Alternation* is indexed in The Index to South African Periodicals (ISAP) and reviewed in The African Book Publishing Record (ABPR).
- \* *Alternation* is published every semester.
- \* *Alternation* was accredited in 1996.

#### **EDITOR**

Johannes A Smit (UKZN)

#### **ASSOCIATE EDITOR**

Judith Lütge Coullie (UKZN)

Editorial Assistant: Beverly Vencatsamy

#### **EDITORIAL COMMITTEE**

Catherine Addison (UZ); Nyna Amin (UKZN); Urmilla Bob (UKZN); Denzil Chetty (Unisa); Rubby Dhunpath (UKZN); Brian Fulela (UKZN); Mandy Goedhals (UKZN); Rembrandt Klopper (UZ); Jabulani Mkhize (UFort Hare); Shane Moran (UFort Hare); Priya Narismulu (UKZN); Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa (UKZN); Thengani Ngwenya (DUT); Corinne Sandwith (UP); Mpilo Pearl Sithole (UKZN); Graham Stewart (DUT).

#### **EDITORIAL BOARD**

Richard Bailey (UKZN); Marianne de Jong (Unisa); Betty Govinden (UKZN); Dorian Haarhoff (Namibia); Sabry Hafez (SOAS); Dan Izebaye (Ibadan); RK Jain (Jawaharlal Nehru); Robbie Kriger (NRF); Isaac Mathumba (Unisa); Godfrey Meintjes (Rhodes); Fatima Mendonca (Eduardo Mondlane); Sikhumbuzo Mngadi (UJ); Louis Molamu (Botswana); Katwiwa Mule (Pennsylvania); Isidore Okpewho (Binghamton); Andries Oliphant (Unisa); Julie Pridmore (Unisa); Rory Ryan (UJ); Michael Samuel (UKZN); Maje Serudu (Unisa); Marilet Sienaert (UCT); Ayub Sheik (UKZN); Liz Thompson (UZ); Cleopas Thosago (UNIN); Helize van Vuuren (NMMU); Hildegard van Zweel (Unisa).

#### **NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD**

Carole Boyce-Davies (Florida Int.); Ampie Coetzee (UWC); Simon During (Melbourne); Elmar Lehmann (Essen); Douglas Killam (Guelph); Andre Lefevere (Austin); David Lewis-Williams (Wits); Bernth Lindfors (Austin); Jeff Opland (Charterhouse); Graham Pechey (Hertfordshire); Erhard Reckwitz (Essen).

#### **CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS**

The Editor: *Alternation*, Univ. of KwaZulu-Natal, Priv. Bag X10, Dalbridge, 4041, DURBAN, South Africa; Tel: +27-(0)31-260-7303;  
Fax: +27-(0)31-260-7286; Web: <http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za>  
e-mail: [smitj@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:smitj@ukzn.ac.za); [vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za)

ISSN 1023-1757

Copyright Reserved: *Alternation*

## ARTICLES

### Memory Studies

<i>Philippe Denis and Sabine Marshall</i> Editorial: Memory Studies .....	1
<i>Michael Samuel</i> Beyond Narcissism and Hero-worshipping: Life History Research and Narrative Inquiry .....	8
<i>D. (Sagree) Govender and R. Sookrajh</i> Roots and All. (Anti)-Memories of Indian Diasporic Women Living in South Africa .....	29
<i>Alain Tschudin</i> What Happens in the Forest? Memory, Trauma, Repression and Resilience amongst Congolese Refugees Living in Durban, South Africa .....	56
<i>Philippe Denis and Philani Dlamini</i> Multiple Layers of Memory: The History of Mpophomeni Told and Retold .....	73

### Media and Cultural Studies

<i>Jean-Philippe Wade</i> Editorial: Media and Cultural Studies .....	103
<i>Adam Meikle and Jean-Philippe Wade</i> New Approach to Subculture: Gaming as Substantial Subculture of Consumption .....	107
<i>Marco Gennaro Bozza</i> Computer Case Modding: A Case of Subcultural Substance .....	129
<i>Genevieve Akal</i> Hipsterama: An Existential Capser through the World of the Ironic Hipster .....	160
<i>Jean-Philippe Wade</i> Reality as Fiction: Autoethnography as Postmodern Critique .....	194
<i>Zakia Jeewa and Jean-Philippe Wade</i> Playing with Identity: Fan Role Playing on Twitter .....	216

## BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

<i>Shane Moran</i> Meat as well as Books. Review article of: <i>The Courage of   kabbo. Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Publication of Specimens of Bushman Folklore</i> . Edited by Janette Deacon, & Pippa Skotnes .....	241
--	-----

## INTERVIEW

<i>Olivier Moreillon and Lindy Stiebel</i> Speaking Out: In Conversation with Niq Mhlongo .....	255
Contributors .....	270
Editorial Associates (1994 - 2015) .....	273

# *Alternation*

---

**Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the  
Arts and Humanities in  
Southern Africa**

## **Memory Studies**

Guest Editors  
*Philippe Denis*  
and  
*Sabine Marschall*

2015

CSSALL  
Durban

## **Acknowledgement of Reviewers**

We wish to acknowledge the participation of the following reviewers in the production of this issue of *Alternation*.

### **Memory Studies Reviewers**

Theresa Edlman, Postdoctoral student, University of South Africa

Sean Field, University of Cape Town

Kalpana Hiralal, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Christina Landman, University of South Africa

Mxolisi Mchunu, Postdoctoral student, University of Cape Town

Radikobo Ntsimane, Honorary lecturer, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Alistair Thomson, Monash University, Australia

Keyan Tomaselli, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Shawn Utsey, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia,  
USA

Robert Vosloo, Stellenbosch

# Editorial: Memory Studies

**Philippe Denis**  
**Sabine Marschall**

This special issue of *Alternation* is the result of the Memory Studies Symposium that we organised in September 2013, but our academic research and personal interest in the field of memory has a long history for each of us. In 2012, Sabine proposed the introduction of an interdisciplinary postgraduate degree programme in Memory Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). It was meant to provide a rigorous theoretical grounding for students with undergraduate foundations in many different academic disciplines and draw on staff resources and research expertise from across the university. The initial research for this initiative revealed that a substantial number of academic staff and postgraduate students, mostly from the Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, but also from as far afield as Mathematics, concern themselves with researching aspects of personal or collective forms of memory. The proposed degree in Memory Studies was eventually rejected by the university on the basis that ‘memory is too narrow to qualify as a designator’. Philippe then suggested organising a symposium that would bring together interested parties across the university and locally based institutions (notably museums and archives). The well attended one-day event served as an initial platform for networking, sharing information and showcasing current research undertaken in the field. The multifaceted character of the papers presented and the debates they engendered, certainly illustrated how ‘wide’ the field of memory is. Participants voiced an interest in repeating and expanding the initiative, as well as publishing the best papers in a special journal issue.

In a most recent study based on an on-line survey with self-identified memory scholars worldwide, Segesten and Wüstenberg (unpublished manuscript 2014) investigated the extent to which Memory Studies has established itself as an academic field internationally and to what degree it

has been institutionalized. Although offered in one form or another at many universities in Europe and beyond, Memory Studies still struggles to be recognized as a separate disciplinary field. While some individual scholars play an active role in defining the boundaries of the field and promoting its institutionalization, on the whole, Memory Studies remains characterized by a high level of fragmentation and its research agenda is more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. The authors note three key developments that must occur for a field to be recognized: firstly, the scholarly articulation of the field through scientific production; secondly, the offering of specialized programmes by higher education institutions; and thirdly, the endowment with dedicated research funding from public and private donors.

The question remains whether Memory Studies should indeed be formalized and institutionalized. This point has been raised in the inaugural issue of the journal *Memory Studies*, established in 2008 as one of the most significant publication outlets and platforms for scholarly debate in memory research, which in itself has contributed much to delimiting the field. Radstone (2008) examines the opportunities, but also the disadvantages afforded by the prospect of institutionalization. The latter include, among other, the enshrinement of canonical texts and concepts and the risk of reification into orthodoxies that discourage critical testing and further investigation, hence turning conjectural speculations about memory into ‘fact’. While some may argue that memory may be more productively explored within the ambit of established disciplines, there can be no doubt that to some extent, Memory Studies has already emerged as a distinct multidisciplinary field.

The surge of interest in memory began in the late 1970s, forging a symbiotic relationship between scholarly research and societal practice. On the one hand, the so-called ‘memory boom’, ‘memory wave’, ‘memory craze’, ‘turn to memory’ or ‘memorialist trend’ is characterized by a broad-based societal interest in the past which manifests itself, among other, in the proliferation of monuments, memorials, museums, commemorative events and festivals, historical documentaries, and war movies, as well as a host of other, critical and popular forms of engagement with the past, including the striving for historical justice through recourse to the suppressed memories of marginalized groups. This trend has been accompanied and partly fuelled by

the scholarly interest in memory, both collective and individual or personal forms of memory (Radstone & Schwarz 2010).

The academic study of collective forms of memory, on the other hand, has its roots in the 1920s, notably with the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg, both of whom independently pursued very different approaches with the same aim, to develop a general theory of memory. It was primarily the re-discovery of Halbwachs' work in the 1970s and the pioneering work of the French historian Pierre Nora (e.g.1984) that forms the foundations of the current interest in memory (Assmann 1999). Since then, a deluge of scholarly work has been produced, contributing to the expanding debate and entrenching a critical discourse that has impacted on many disciplines. Among the most influential early conceptualizations of collective memory, Paul Connerton's (1989) book on social memory and Jan Assmann's (1992) definition of cultural memory stand out, but a host of sub-categories and new conceptualizations have been developed since.

The period of the late 1970s and 1980s is not only associated with the booming interest in collective forms of memory, but also with major developments in the study of individual or personal memory. This occurred as a result of increasing collaboration between the previously separate work of cognitive psychologists and clinical neurologists or neuroscientists. The integration of research on the mind and on the brain in the field of cognitive neuroscience has revolutionized the understanding of personal memory and sparked new interest in the field of memory (Schacter 1996). One of the key insights of this interdisciplinary research, paralleling developments in the field of collective memory, refers to the constructedness of memory, the recognition that memory is not merely recalled from some internal storage reservoir, but always actively reconstructed. Both individual and collective forms of remembrance and forgetting are contingent on context and purpose (Bietti *et al.* 2014).

The link is still weak between studies of collective memory, including social memory, cultural memory, public memory, generational memory, communicative memory, etc. typically studied by social and political historians, oral historians, political scientists, religious studies scholars, cultural geographers, heritage scholars, philosophers, etc. and individual or personal forms of memory, e.g. notably autobiographical memory, episodic memory, and semantic memory, typically investigated by discursive and cognitive psychologists, neuroscientists, biologists, but also

cognitive linguistics, sociologists and historians. Also significant in research is trauma memory, an ever expanding field of enquiry within Memory Studies, which implies particular ways of remembering and forgetting, individually and collectively, in the context of intensely painful events. Interdisciplinary work that connects scholars from the humanities and social sciences with those in the natural and health sciences and links the study of individual to that of collective forms of memory holds much promise for truly innovative research and groundbreaking insights based on unique methodologies.

The relevance of memory in the South African context has a long tradition in academic research in some disciplines, notably history. During the 1980s, for instance, oral history was used to bring to light alternative memories, of dispossessed land dwellers or underpaid black workers for example, with a view to challenging the dominant historical narratives promoted by the state. Oral history projects such as the Centre for Popular Memory at the University of Cape Town and the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work at the University of KwaZulu-Natal made concerted efforts to help people affected by apartheid, HIV/AIDS and other forms of traumatic situations to retrieve, preserve and process their memories. In terms of public discourse and societal visibility, memory became pivotal during the second half of the 1990s through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where personal memories of trauma – persecution, violence, torture and death – were publicly shared and broadcast throughout the nation and beyond. The TRC was seen as an important catalyst to reconciliation and nation-building by the newly elected democratic government and quickly became an internationally respected model. International consensus about the role of memory in post-conflict societies is widely shared and the field of transitional justice, itself an burgeoning niche area of academic enquiry, is based on the notion that future peace and stability depend on finding ways of coming to terms with the past (Rigney 2012).

As participation in the Memory Studies Symposium has illustrated, the academic interest in memory is extremely diverse and multifaceted at UKZN, ranging from engagement with trauma testimony and political violence to issues of identity and resilience. Yet a common thread ran through the papers read on that day, including those which are published in this issue of *Alternation*. Memory is always a re-creation, using the past to

make sense of and adapt to the present. Vehicles of memory range from oral history interviews and documentaries to cultural reminiscences and literary productions. They allow, in multiple and dynamic ways, a re-appropriation of the original story.

The five papers presented here all combine theoretical reflection and empirical data, mostly collected in South Africa. In his discussion of a set of life stories of student teachers and teachers described as successful, Michael Samuel argues that, in contrast to the positivist paradigm, life story research brings multiple facets of truth and truth-making into its research agenda: the truth as lived, the truth as experienced and the truth as told. Life history research is a process of re-searching, re-looking at accepted truths in circulation around a particular phenomenon. For their part, Sagree Govender and R. Sookrajh use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of arborescent and rhizomatic systems, as expressed in the metaphors of the tree root and canal rhizomes, to describe the lived experience of Indian diasporic women in South Africa. Their paper shows how these women choose to break away from some of the cultural memories inherited from their motherland while maintaining others. The path followed by these memories is all but linear. On gender issues, for example, the contradictions are apparent.

Reflecting on the oral testimonies of Congolese refugees in Durban after having witnessed horrendous scenes of murder and rape in the forest while fleeing rebel armies in the eastern DRC, Alain Tschudin suggests that, in these narratives, a form of 'memory work', similar to what Freud describes as 'dream work', is carried out. This kind of memory, which is akin to imagination, allows them to put in words an otherwise unspeakable experience, developing a form a communication and creating the conditions for resilience. The refugees from the Congo experience what Roberta Culbertson (1995) has called the 'survivor's paradox': they do not want to remember, but their memories haunt them. They are unable to speak but they feel the need to tell their story.

In their paper, Philippe Denis and Philani Dlamini examine how the memories of the residents of Mpophomeni, a black township in the Natal Midlands which experienced forced removals, unfair dismissals, political violence and gang warfare in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, changed from the time of apartheid to the present day. Comparing residents' testimonies from the time of the Sarmcol strike, during which a third of the township's

breadwinners lost their job, and political violence to the post-apartheid era, they show a process of diversification and complexification of memories. In recent oral history interviews, the residents draw a picture of the Mpophomeni community very different from the image which the written documents and the oral testimonies collected at the time had been giving.

This selection of papers provides a glimpse of the variety and diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches to scholarly investigations centered on issues of memory. Another outcome of the 2013 Memory Studies symposium was the request for another, more substantial conference. This came to fruition with 'Memory in Africa. 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Memory Studies Conference', held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on 14-15 November 2014 – a two day, international event which demonstrated the topicality of memory work in academia in South Africa and beyond and will in turn result in the publication of other papers.

## **References**

- Assmann, J. 1992. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C.H. Beck.
- Assmann, J. 1999. Kollektives und kulturelles Gedächtnis. Zur Phänomenologie und Funktion von Gegen-Erinnerung. In Borsdorf, U. & H.T. Grütter (eds.): *Orte der Erinnerung. Denkmal, Gedenkstätte, Museum*. Frankfurt/ New York: Campus.
- Bietti, L.M., C.B. Stone & W. Hirst 2014. Contextualizing Human Memory. *Memory Studies* 7,3: 267-271.
- Connerton, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cuthbertson, R. 1995. Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self. *New Literary History* 26,1:169-195.
- Nora, P. 1984. *Les lieux de mémoire*. (Realms of Memory.) Paris: Gallimard.
- Radstone, S. & B. Schwarz (eds.) 2010. *Memory. Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Radstone, S. 2008. Memory Studies: For and Against. *Memory Studies* 1,1: 31–39.

- Rigney, A. 2012. Reconciliation and Remembering: (How) does it Work? *Memory Studies* 5,3: 251–258.
- Schacter, D.L.1996. *Searching for Memory. The Brain, the Mind and the Past*. New York: Basic Books.
- Segesten, A.D. & J. Wüstenberg 2014. Memory Studies: The State of an Emergent Field. Unpublished manuscript. (Currently submitted for peer-review.)

Philippe Denis  
History of Christianity  
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Denis@ukzn.ac.za

Sabine Marschall  
Cultural & Heritage Tourism  
School of Social Sciences  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Marschalls@ukzn.ac.za

# **Beyond Narcissism and Hero-worshipping: Life History Research and Narrative Inquiry<sup>1</sup>**

**Michael Samuel**

## **Abstract**

Life history research is often misunderstood to be a celebratory hero-worshipping of the subject whose biography is being constructed. This paper argues that life history research is not a vainglorious narcissistic narrative exercise, but instead is an approach to developing of qualitative in-depth insight into a theoretical phenomenon. The chosen individual's life and the narrativising about the intersected complexity of their life and experiences becomes a means to examine the phenomenon under exploration by providing potentially generative elucidation for further research. Examples of what is not life history research form the backdrop to contrast with more recent uses of the methodological approach in the field of educational research. The studies explore the intersection between epistemology, methodology and positionality in which the researchers theorise phenomena such as individual professional development trajectories, the engagement with speech language therapy, the development of curriculum in higher education and evaluations of organisations through institutional biographies. The rigorous data production and analysis strategies employed reveal the prospect of the approach as a useful contribution to social studies research.

**Keywords:** Kinds of truth, life history research, narrative inquiry, life history studies in education

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at College of Humanities Symposium: The study of memory in an interdisciplinary perspective. Innovation Centre, Howard Campus, Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal. 18 September 2013.

History is an angel being blown backwards into the future  
(Lather & Smithies 1997: 54).

Peruse the shelves of many commercial bookstores today and one is bound to encounter the proliferation of celebratory biographies, even constituting a specialist marketing category to attract would-be customers. One is usually in no doubt that the rise of the 'vanity biography' fulfils the curiosity factor which sells tabloid newspapers and is further legitimised by the voluminous biographies, usually constructed by ghost writers employed by the rich and famous. Even the infamous see the marketing possibility of authoring a biography which outlines their rise or fall to ascendancy or descendancy. The obsession to peep into the lives beyond the high fences of security cocoons, the fetish with the unattainable or the decadent, the interest to provide examples of rags-to-riches stories fascinates those who are seduced to believe that these exemplary life trajectories are replicable in their own. It is interesting to note that some biographies are being constructed even before individuals have reached age thirty: hardly a lengthy life at all in the context of increased life expectancy of the 21st century! However, inspirational these biographies purport to be, they are largely about commercialisation and commodification of these lives. It becomes even more concerning when the authorship of the 'auto'-biography is quite clearly not the individual super hero film star, politician and or sport hero himself or herself. Biographies are supposedly being constructed about these heroes too, even when they sanction them or not. Competing biographies are constructed over a single person's life, creating multiple vantage points about the authenticity of the life itself. Even autobiographies (self-authored) are deemed to be contestable.

A fascinating book by Bill Bryson (2007) chooses to explore whether noted historical figures such as William Shakespeare even existed at all. Was his life/ biography a fictional creation? Some even argue that the famous heroic characters such as Marco Polo did not even exist, but are convenient mythological creations to construct notions of Empire and Exploration. Historical records of the life and battles of Julius Caesar (*bella gentis*) could be argued to be careful propagandist agendas to reinforce political and social control of Roman power. Some of these battles emerge entirely implausible pragmatically and operationally. The construction of history too might arguably be seen to be simply a quest to present specific convenient and

accepted truths not about the past, but about how the present powers wish the past to be remembered (Wassermann & Bryan 2010). Historical heroes become means to cement present, not past accepted values. All of the above certainly raises the question of what kinds of truth are being generated through the constructing of narratives and life histories. This also raises serious questions about life history research methodology which is increasingly becoming a fashionable counterpoint to the normative and dominant quantitative mode of research endeavours.

In this paper I will argue that these different kinds of truth-making noted above pose a baseline from which to explore the role of the life history researchers as they employ methods of data production, analysis and representation such a narrative research (Section One). What are the purposes of life history research and narrative research? Whose interests are being served in generating these conceptions of life history research? I will argue that we need to distinguish the specific characteristics which make life history research a ‘research endeavour’ and not a commercial (or crass ideological) venture. I will provide examples of how the life history research agenda has taken shape within the field of education (Section Two). This paper does not aim to suggest that the other forms of biographical work are not useful as social or entertainment titillation. Instead it will argue that life history research needs to be cautious of its need for rigour, attention to validation, authentication and trustworthiness considerations. Anything less deserves the criticisms levelled by opponents who do not see its value beyond ‘intellectual masturbation’- disguised attempts at self-satisfaction and narcissistic hero-worship.

## **Section One: A Lens into the Epistemology and Methodology of Life History Research**

### ***Kinds of Truth and Truth-making***

The Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC Report 1998) in post-apartheid South Africa has received much attention as a strategy to address the process of moving beyond the need for legalistic retribution and legal justice against perpetrators of violence and subjugation. In the commentary on the TRC agenda, the chair of the commission, Desmond Tutu argues that the act of re-telling one’s implicatedness in the atrocities of apartheid was a

public means of sharing the horrors of exploitation of humanity (*ibid.*). The perpetrator was granted amnesty for revealing the details of the events which led to the physical torture, abuse and death of those who campaigned in defense of the apartheid system. The process of narrating these lived experiences was seen as potentially restorative, not only for the victim who was offered explanations of how their loved ones were brutalised, but also for the perpetrators who saw the possibility of choosing alternative paths for their further lives.

Those who were critical of the TRC *modus operandi* felt that it offered a 'soft fuzzy' cop out of taking responsibility and accountability for perpetrators' evil deeds. A Nuremberg type trial was preferred to generate lists of criminals who could languish in prison as punishment. The TRC report (*ibid.*) clarified that the commission was aiming to recognise that several 'truths' potentially co-exist, each with different conceptions of epistemological worth. Legal or factual truths serve the purpose of establishing the veracity of events, participants' actions and deeds. The courts of legal justice are geared towards establishing such '*scientific truths*'. However, as human beings, we inherit interpretations of the world through '*dialogical truths*', which are multiple, conflictual and varied. The acceptance of a thread of truth as an agreed social explanation is understood as produced and is producing conceptions that are socially accepted. In contrast, individuals construct '*personalised truths*' drawn from their own unique lived experiences within the social system. This embeds social, political, ideological, cultural and psychological understandings of events, practices and deeds. This latter kind of truth is often constructed in dialogue with dominantly held truths at macro-level. The fourth truth type that is referred to in the TRC is a '*healing or restorative truth*'. This form of truth-telling or truth-making is not overtly concerned with the 'actual scientific fact' (*did the event actually occur?*); it links into the way in which the experienced truth (*what sense did I make of the interpretations around me?*) intersects with the dominant social truths (*what do most people agree or say happened?*) Moreover, 'healing truths' are aiming to allow persons narrativising the telling to form their own explanations and critiques of what moral or ethical pathways they undertook; how they themselves are implicated in the unfolding of events. This last form of truth-making has the potential to allow the perpetrator to engage with a possibility of reconstruction and reconciliation with the victims they offended. The deep emotional and

intellectual, and perhaps spiritual cleansing, is what the TRC aimed to generate, as part of the reconstruction of a post-apartheid South Africa.

In the *Handbook on Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin 2007), a further distinction is offered to distinguish between ‘*lived as lived*’ (forensic truths), ‘*lives as experienced*’ (social and dialogical truths) and ‘*lived as told*’: how selective the memory-making process, infused with elements of nostalgia, or the limits of the capacity of the memory process, or the psychological process of subverting and /or celebrating one's own agency (and/or victimhood) within the re-telling. The act of narrativising a life history is thus infused with several co-existing elements that are to be interrogated by the researcher interpreting how the context, audience and purpose of the ‘telling of the tale’ is an act of creating an interpretation of one’s world, one’s past, present and future.

The TRC has been suggested by some to have become a romanticised re-constructivist agenda (Govinder, Zondo & Makgoba 2013). Some have even argued that it was simply a pragmatic way of obviating the flooding of the legal system with cases seeking victimhood and vanquished status. Some argue that it is a strategic plot to sanitise racialised and tribalised agendas lurking within the apartheid psyche: a means to build a new South African nationalist identity. Life history research inherits these multiple facets of truth and truth-making into its research agenda. It locates itself at the intersection between these varieties of truth-making efforts yet moves towards generating deep accounts of social experience from individuals' points of view. This view of the social system is recognised to be a first-hand subjective experience that is not sanitised from one’s social, cultural, historical, biographical and contextual biographies. The complexity rather than the reduction to single truths is explored in the process of life history research. Usually the life history research chooses multiple case studies of different/ similar participants to make a theoretical argumentation. It aims to generate with its participants retrospective accounts of the past, yet providing insightful interpretation of how individuals make sense of their present and their future. The act of writing the narrative life history project itself is imbued with the process of restoring, healing and re-interpreting through dialogical interaction between the researcher and the researched. The act of constructing the life history research narrative account is itself a theorising process (Reddy 2000; Dhunpath & Samuel 2009). We live storied lives and a simplistic reduction to only factual forensic type interpretations reduces our humanity.

As a methodological approach life history research has many historical antecedents including anthropology, literature studies, psychology, sociology, historical studies. Each of these disciplines has spawned theoretical interpretations of their disciplines or fields drawing on their interpretations, theories and models. These interpretations of what constitutes ‘the discipline’ shift over time or contexts as well. Hence, it is likely that the varied definitions of life history abound in relation to the multiplicity of paradigmatic perspectives available in each of these sub- and intersecting disciplinary trajectories. For example, it may be argued that all of fictional narrative literature is a process of documenting, reinterpreting, fictionalising the ‘truths’ that exist socially, anthropologically, psychologically, culturally socially and politically. Every novel, each narrative account is but a representation of the worldview of its creators and their relationship to the world and persons they lived amongst. This is perhaps even true of science-fiction literature in which imagined possibilities of the world order is engaged as a philosophical and theoretical exploration of the material, geographic and social world in which we presently live. By definition then, life history must be interested in multiplicity, multi-disciplinarity, and heightened subjective, contextualised awareness.

### ***What Life History is Not, and What It is***

However, life history research (LHR) is not simply a singular immediate perspective of self-reflection. The aim of life history is not to construct a diary of sequenced chronological interpretation of events. It is not a story-telling exercise merely to recall the stages of development over time and space. It is not about a journalistic recording of events to apportion blame or culpability. It is not an attempt to sensationalise or romanticise the social system. Paradoxically, LHR is not overtly aimed to provide therapeutic intervention. The effect of constructing a LHR account might have the consequence of providing ‘healing truths’, but this is not its founding operational intention. Ultimately LHR is a *research approach*, a process of re-searching, re-looking at accepted truths in circulation around a particular phenomenon<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> I note my own paradigmatic preference in this stance.

The life historian is a researcher who aims to analyse, interpret, make sense of how individuals recall their experiences, how individuals make sense of the events, structures of society or patterns of behaviour within their environment. The life history research (LHR) historian is one acutely concerned with how memories are remembered, not whether these memories are in themselves accurate or true (in the sense of forensic truth). The life historian researcher is working to gauge the truth-making of his/her participants against a theoretical framework which previously exists amongst the dominant literature, amongst dominant theoretical perspectives and previous research studies about the phenomenon. The life historian engages his/her participants in construction and reconstructing of these narrative accounts and integrates them into a discursive analytical narrative account capturing the richness of the lived contextual world views of the participants. More often researchers chose more than simply a single case to construct a biographical life history research project. Having several potentially competing cases from within the social system providing their conflictual or convergent interpretations of their histories may be a part of the methodological pursuit. In this way the choices of sampling is a theoretical purposive procedure (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). The following table contrasts the choices of sampling within life history research compared to the traditional conceptions of empirical studies.

**Table 1: Sampling strategies within life history research and traditional empirical studies**

	Life history research	Traditional empirical studies
Type of sampling strategy	Strategic sampling	Random sampling
Who is chosen?	The sample (person/s) is/are chosen because of WHAT they can say rather than whom they represent	Every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected into the sample

<b>Why are they chosen?</b>	Chosen because they typify some socio-historical circumstances/ process Historiographical sampling Chosen because they are articulate and can illuminate the phenomenon being studied/ understand the complexity of the phenomenon being researched Can be purposively selected: handpicked on the basis of their typicality	Statistical
<b>What is the relationship to the research hypothesis and theory building process?</b>	Hypothesis generating Theory producing	Hypothesis testing Theory testing
<b>What is the goal of the end point of the research process?</b>	Is the starting point for new ideas or further research	Aiming at arrival at a position of certainty
<b>What kind of theory is the research process aiming to produce?</b>	Local theory	Grand theory

(Adapted from Reddy 2000).

### ***Analysing Narrative Research and Life History Data***

Each pursuit of the telling of the narrative life history is analysed against the theoretical framework which the researcher chooses to set out at the commencement of the project. This does not mean that the act of

narrativising is simply a matter of the research imposing his/her worldview or theoretical framework onto the lived experiences of the participants. The act of constructing the narrative and its analysis might be collaboratively and analytically constructed with the researcher and his or her participants, individually or collectively (Freeman & Richards 1996). The data produced during the narrative construction is regarded as potentially only a first level of construction ('narrative analysis') (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). The researcher is still then obliged to generate further insight through an 'analysis of the narrative' (Polkinghorne 1995): making sense of the narrative.

The analysis of the narrative can take multiple strategies sometimes used in conjunction with each other. For example, the first stage of analysis of the narrative may be drawing from the tradition of 'grounded analysis': where the constructed narrative story is subjected to a codifying of recurring concepts, aggregated into themes and conjoined into thematic clusters (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Alternatively (or consequently), the research might engage with the act of 'hypothesis testing': checking to see whether the recurring categories of *a priori* theoretical categories which explain the phenomenon under investigation, are indeed present in the data (Miles & Huberman 1984). A compromise data analytical strategy could involve the participants in the sense-making of the constructed narrative in a 'negotiated analysis' (Freeman & Richards 1996). All of these strategies of data analytical techniques should ideally be anticipated before the researcher enters the field, thus making opportunity for creative and multiple sources of data for the construction of the narrative and /or potential co-constructors of the life history research report itself. Multiple data sources could be invoked, not only the oral telling through interviewing. Potential 'texts' available for theorising include photographs, artwork, documents, collective group interviews, architecture of spaces occupied and used by the biographer and biographed.

It is against the above broadening of possibilities that the need for clarity of an operational definition of what is life history research is needed. This definition recognises the biases and theoretical perspective of the author. Acknowledging such is to declare that it is possible that multiple perspectives of what is life history are likely to emerge from different theoretical vantages. The working definition of life history which has guided the selected examples in Section Two below is as follows:

Life history research is a theoretical research approach which aims to explore, interpret and analyse the told and silenced stories, the narrativised accounts by individuals who interpret, re-interpret and exaggerate their memories in the act of remembering, in dialogues with the contextual settings within which participants presently live.

The act of creating a life history record is *time- and space-linked* in that it codifies the process of memory-making which provides an insight into how individuals/ groups of individuals choose to remember their past within particular moments. The *context, audience and purpose* of the telling of the narrative account are embedded into the kind of narrative that is constructed. The aim of the life history is to uncover these multiple truth-making in order to *expand, refine or develop new theoretical understandings* of existing or prospective phenomena. A telling of a life history is against the backdrop of an existing framework which provides the initial analytical lens which frames the methodological data gathering process. Importantly, the life history researcher is an analyst, an interpreter of these stories. The life history narrative record is not simply about the biographical account itself, but about what this biographical account can inform, illuminate, and help provide insight into the social phenomenon that is the topic of the life history research project. The obligation of the life historian researcher is not simply to record the story, the narrative, the life historical biography, but to analyse and help develop theoretical insight. The life history researcher is a theory-builder, a historian in the sense of not simply recording events, but of making interpretation of the world in which we have lived and in which presently live.

This definition implies that the life historian researcher should be conscious of the attempt *not to glamourise the subject's worldview or positionality*. S/he should be aware that some of the telling of narrative accounts (by the participants) may be infused by nostalgia and celebratory self-glorification and that the historian's role is to filter a more abstract analysis (*why does the participant choose to re-present their lives the way they do?*). The audience of the tale could equally be implicated in the kind of tales that research participants offer. Nevertheless, the analysis process will attempt to interpret how and why individuals choose to remember and re-tell their memories the way they do (Dhunpath & Samuel 2009).

### ***The Researcher and the Researched***

It is an accepted qualitative conundrum which points out that the specific historical categories of race, gender, age and *researcher stance and positionality* (i.e. the relationship to the context, the phenomenon and the participants) could influence the nature of the kind of data that is produced. After all the audience might produce the text (Samuel 2014). As a hallmark of ethnographic research, life history researchers too need to be cognizant of how their own positionality in relation to the topic, the phenomenon, the participants, their context, influence the nature of the data that research participants are likely to produce. For example, Patti Lather in the book *'Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS'* (Lather & Smithies 1997), argues that her role as academic researcher placed her in a particular stance in relation to the HIV+ women whom she was co-researching with a sociologist. The story that is created of the women's lived experiences of living with the disease is a revelation also of the relationship between themselves and the non-infected, the social worker and the academic. Within the tradition of feminist research methodology aiming to uncover power differentials, the truth-making is not about glamour and glory, but about co-sharing of identities, and co-finding of agency.

The representational form that a life history narrative could take is not restricted to only a narrative written lettered text. It may include *artistic and oral* performance. It may be re-presented in the form of a public or private performance amongst intimate partners, or a large audience. Invariably, the choice of a life history research project cannot cover the full sweep of a participant's whole life experiences. It is usually a *contracted form* dedicated to exploring one topical phase, or aspects of one's participants' lives. For example, the choice might be to focus only on the way in which an individual negotiates their personal relationships with authority figures, or the individual's choice of how they negotiate their professional development trajectory, or the specific ways in which home (as opposed to public) life is negotiated and managed. Given that the life history narrative is a *co-construction* between the life historian researcher and the participants, the representational form of the LHR report could take the form of interspersed dialogue between the constructing participants. Many LHR project reports are chosen to be represented in third person narrative to account for the 'omniscient' authorial presence of the reporter of the

narrative, namely the life historian researcher (see Later & Smithies 1997). However, the LHR research might also choose to write the LHR report in a first person narrative account, allowing for greater immediacy of the teller of the tale (i.e. the participant). The latter form (although re-presented in the narrative form by the researcher) is usually authenticated by the research participants through a detailed member check (see Pillay 2003a).

In the act of telling of the life history narrative, one needs to be conscious of *whose biography* is being told: the presence or distance of the LHR researcher and the participants themselves is something to take note of. In autobiographical self-study research (Pithouse-Morgan, Mitchell & Molet-sane 2009) the research is activated by the participants themselves. The reason why they consider themselves and their lives worthy of being reported in public domain is worth noting. Usually such persons are individuals who have shaped particular social events socially, politically, memorably. However, it should be noted *when such autobiographies are written* since the timing itself is clue to its belief in its own value and contribution as a social force.

The *ethical considerations* of life history research include some of the following issues. The researcher needs to be conscious of their position of power in relation to the participants in his/ her study. Oftentimes researchers do not provide adequate critical reflection of whether they are ‘giving voice to their participants’, in a hierarchical patronising and condescending interpretation and analysis of their participants’ lived worlds. This is as relevant a set of considerations when one is ‘*researching down*’ (those who do share a lower social rung as oneself as a researcher), as it is when one is ‘*researching up*’ (those who are above one’s one station in the social system). The matter of interpretation when one is ‘*researching across*’ is as relevant since this questions the legitimacy of the researcher choosing to speak on behalf of participants. Does the life history biographer take on new forms of hierarchy when s/he interprets theoretically the world of others? What if the participants do not share this interpretation? Who owns the data analysis of the study? Can participants disagree with the analysis? If so, when and how? The matter of building trust between the research and the researched is thus a crucial element particularly of life history research, but maybe true for all research (interpretivist, constructivist or critical research) agendas.

The table below represents a summary of the argument led in Section One above linking how each of these truth-making operations predispose a

particular goal or focus which can be linked to the paradigmatic epistemological questions. Whilst this table should be seen as an attempt to provide comparability of perspectives, it is accepted that many researchers may choose to *work across and between these paradigmatic perspectives*. Methodological research permutations are thus likely to emerge.

**Table 2: Kinds of truth making within life history research**

	Kinds of truth	Operations	Goal/Focus	Paradigm
1	<b>Factual Forensic/ Legal Scientific truth</b>	verifiable, can be documented, proved	<i>To establish single account PRODUCT</i>	EMPIRICAL POSITIVIST <i>Truth exists</i>
2	<b>Dialogical social truth</b>	weighing up a range of views through listening, dialoguing...the process of establishing the truth	<i>To focus on how meaning is constructed PROCESS</i>	(SOCIAL) CONSTRUCTIVIST <i>We create truths and are created by them</i>
3	<b>Personal narrative truth</b>	based on the lived subjective experience of the individual, meaning making, giving voice to the voiceless	<i>To acknowledge individual meaning INDIVIDUAL</i>	INTERPRETIVIST Subjectivity <i>We make truths</i>
4	<b>Restorative Healing truth</b>	Focus on what purpose certain 'truths' serve in the wider society	<i>To locate knowing in a broader social context; to reconcile members of the community; INDIVIDUAL</i>	CRITICAL Power & hierarchy Change: bringing about greater justice <i>We can change 'our truths'</i>

---

## **Section Two: Exemplary Studies of Life History within the Field of Education**

This section of the paper points to a brief overview of a sampled set of educational research studies using a life history research methodology. The list is by no means exhaustive; instead it aims to be illustrative of the research approach adopting the above framework. It draws on work from a particular institution and therefore embeds the institutional preferences epistemologically and methodologically of this setting.

The first study explores the professional developmental trajectory of the lives of student teachers over different periods of their lives. In particular it focuses the experiences of learning and teaching the English language and their emerging conceptions of what being and becoming a teacher of the language embodies (Samuel 2003). The study emerges as an examination of the complex intersection of personal biographical forces which are drawn from particular homes, schools and patterns of pedagogy within the primary and secondary schooling systems of these selected participants. The study reveals the shifting theoretical influence of alternative theoretical interpretations of language teaching and learning when these student teachers embark on tertiary education in their preparation to become teachers. The study shows how one's biographical force engages in tension with these 'alternative' theoretical views of language acquisition, learning and teaching. Moreover, the study reveals the further pushing and pulling that emerges when students (schooled under the apartheid separate systems) engage with the post-apartheid multi-racial schooling contexts of their professional practicum during training as teachers. The process of professional development is thus an intersection of these forces. The different life histories of nine participants from varied backgrounds reveal how making professional development trajectories entail a personal and situated practice, infused by the macro-, meso- and personal micro-levels of schooling and education.

The second study chooses to explore how particular teachers choose to remain resilient, energetic, committed and creative even in the face of contexts where the majority of their colleagues have given up the hope of positive pedagogy and schooling. The lives of these successful teachers are explored to establish from where they draw these strengths to activate

---

energised and spirited passionate teaching. The life history researcher here draws on the theoretical conceptions of ‘successful teachers’ who embrace their challenges as opportunities to draw from inner strengths, strengths of personal histories of alienation, affirmation and/or even marginalisation. They become positive through seeking out contexts and pedagogies which extend their own immediate worldviews and restrictive management regimes. These regimes paradoxically become their sources of inspiration (Pillay 2003a). An innovative representational contribution is explored in this study showing how different narrative first or third person voices of the participants yield different levels of insight into the phenomenon.

The common concern of many tertiary education institutions is that its graduates may not be sufficiently embracing the kinds of literacies that are required within the world of everyday work practices. Jacobs (2010) in her study chooses to review the literature on the relationship between academic content and the nature of the language practices of university studies in a range of disciplines: architecture, engineering, teacher education, the legal profession and radiography. She examines the relationship that is established between ‘content lecturers’ (concerned with the disciplinary subject matter) and the ‘language practitioners’ (concerned with the kinds of oral/written assessment discourses required of university study). Many of the content lecturers were also practitioners from the ‘world of work’ who were familiar with the literacy practices (Gee 1990; Boughey 2005) of the everyday workplace. How communication channels between various partnerships of lecturing staff are negotiated is explored in this life history narrative approach. The language practitioner is one who is usually sensitive to the ways in which the languages of different worlds/ domains/ discourse settings are shared. The discourse of the disciplines, their language and literacy practices and that of the work practices are the subject of theorising.

A recent study in Mauritius looks at the manner in which early childhood education teachers choose to remember their own lived experiences of teaching and learning of languages (Ankiah-Gangadeen 2014). Here the life history researcher chooses practitioners from a variety of schooling contexts in the Mauritian setting, each with varied biographical heritages of languages in dialogues with local and global experiences of language learning. The intersection between these multiple levels produces an understanding of the often unarticulated philosophical worldviews of these teachers. Often marginalised as being superficial or a-theoretical, the study

reveals the deeply-held epistemological views of language learning and teaching pedagogues and schooling in general. The impact on their current practices forms the basis of the analysis.

An earlier study (Beecham 2002) chose to research one participant, a student who repeatedly is failing to graduate within the Speech and Hearing Therapy curriculum in her training as a potential therapist. The in-depth study of the student in her final years of study at the university provides an insight into how the curriculum of higher education might be failing the student, how its hidden valuing systems and culturally-loaded expectations of 'normative practice' might be reasons why the student fails repeatedly. The study is indirectly a study of the curriculum of the professional training programme.

Pillay (2003b) explores how relations of hierarchy between the powerful therapist in a clinical setting of speech and audiology therapy and their 'patients' might be producing conceptions of alienation and marginalisation. The study is a hypothetical exploration of 'imagined data' drawing from the researcher's own lived experiences of being a therapist and a university lecturer of speech and hearing therapy students.

In her study of the lives of people who stutter, Kathard (2003) reveals that the act of documenting the lived experiences of these 'patients' could itself become a therapeutic strategy of healing and alternative form of social intervention rather than the traditional medical models used to address the 'pathology'. The study becomes an explanation of many who stutter who have overcome stuttering in their adult lives. The study therefore, emerges as a potential possibility for therapeutic professional strategies of intervention. By documenting the engagement of the designers of curriculum for occupational therapy across the South African higher educational landscape, Joubert (2007) shows how the personal life histories of her participants have helped shaped the nature of what the discipline of occupational therapy has emerged to be within the South African higher educational landscape. The tension between the importations of worldviews from the westernised traditions of medical history is intersected with the local 'indigenous' valuing systems.

Mannah (2009) chose in her study to look at how the agenda of gender is marginalised in the process of the setting up structures within a teacher union. Through telling the lives of women participants who were tasked with the responsibility of inserting gender considerations within the bureaucracy and policies of the executive of the union structures, she is able

to show how paternalistic the organisation was despite the overt rhetoric of equity in public forums. The study resulted in the researcher herself becoming disillusioned with the prospect of gender equity within the union structures and she theorises why the paternalism persists. Her recognition of the union as a 'bureaucracy' rather than a force of liberation provided insightful theoretical and philosophical analysis of educational labour forces.

Reid's (2011) study narrated a fictive account of two participants engaged with the practising to become medical doctors within rural settings. The data is drawn from an intersection between his own personal life historical journey of training and working with students for family and rural medical practice, and his own personal lived experiences of managing a clinical setting within a rural context. His study analyses his own research journal publications on rural medical practice considerations over a number of decades and the kinds of repeated stories from different student doctors during training. His shift in epistemological conceptions of the medical curriculum design spurs him to analyse how two fictive characters, one from an urbanised White racialised background and another from a rural background both experience the challenges and potential of executing rural medical practice. This multiple levelled thesis becomes a means for theorising the curriculum design for training medical doctors for rural practice.

Dhunpath (2010) shifts the emphasis of life history research from its normative focus on the lives of persons. He instead chose to use the methodological approach to develop an insight into the life of an institution. In particular, he focused on the impact of the shifting macro-economic policy environment which redirected resources away from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) towards centralised governmental sponsored coffers in the early stages of post-apartheid South Africa. Through documenting the lived experiences of the participants in one educational NGO he is able to show how these macro-forces redirect the identity at micro-institutional level. How the NGO survived the withdrawal of support is the subject of the theorising of managing educational and institutional change. The NGO in question was able to forge different directions which provide exemplary potential of how to remain relevant and committed to 'outside-of-government' agendas. The study also provides different lens theoretically of how to conduct institutional organisational evaluations.

What is a common thread through all of these studies is the positionality of the researchers in relation to each of the studies. Most of the researchers are themselves higher education professional developers, designers of curriculum or practitioners of the phenomenon they explore. They reflect similarity to or resonance with the kinds of participants whom they study. Mannah (2009) and Joubert (2007) are practitioners like the participants they research: Mannah was herself engaged in the teacher union as an activist for gender considerations; Joubert is a senior curriculum designer of occupational therapy. Reid (2011) is himself a doctor who has worked in rural areas and now a professional trainer of doctors. His positionality is deeply infused into his study. Samuel (2003), Pillay (2003a), Jacobs (2010) and Ankiah-Gangadeen (2014) are professional (teacher) educators or language practitioners concerned about quality of professional development and growth and their studies' focus reflect this interest. Beecham (2002), Pillay (2003b) and Kathard (2003) were all academic members of the professional training when they embarked on their study into speech and hearing therapy curriculum and practices. We study who we are, choosing frames and questions which provide insight not only into the phenomenon we choose, but insights into our own personal implicatedness. The possibility for new directions infuses all of these studies. The researcher may indeed become the researched in the process of the pursuit of the life history research itself.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The aim of this paper has been to explore the potentialities of life history research as a research methodological approach which is deeply connected with its epistemological locatedness. The paper has aimed to reveal that the choices of the studies that researchers have embarked upon are linked to who they are, what they wish to study, and what contribution to knowledge they wish to make. The characteristics of life history research are that it is a theoretical and philosophical approach aiming to develop epistemological possibilities for operational practice. It is not simply a matter of documenting hero-worshipping or narcissistic reflection. However, in order to be recognised as a trustworthy methodological research approach proponents need to be vigilant of the intersection between the epistemological and methodological considerations. Through the examples shared in the paper the

potential for it to be a valuable contributing research approach is illustrated. Our lives become sources for our theory building. Our participants and our own researcher positionalities are our theoretical resource. Life history research opens up the richness of our lives for such philosophical and theoretical insights.

## References

- Ankiah-Gangadeen, A. 2014. *Biographies, Experiences and Language Practices. Teachers of Early Childhood Education in Mauritius*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Beecham, R. 2002. *A Failure of Care: A Story of a Speech and Hearing Therapy Student*. Unpublished D.Ed. thesis. Durban: University of Durban-Westville.
- Bouhey, C. 2005. Academic Study as a Social Practice. In Sutherland, P. & J. Crowther (eds.): *Lifelong Learning: Concepts and Contexts*. London: Routledge and Falmer Press.
- Bryson, B. 2007. *Shakespeare*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Clandinin, D.J. (ed.) 2007. *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry. Mapping a Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Clandinin, D.J. & F.M. Connelly 2000. *Narrative Inquiry. Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion & K. Morrison 2007. *Research Methods in Education*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. London and New York: Routledge and Falmer Press.
- Dhunpath, R. 2010. *Archaeology of a Language Development NGO: Excavating Organisational Identity*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishers.
- Dhunpath, R. & M. Samuel (eds.) 2009. *Life History Research: Epistemology, Methodology and Representation*. Rotterdam: SENSE Publishers.
- Freeman, D. & J.C. Richards (eds.) 1996. *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J.P. 1990. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourses*. London: Falmer Press.
- Govinder, K.S., N.P. Zondo & M.W. Makgoba 2013. A New Look at Demographic Transformation for Universities in South Africa. *South*

- African Journal of Science* 109,11/12: 1-11.
- Jacobs, C. 2010. Transgressing Disciplinary Boundaries: Constructing Alternate Academic Identities through Collaboration with the 'other'. *African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 14,2: 110-120.
- Joubert, R. 2007. *Indigenous Fruits from Exotic Roots? Revisiting the South Africa Occupational Therapy Curriculum*. Unpublished D.Ed. thesis. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Kathard, H. 2003. *Lives of People who Stutter: On becoming Someone*. Unpublished D.Ed. thesis. Durban: University of Durban-Westville.
- Lather, P.A. & C.S. Smithies 1997. *Troubling the Angels. Women Living with HIV/AIDS*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Mannah, S. 2009. *Women in the Teacher Union Leadership: A Case Study of South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU)*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Miles, M. & A.M. Huberman 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications.
- Pillay, G. 2003a. *Successful Teachers: A Cubist Narrative of Lives, Practices and the Evaded*. Unpublished D.Ed. thesis. Durban: University of Durban-Westville.
- Pillay, M. 2003b. *(Re)positioning the Powerful Expert and the Sick Person: A Case Study of Communication Pathology*. Unpublished D.Ed. thesis. Durban: University of Durban-Westville.
- Pithouse-Morgan, K., C. Mitchell & R. Moletsane (eds.) 2009. *Making Connections. Self-study and Social Action*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. 1995. Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis. In Hatch, J.A. & R. Wisniewski (eds.): *Life History and Narrative*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Reddy, V. 2000. *Life Histories of Black South African Scientists: Academic Success in an Unequal Society*. Unpublished D.Ed. thesis. Durban: University of Durban-Westville.
- Reid, S. 2011. *Education for Rural Medical Practice*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Samuel, M. 2003. Autobiographical Research in Teacher Education: Memories as Method and Model. In Lewin, K., M. Samuel & Y. Sayed (eds.): *Changing Patterns of Teacher Education in South Africa: Policy,*

*Michael Samuel*

*Practice and Prospects*. Sandown: Heinemann.

Samuel, M. 2014. Educational Leadership: The Audience Creates the Text.

*International Journal of Education and Development in Africa* 1.1.

(In press.)

Strauss, A. & J. Corbin 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

Thousand Oaks: CA: SAGE Publications.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) 1998. *Truth and Reconciliation*

*Commission of South Africa Report. Volume 1*. Cape Town: Juta Press.

Wassermann, J. & A. Bryan 2010. *Edgewood Memories: From College to Faculty of Education*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal. In-house publication.

Michael Samuel

School of Education

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Samuelm@ukzn.ac.za

# Roots and All: (Anti)-Memories of Indian Diasporic Women Living in South Africa

**D. (Sagree) Govender**  
**R. Sookrajh**

## **Abstract**

Through memory work, this paper has contributed to global interest in diaspora and seeks to illuminate the lived experiences of Indian diasporic women living in South Africa. This qualitative study of four Indian diasporic academic women has highlighted their ‘becoming’ that is symbolic of an interaction between ‘memory and metamorphosis.’ Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of arborescent and rhizomatic systems (1987), through the metaphors of the tree root and canal rhizomes respectively, linked to their assertion that ‘becoming is anti-memory’ are explored with examples from the data. This paper highlights the way in which memory has shaped the stories that the participants have shared and has also emphasised the ways in which Indian diasporic women have selectively chosen to rupture from some of the cultural memories inherited from their motherland. The findings indicate that the lived experiences of the Indian diasporic women in the sample are mainly rhizomatic in nature since they have developed in metamorphic and even contradictory ways against the background of various ideologies, namely apartheid, democracy and patriarchy. Traces of arborescence are also evident. Since becoming is an anti-memory, the question that requires further investigation is: Can the Indian diasporic free her or himself from cultural memory of the motherland?

**Keywords:** memory, diaspora, Indian women, arborescence, rhizomes, Deleuze, Guattari

How a society knows itself, asserts and exhibits itself is governed by its memory and history (Chowdhury 2008: 12).

As a diasporic woman whose Indian roots have ‘rhizomatically’ ruptured in the African soil, the first author is guided by the philosophies of two icons who left their indelible mark in South Africa and around the world, namely Nelson R. Mandela and Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi has advised, ‘Be the change that you wish to see in the world’, thereby highlighting the power of individual action towards the greater good of society (B’Hahn 2001 as cited in [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mahatma\\_Gandhi](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi)). Nelson Mandela, who spent twenty-seven years in prison, played a pivotal role in dismantling apartheid and embracing Indians in the democratic South Africa. He has left South Africa a legacy of wisdom through his deeds and words. He said, ‘As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison’ (Nelson Mandela Quotes). As a healer, Mandela chose to leave the memories to his incarceration behind to create a ‘rainbow nation’ in South Africa. To describe similar views of memory Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the authors of the concepts of arborescent and rhizomatic systems, state that ‘becoming is anti-memory.’

During the early years of democracy, when nation-building was imperative in South Africa, anti-memory was both frowned upon and valued. For the whites the anti-memory was a convenient way of rationalising their privileges in the days of apartheid. For blacks the anti-memory of the injustices of the apartheid era – to forgive and forget – was deemed a necessary precursor to the creation of a democratic society. Being neither black nor white, there are many grey areas which present challenges and ambiguities for Indian diasporics, a minority group living in democratic South Africa. Through memory work the lived experiences of selected Indian diasporic women in South Africa are illuminated, highlighting the triumphs, challenges, ambivalences and contradictions in their becoming.

Etymologically derived from the Greek term *diaspeirein* – from *dia* (across) and *speirein* (to sow or scatter seeds) – diaspora suggests a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states, territories or countries (Brazier & Mannur 2003:1). ‘Indian Diaspora’ is a generic term used to describe the

people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India (HLCID 2002).

This paper is the revised version of an article written in response to a call for research by the journal *Man in India* on the theme ‘social and cultural world of the Indian’ (Govender & Sookrajh 2013). The authors argue that, since the arrival of Indians in South Africa, several generations have rooted and flourished and that, although the Indians who came to South Africa were disconnected from the cultural space of the motherland, they re-established cultural spaces in the country. The authors further argue that, for Indian diasporics, memories have played a significant role in individual and collective patterns of thought and that it is through memory work that the social meanings of the lived experiences of the Indian diasporic participants are uncovered.

The Indian diasporic living in South Africa has developed a dynamic ‘hyphenated identity,’ a concept explicated in this way by Chowdhury (2008:1) in his dissertation on memory and the Indian diaspora:

To be Indian in the diaspora is to be hyphenated, where the hyphen on the one hand connects, elicits similarities, commonalities, bonding – a shared origin, a common memory; but on the other hand, the hyphen is also that unbridgeable gulf, between the diaspora and the homeland. The hyphen is what allows the diasporic to claim an ‘Indian identity,’ it is also what keeps the diasporic eternally distant (Chowdhury 2008:1).

This hyphenated identity is a global phenomenon experienced by Indian diasporics throughout the world. The hyphenated identity is aptly described by Moodley (2013:6) when she states, ‘When I am in India I am South African, yet when I am in South Africa I am Indian.’ Similarly, international literature by Presaud (2013) argues that Indo-Caribbeans actively resist being categorised as ‘East Indians’ or as ‘coming from India’ and whilst they acknowledge their history they assert that the Caribbean is their homeland.

Through memory work elicited through stories, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of Indian diasporic academic women in South Africa. The analogy of roots in the growth and becoming of the Indian diasporics in South Africa is examined through the lens of Deleuze and

Guattari's (1987) metaphors of arborescent and rhizomatic systems, symbolising the tree root and canal rhizomes which are linked to their explication of 'becoming as anti-memory'.

The authors argue that the lived experiences of Indian diasporic women living in South Africa have ruptured rhizomatically in boundless ways in their becoming by selectively choosing to deviate from the point of common memory to assert their individual identities. There are some tracings of arborescence emerging from the endurance of long term memory and this becoming in Chowdhury's terms is 'symbolic of an interaction between memory and metamorphosis' (2008:1).

## **The Historical Context**

According to the first author's memory of school history, the year 1860 has been associated with the first arrival of Indians as indentured labourers in South Africa. However, contrary to this common belief, there is evidence of Indians having settled at the Cape from as early as 1653. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as many as 1195 Indians were brought into the Cape Colony comprising 36.4% of the slave population (HLCID 2002:75). For the indentured labourers who arrived in South Africa to work in the sugarcane fields, the dislocation from the motherland occurred between the years 1860 and 1911 (Landy *et al.* 2003). Indians from different villages in India, with different religions and languages, brought different ethnicities to South Africa. The establishment of Indians in South Africa was not welcomed. 'Indians,' DF Malan, the architect of apartheid declared in his manifesto, 'are a foreign and outlandish element which is inassimilable' (HLCID 2002: 75).

'Apartheid,' or separateness, was the policy of strict racial segregation in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 (Norval 1996). As a result of apartheid, Indians were forced to maintain insular spaces by living in specific group areas, for example Chatsworth, and they attended racially exclusive schools.

During the apartheid era, Indians in South Africa were not subjected to a cleansing of the culture of their motherland. On the contrary they were insulated from other cultures in South Africa where this shared memory was fostered. Maharaj and Desai (2009:243) argue that MK Gandhi played a

significant role in consolidating Indianness that both looked to confront white discrimination and to keep alive the idea of a broader identity with the 'motherland'.

Whilst Mandela and other black leaders embraced Indians as allies, this was not a general attitude amongst blacks who clashed with Indians. Maharaj and Desai (2009) investigated the history of the Indian diaspora and the racial conflict by those who experienced it. These authors elaborated on poor perceptions of the Indians by other races in South Africa as well as the dilemmas experienced by Indians who were denied redress in the form of affirmative action provisions since the fall of apartheid.

While apartheid served as an insulator for the Indian culture, democracy served to expand the societal boundaries making access to other cultures more permeable. The later generations of the Indian diaspora had greater access to white integration which resulted in a dilution of their 'Indianness' and, in Chowdhury's terms, a hyphenated identity (Chowdhury 2008).

Landy *et al.* (2003:213), however, report that the Indian 'identity' is still very much alive in Durban. These authors explain that despite some vanishing elements such as vernaculars, two important markers of identity remain, namely religion (Hinduism and Islam) and culture (films, music).

Chowdhury (2008:20) cites Klein who asserts that the discipline of history interests itself with power, identity and politicised forms of memory and that historical trauma as an agent in history becomes a significant direction in cultural history. In presenting this paper on memory and the Indian diaspora in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the authors do not include historical trauma in their narrative to highlight victimhood but to emphasise the becoming of the Indian diasporic woman.

## **Objectives**

The objective of this paper is to highlight the value of memory work as a way of contributing to the understanding of the lived experiences of Indian diasporic professional women living in South Africa. Memory is viewed from a dual perspective: as a methodological tool to retrieve stories from the participants and as a concept to illustrate that 'becoming is anti-memory' and is associated with rhizomatic rather than arborescent systems.

Through memory work this paper contributes to an understanding of the diaspora which is a vibrant area of research since there is a call for a theorisation that is not divorced from historical and cultural specificity (Brazier & Mannur 2003:3). International research on the diaspora highlights the tension between 'cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation' as 'the shapes of cultures grow less bounded and tacit, more fluid and politicised.' (Appadurai 2003:31-43). Appadurai (2003:42) elaborates that

As group pasts become increasingly parts of museums, exhibits, and collections..., culture becomes less what Bourdieu (1977) called a *habitus* (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation.

For the Indian diasporics living in South Africa, the 'hyphenated identity' (Chowdhury 2008) suggests commonalities as well as the 'unbridgeable gulf' with India, the motherland.

It is argued that, during the apartheid period, the larger politics of discrimination and the lack of freedom and opportunities faced by the Indian diasporic communities were compounded for Indian diasporic women who were further burdened by the domestic politics of patriarchy.

Gender, with regard to the Indian diaspora, is far from being a neutral construct, especially within the cultural heritage of patriarchy. Appadurai (2003:42-43) observed that women in particular may become pawns in the heritage politics of the household and are often subject to the abuse and violence of men who are themselves torn between heritage and opportunity in shifting spatial and political formations. The justification for choosing a sample of Indian academic and professional women was to increase the probability of a critical perspective on social and cultural issues through memory work as a focus instead of that of social justice. For these professional women, globalisation through technological development means that South Africa is not the sole space of acculturation. It can be argued, however, that for these Indian diasporic academic women living in South Africa, the challenges were amplified by issues of gender and race especially during the apartheid era. Hence, the fundamental purpose of memory work is to facilitate a heightened consciousness of how social forces and practices such as gender and race affect human experiences and how individuals and groups choose to respond to these social forces and practices.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study focuses on four Indian academic women – university lecturers and personnel – who presented selected stories, drawn from memory, of their lived experiences as Indian diasporic academics in South Africa, the land of their birth. A qualitative study within the interpretative paradigm is aligned with the research aim to ‘make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2008:4). Furthermore, a qualitative inquiry was chosen because of its emphasis on a ‘holistic treatment of phenomena which requires looking at the historical contexts’ (Stake 1995:43) of these Indian diasporic academic women in order to understand their lived experiences in a land that is both nurturing and challenging.

A case study approach, that is, a systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular instance in its context (Yin 2009), was used to understand the lived experiences of these Indian diasporic academic women.

The researchers used a purposive sampling technique whereby subjects are consciously selected for ‘fitness for purpose’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000:104). A total of seven academic women were interviewed by both authors together or separately in some cases. The interviews which lasted from about 45 minutes to 60 minutes were audio-recorded and transcribed. For the purpose of this paper, data from four participants, comprising one first-generation and three fourth-generation Indian diasporic academic women, are presented.

The following critical question was asked: What are your memories of your lived experiences as an Indian diasporic academic woman? The supporting questions were: To what extent through memory do you choose to preserve the inheritance of being ‘Indian’? To what extent do you surrender to the Indian cultural heritage including patriarchy? Is India still a key referent?

The participants were asked to describe a few critical moments as Indian diasporic women. The participants responded by telling stories drawn from memory to the researchers. The narratives comprised a ‘short topical story about a particular event’ (Chase 2008:59). As Thomas (1995:3), aptly states, the impulse to tell stories is so powerful that there is a sense in which ‘we are told by our stories.’

Stories drawn from memory are driven by two sets of two concerns.

The first has to do with the way in which memory shapes the stories we tell, in the present and in the past – especially stories about our own lives. The second has to do with what makes us remember: the prompts, the pretexts, of memory; the reminders of the past that remain in the present (Kuhn, cited in Mitchell & Weber 1999:220).

Drawing from the work of Amin and Govinden (2012), we emphasise that the stories are fragments from memory presented unsystematically and without unity. The stories are recollections; bits and pieces of conversations and observations based on personal experiences (Amin & Govinden 2012:325). This paper does not seek to capture truth but to illuminate the lived experiences of selected women through memory work.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Data from the participants are explored through the concepts of arborescence and rhizome in relation to ‘becoming as anti-memory,’ as outlined in Deleuze and Guattari’s seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

Mazzei and McCoy (2010:504) assert that Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theorising of arborescent and rhizomatic systems of thinking serves to bring ‘philosophy into closer contact with sociocultural issues’ (see Govender & Sookrajh 2013). This paper extends the use of the theoretical lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts by showing its links to memory and the becoming of Indian diasporic academic women.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the term rhizomatic, supported metaphorically by the canal rhizome, represents social systems that expand horizontally, producing multiple shoots that weave through the system with the potential to break off and create or map new possibilities for growth. An arborescent structure, according to them, is depicted in the metaphor of a root-tree which represents the tracing of pre-established paths and structure thereby signifying unidirectional progress. The arborescent system of thinking is marked by a linear unity of knowledge whilst the rhizomatic system is indicative of a cyclical unity.

To highlight circular or cyclic unity as opposed to linear unity, Deleuze and Guattari (1987:7-12) enumerate the six characteristics of the rhizome, which are the principles of connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, assigning rupture, cartography and decalcomania.

The principles of connection and heterogeneity suggest that ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:7). Multiplicities are rhizomatic and defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialisation according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities. The principle of assigning rupture highlights that a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. These lines always tie back to one another. Through the principles of cartography and decalcomania, Deleuze and Guattari (1987:10-12) highlight that the rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model but a mapping of new pathways.

The principle of connection, heterogeneity and multiplicity highlights the variation of the paths selected by the participants (Indian diasporic academic women) in terms of their conscious choices rather than following fixed patterns. In analysing the lived experiences of the participants, the principle of rupture serves to highlight breaking or collapsing of established structures as new paths are created. The rhizomatic characteristics of mapping and graphic arts emphasise the lines of flights or critical moments where the Indian diasporic women create new paths instead of following pre-established paths that typify the normative rules of tradition or Indian heritage.

The tree logic or arborescent thinking is a thinking of tracing and reproduction while the rhizome is a map. A point of distinction is made from the tree or root, which plots a point and fixes an order or structure (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:7). It should be emphasised that Deleuze and Guattari (1987:20) do not present these systems as opposed models or categories of good or bad.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:293) define the concepts of becoming and memory in relation to the arborescent and rhizomatic systems as follows:

[B]ecoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating. Becoming is a verb with consistency all of its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to (1987:293).

They also clarify what they mean by memory:

Man constitutes himself as a gigantic memory, through the position of the central point, its frequency and its resonance. Any line that goes from one point to another in the aggregate of the molar system, and thus defined by points answering to these mnemonic conditions of frequency and resonance is part of the arborescent system (1987: 293).

They explain that arborescence is the submission of the line to the point and that if one does not break with the arborescent schema, one does not reach becoming.

Becoming is the movement by which the line frees itself from the point, and renders points indiscernible: the rhizome, the opposite of arborescence; break away from arborescence. Becoming is anti-memory (1987:293).

The challenge presented to us as authors was to explore the data revealing the hyphenated identities of the Indian diasporic academic women in terms of their interaction between their common or shared memory and metamorphosis as they veer through the challenges of various ideologies namely, apartheid, democracy and patriarchy. In terms of Deleuze and Guattari's framework, we had to illustrate with examples drawn from the data and show the connection between the metaphors of the rhizomatic to signify metamorphosis and arborescence as adherence to memory.

## **Findings from Case Studies**

### ***Deshnie: Indianness sets you free or makes you a slave and victim***

Drawing from her memory, Deshni a fourth generation Indian diasporic woman in the age category 50-55, describes a critical moment she experienced as an undergraduate Bachelor of Music student during the 1980s:

As a student at the University of Durban-Westville I was tutored by an all-white staff. However, this contingent of lecturers also taught at

Natal University in Durban that was better resourced. A private arrangement was made between the deans of both universities that allowed the small group of B Mus students to use the Natal University Music library. However, being Indians we would have to leave by 5pm so as to not be found in a so-called white area after dark. On one of my afternoons spent in the library, being caught up with preparation for an assignment, I lost track of time and looked up to see twilight setting and it was getting on to 6 o'clock.

Deshnie's memory of her experience as an Indian diasporic female during the years of apartheid highlights the way of life for marginalised communities living in South Africa. The white universities had better facilities and, as an Indian, Deshnie was not allowed to be on the premises of the University of Natal after 5pm. Her realisation that she had broken the curfew is reminiscent of the fairytale, Cinderella, where the protagonist had to engender an escape. Deshnie describes how she made her exit:

I grabbed my belongings, hastened down the wooden staircase and bolted for the street. The run down to Sydney Road is a mere flash of memory now as I recall security guards close on my heels.

For Deshnie, this experience was no fairy tale but depicts the harsh realities endured as an Indian diasporic woman living in South Africa during the era of apartheid. Her response indicates the fear of being caught by the guards. Yet the enormity of this experience is ruptured by focusing on the humorous side to the shoes that she was wearing that carried her to the safety of the Indian bus rank. She explains:

Why I wore those in-fashion clogs of the time- I grin at it now... so reminiscent of the Dutch! Well those clogs carried my heaving body down to the Indian bus rank. Standing at length in the relative safety of a packed Unit 7 Indian bus bares its own memories.

The Unit 7 that Deshnie recalls refers to a spatial allocation in Chatsworth, an area previously reserved for the Indian community. Through this memory Deshnie reflects:

Does this lived experience as a student of classical music, more so as an Indian female student, surpass my Indianness or, as I wish to think, has it served to establish and maintain it? Certainly the latter.

Deshnie's memory of this experience highlights that Indianness was maintained through the insular spaces created by apartheid. The opportunity of 'becoming' other was restricted to 'being' Indian during the era of apartheid.

In exploring the experiences of Indian diasporic women living in South Africa, the historical context is a significant factor. In Deshnie's experience, the demise of apartheid paved the way for her rhizomatic rupturing as an Indian female as insular boundaries were forced to give way to the 'other'. She describes this in the following extract:

The second critical moment I would like to describe based on memory was when I was appointed on the management as Head of Department of a former Model C school. I was historically the first non-white member of management in a school with a long English tradition. Furthermore, I had come from another city and was quite the outsider. Although India was not a key referent for me, the Indian township in the area was. I had not known it well and was not from there, but it certainly seemed to raise eyebrows for many who thought I had hailed from there. Whatever perceptions, experiences, thoughts, histories associated within the social dynamics of that township, I shall not fully know. However, during some very turbulent days of adjustment and school transformation, my Indian identity was ruptured by those who believed that my Indianness equalled inferiority and subservience. Being Head of Department, as an Indian woman, came with much patience, tolerance and long-suffering within an all-white environment. However, my expertise, experience, personality and willingness to learn proved over time an unwavering, unchanging resolve for excellence, character and presence for the benefit of my profession. Would I have been any different if I were not Indian? I think not. It is my Indian identity and nature that has shaped and framed much of who I am.

During apartheid, Deshnie's experience of running away from an university

designated for whites after the curfew time was up is contrasted to her being appointed as Head of Department in an all-white staff school, thus rupturing insular spaces. Her application for this position heralds a rhizomatic rupturing from the fear she experienced at during the apartheid days of being found on the premises of a white institution. She relates her 'turbulent' experiences she has had as a result of stereotypical perceptions that whites held regarding Indians by associating them with spatially designated areas reserved for Indians through the Group Areas Act. She maintains that an arborescent thread of being Indian has enabled her 'unwavering, unchanging resolve for excellence, character and presence for the benefit of [her] profession' to rhizomatically assert herself in a changing environment.

As an Indian diasporic woman, apartheid is not the only challenge experienced by Deshnie. Her lived experiences are also influenced by the heritage of patriarchy that still continues to control the lives of Indian women in many parts of the world. She explains the contradictions and ambiguities which confronted her as an Indian woman:

The prominent figures in my life have been my dad and my husband and both have been conservative traditional people who have old school values... a mindset of how an Indian woman must be or conduct herself in terms of relationships. You could not break free in terms of thought because on the one hand you would be disrespecting values and morals and ideals deemed to be important and necessary in terms of who you are in terms of your identity. You would also be regarded in colloquial terms as a 'loose woman'. You would be regarded as being frivolous if you questioned the status quo. You would be regarded as unconventional, untraditional and undisciplined if you broke away from that and actually questioned the values and morals of your upbringing in term of your Indianness. When I say that I mean: Do not question your elders and whatever decision they make. You do not question the hierarchy with a family where the husband is the head of a home and whatever his decisions are spoken or unspoken or whatever his role is, whether you agree with it or not you don't question it. You follow an unspoken ...untainted status quo that has been passed down to you almost inherently internally right.

Deshnie's experiences as an Indian woman are firmly guided by the patriarchs of her family who reflect a strongly arborescent view of the conduct of an Indian woman, especially in terms of relationships. Passivity and obedience are valued by patriarchs who head Indian families. In a patriarchal sense maintaining or bringing honour to one's family is valued. Success of the Indian woman in terms of education is also valued and this contradiction is explained by Deshnie:

Yet there is an expectation from within your family, especially from the patriarchal figures of being a free thinker, being critical, making a difference, being politically aware, being intellectual, being academic in order to bring value to the family. It's almost a given that education, which is highly prized in the Indian home by the dad and the mum but especially the dad, brings honour, respect and dignity. Education is meant to make you a free thinker...That very Indianness that creates your being and sets you free has done just the opposite that made you a slave and victim.

Drawing from her memories as an Indian woman living in South Africa, Deshnie highlights the cultural contradictions which, on one hand, encourage critical thinking as an academic but, on the other hand, encourage passivity and subservience to the influence of patriarchy.

For Deshnie, a rhizomatic rupture was evident when she developed in academia and at that time she indicated that her 'marriage came apart.' Divorce in a patriarchal society is frowned upon and in a sense Deshnie defied both her father and her husband by challenging the status quo of an Indian woman.

### ***Neela: The Gujarati Indian male changed his idea of a wife***

As a Gujarati-speaking first-generation Indian diasporic woman, Neela's fate was almost pre-determined by the normative rules of the closed community in which she grew up. Young women were groomed to take up their positions as wives to Gujarati-speaking men. Such was the destiny of Neela's older sisters. A strange twist had altered Neela's destiny since the young Gujarati males were looking for educated marriage partners. She explained:

When I was growing up in the 1970s, the Gujarati identity was being like kind of bounded and protected so the thought of marrying outside of your caste, outside of your linguistic group, was frowned upon and not tolerated at all. Girls were frequently pulled out of school at the end of primary school to start learning about the house in anticipation of an early marriage. Values came about culturally, whether it came from India or it was from my parents.

What gave me a little bit of an advantage was that the Gujarati Indian male changed his idea of a wife. He did not want an uneducated girl. As much as my parents wanted to pull me out of school, they left me a little longer so that I could have an advantage over other girls.... And of course, they felt very betrayed when I fell in love [with a Muslim] because it was not somebody from the same caste.

From Neela's experience it is apparent that the values of cultural communities were strong influences that sought to maintain the common memory brought from their homeland. Neela's marriage to a Muslim man was indeed a rhizomatic rupture from the expected path of marrying within the same community.

Whilst Neela had shattered the arborescent expectations of the Gujarati community, her marriage presented her with another set of arborescent thinking espoused by that community. She explained:

When I got married, I also wanted to be the good daughter-in-law, which is at odds with being an academic. So if my parents, my husbands' parents, were alive, I would not have been an academic. So my life as an academic began when my daughter finished her schooling and with the death of all these people in the family and that released me from following the path.

From this extract it is evident that patriarchy was intended to be strongly arborescent in nature, demanding a tracing of traditional ways of living. The death of significant others released Neela from that path and enabled her to rhizomatically map her own career path.

In describing her development as an academic she related that she had support from her husband who looked at it from a singular perspective:

His thinking was, 'If I empower my wife, she would work in the university and earn more money' without him thinking how that would change my thinking about marriage, life and children. What he did not anticipate is how I would shift socially, culturally and politically.

Neela's university education and development in academia reveals another rupture or line of flight in her experience as an Indian diasporic woman in multiple ways: socially, culturally and politically.

Neela also shared her memories of her lived experiences in South Africa which highlighted the cultural history of a land once divided to keep its inhabitants separate. She explained that 'during apartheid at a time when we were not sort of accepted as South Africans and it was almost a sense of being in a no-man's-land ... not in India ... in South Africa, but not in South Africa in a sense because you were not white'.

As an Indian diasporic woman, Neela felt the shunning of the apartheid regime, in which 'the hierarchical construction of race in South Africa and its justification resulted in race being the central tool in the manifestation of a segregated society' (Moodley 2013:2). During the years of apartheid, this rejection was experienced by Neela as rootlessness or a lack of belonging.

For many Indians living in South Africa, India represented the motherland, a sense of belonging and was imagined with much nostalgia. Like most South Africans, Neela visited India with much anticipated hope. She shared her memory of her first visit to India.

I went to India in 1975 and I said: I don't belong here. There was an intense shattering of who I was. We never had family here and suddenly to go and meet your family and still not feel that part of that family so that idea of being in no-man's-land was intensified.

Neela's first visit to India dispelled the imagined sense of belonging to the motherland thereby compounding the feeling of a lack of belonging.

After the dismantling of apartheid, Neela experienced a greater sense of belonging to South Africa:

Strangely enough I went back to India on a conference and this was after the fall of apartheid, and feeling very proud to reclaim the South African identity. They played the Indian national anthem and I knew at that time that I am not 'Indian,' I am South African because I felt more emotional when the South African national anthem was played.

For Neela, like so many other Indians living in South Africa, the collapse of apartheid freed them from the memory of an insular and arborescent identity of being 'Indian' to a rhizomatic 'becoming' within the broader identity of being proudly South African.

### ***Devina: Being voiceless to asserting an Indian voice***

Devina is a fourth-generation Indian diasporic academic born in the mid-1960s during the apartheid era and raised in a working-class environment.

Devina's lived experiences in South Africa, the land of her birth, were marked by the historical and contextual realities of the social engineering of apartheid that was intent on keeping races separate. As a result, she lived an insulated life in an area designated for Indians, went to an Indian school, studied at an 'Indian university' and taught at an 'Indian school'. She recalls that her marginal position as 'black' was accepted within the context of the historical-political stance of the country which encouraged subservience and fear of authority.

Her first critical moment as an Indian diasporic woman was when she was offered a secondment to lecture in a previously 'whites-only' teachers' training college during the mid-1990s. This experience was indeed a cultural shock for her. Her Indianness in a mainly white, racially constituted environment for the first time destabilised her notion of being Indian. She questioned the adequacy of her shared memory of living in an insulated community as she tried to 'fit into' a community which espoused western values regarding speech, dress and religion. She indicated that she felt 'voiceless'. That was an uprooting experience for Devina. She felt dislocated

for the first time having left her cocoon of Indianness which left her feeling ‘incomplete and vulnerable.’

This cocoon of being Indian insulated her from others in South Africa. As a university-qualified teacher, she held a position of strength within the Indian community. Her assimilation into a multicultural community was a traumatising experience and she felt inadequate, for not having had access to what Bourdieu (1986) describes as the ‘cultural capital’ of the white world.

In her journey, Devina also observed that those colleagues who had obtained Master’s degrees exuded confidence. She realised the need for academic status and went on to upgrade her qualifications to a doctoral level.

A second critical moment for Devina was during the writing of her PhD. Once again, she experienced the weight of the dominance of white culture until she decided that she was going to make her voice as an Indian heard. A significant shift came through her PhD work when she chose to deliberately use Sanskrit words. She explained: ‘If academia can use Greek words like *Telos*, then why could I not use the word *dharma*?’ She drew from her Hindu background, and included theories of the soul in her PhD.

She was warned by her supervisor, a white male, that it could compromise her obtaining her PhD. She asserted herself for the first time as an Indian living in democratic South Africa knowing that she wanted to be true to herself without a care for the consequences. Her success was doubly rewarding since she left her mark of Indianness on her PhD.

Through memory work Devina was able to re-trace what she deemed critical moments as an Indian diasporic living in South Africa. She revealed sensitive moments when she questioned the value of the arborescent or deep-rooted memory of being Indian when she attempted to ‘fit into’ a multi-cultural environment. Her experience of other cultures was limited during the apartheid years and her first multi-cultural encounter signalled the need for new lines of flight towards academia to enhance her possibilities of survival in the field of education. She saw the need for academic studies and subscribed to it even though it reflected strong western values and culture. Her rhizomatic development was most evident during her PhD studies when she chose not to follow the tracings of typical western notions of acceptability and asserted her cultural identity as an Indian through her use of selected Sanskrit words such as ‘dharma’ instead of using its Greek or English equivalents. This signified her ‘becoming as anti-memory’ because she did

not anchor herself arborescently within western notions of acceptability in the academic field but rather chose to ‘stand out’ which is rhizomatic in relation to her initial concern to ‘fit in’

***Jayshree: I am like a chameleon. I have so many different shades***

Jayshree is a fourth generation Indian woman living in South Africa, whose biggest challenge is living by the values of the Indian community where patriarchy is of high importance. As a result she admitted that her lived experiences were marked by masquerades and pretensions. She explained:

I am very aware that I am an Indian woman in my community. My Indianness is very predominant at home – even in the way I bring up my children. There are certain things that they have to do, that are not western at all. There are things that I have learnt from my mom and dad, my grandparents and some of those things I have difficulty explaining to them [her children] why they have to do it that way.

Although she endeavoured to uphold her Indian roots and values, she was challenged in India during her recent visit there. She explained:

I found that because I had gone on holiday without my husband, all of them in that little community [in India] had looked at me as if something was wrong, you know: ‘How can you bring the children alone?’ and I was questioned a lot on that and it was the first time that I thought that people are frowning upon me travelling alone and I had three girls with me. That is one of the things that I brought back from India. It got me thinking about the decision I took to travel alone with my children.

Jayshree made a concerted effort to uphold the memory of her Indian heritage in the way she raised her children in South Africa. Her visit to India with her three daughters signified a rhizomatic rupture from the traditional patriarchal cultural ways by travelling without her husband. This was a critical moment

for Jayshree who had to reflect on ways in which her life in South Africa had ruptured rhizomatically from some practices still valued in India.

One of the areas that Jayshree hid from the community was the change in her family dynamics with regard to the reversal of roles between her husband and herself. One of the cultural expectations of an Indian woman is that she should cook the meals for the family. In her becoming a professional, Jayshree has relegated this task to her husband. This, however, was done in secrecy from the rest of the extended family to protect the identity of her husband as patriarch of the family. Although Jayshree was a key decision maker within the confines of the nuclear family, she took on a pretentious role as a subservient wife. She explained:

So within our closed doors, we make certain decisions. I would decide what we are doing. But really when we go out into the community or with family, I would step back and say that it is his decision and that is the decision we are taking. I do that unconsciously actually. I can switch sides so quickly.

... I have watched my husband take offense during the 23 years of marriage. He does not have a problem with how I behave in my family. But in his family an example would be that I know now not to tell his mother that he cooks at home. Yes, he does (laughter). He cleans up, he picks the clothes and he loads the machine. But those are the things that we don't divulge. But only because of the way he responds when his mother says, 'Oh, you cook!' Then I know that those are the things I should not be sharing. I certainly would not tell my own mother that my husband does the cooking. She often asks about the cooking, he [her husband] does it or my daughter – so I don't even do the traditional thing at home. But I live the pretence of doing it.

In her becoming as an Indian diasporic woman, Jayshree has rhizomatically ruptured from her traditional roles. Her dilemma lies in her attempts to mask this multiplicity or line of flight from the expected path and display that which is expected of her in terms of cultural norms rather than to assert her break with traditions.

Marriage out of one's caste system or religion was generally unacceptable within the Indian community. Within this context Jayshree, who was born to a Hindi-speaking family whose ancestors came from North India, chose to marry a Tamil-speaking man whose ancestors were South Indian. She indicated that her father was a liberal man who warned her to think carefully about her choice but did not object to her marriage. It was her mother who had difficulty in coming to terms with her father's decision to allow her to make the choice. Jayshree explained that although both her husband and she were Hindus, the customs and rituals of people from a Tamil-speaking background were very different from those of people from a Hindi-speaking background. Over the years she has given in to accepting the customs of her husband's culture albeit without belief in them. Through the years she has had to make several compromises regarding her beliefs. Recently, however, as she has become more critical through academia, she is now asserting her beliefs to include some North Indian customs. She explained:

We have had so many family members pass away and we are discussing it. He [her husband] is quite fixed about what will happen for me and I am quite fixed about what will happen for me [customs relating to final rites upon death]. At the moment the children can't understand that I still want certain North Indian rituals to be done for me because I was born that way – I may have married out. The children are saying that I have made all these sacrifices all these years and embraced so many different things, so why now and why this? This is difficult to get them to understand that I am like a chameleon. I have so many different shades really that I can change and they are not really sure what I am. I can be a very traditional South Indian wife and sometimes I want to assert my North Indian heritage.

Jayshree's North Indian heritage is deeply or arborescently rooted within her. Although she may have practiced some of the South Indian rituals and customs, there is little faith in that. Her children's questioning of 'so why now and why this' alludes to Jayshree's strong identity as a person of North Indian ancestry. Despite living in the rainbow nation of multi-cultural, multi-racial South Africa, she holds the long-term memory of her heritage

arborescently. Yet she chose to rhizomatically rupture from traditional roles of her choice (such as cooking) which is valued even within her own cultural heritage. Her comparison of herself to a chameleon is indicative of her adaptability in her becoming as well as her confusion.

## **Discussion**

The findings indicate that, while some traces of arborescence are evident, the lived experiences of the four Indian academic women are far from being structured, fixed and linear but have developed in unstable, metamorphic and even contradictory ways against the background of various ideologies, namely apartheid, democracy and patriarchy. The lived experiences of the Indian diasporic academic women demonstrate a strong resonance with the rhizomatic principles of multiplicity and rupture and the mapping of uncharted paths.

One of the contextual realities of the people of the Indian diaspora is that, during the days of indentured labour and since, people from various places in India, with different ethnicities, religions and languages settled in South Africa. In addition to enduring the struggle to live in freedom during the days of apartheid, these groups of Indians were ironically committed to keeping their own ethnicities, language groups and castes insular. Marriage out of one's caste system or religion was unacceptable. Two of the participants, Neela and Jayshree, chose to rhizomatically rupture these traditions by marrying out of their caste.

Neela's Gujarati heritage had set the points of an arborescent system by predetermining the fate of young Gujarati females as prospective wives to Gujarati-speaking males within a patriarchal society. Neela's becoming was rhizomatic since she ruptured the arborescent system by falling in love with her marriage partner rather than succumbing to the fixed tradition of arranged marriages. Neela further ruptured rhizomatically by marrying out of her caste thereby venturing out of the fixed points instead of adhering to the memory created by that cultural society. She also indicated that her entry into academia was only possible as a result of the death of the elders in her family. In a sense, these elders held the memory of a set culture to be lived within the structure of an arborescent framework. Therefore the passing away of the elders in her family created an anti-memory of a fixed path thereby allowing her to become an academic.

As a Hindu, Jayshree chose to marry a Hindu who was not of the language group of her North Indian ancestry. Although she was a fourth generation Indian diasporic living in South Africa, the cultural tradition of marrying within one's own ethnic and language group was arborescently fixed and valued. Her choosing to marry out of her ethnic group signified a line of flight from the expected path. Although she had adhered to the cultural ways of her South Indian Tamil-speaking husband, in some ways she still anchored arborescently to the identity of her North Indian Hindi-speaking cultural group. For her the hyphenated identity was amplified. Being an Indian diasporic living in South Africa presented its own challenges as she sought to hold on to 'Indian values.' True to her own description of herself – 'I am like a chameleon' – she chose some aspects of holding onto the traditional role and dismisses others. She kept up the masquerade by playing down her role in her family's decision making process so that her husband can uphold his dignity as head of the family in a patriarchal community. She chose to relinquish her traditional role of cooking for her family while ensuring that the matriarchs of her family (both her mother and mother-in-law) were not informed of this.

Deshnie's highlighted the Indian cultural contradictions which, on one hand, promoted critical thinking as an academic but, on the other hand, encouraged passivity and subservience to the influence of patriarchy. Deshnie's divorce from her husband of twenty-five years signified a rhizomatic rupture from fixed traditions. Her rhizomatic becoming signified an anti-memory of the traditional notion of marriage as 'until death does us part.' Another rupture in Deshnie's becoming was the anti-memory of the historical trauma of running away from a white institution (the university) during the days of apartheid. She chose to look back at the event with humour by recalling the escape she made in her Dutch clogs. In post-apartheid South Africa, her application for a management post in a former white school, however, signified her willingness to traverse uncharted paths. It can be described as rhizomatic.

The principle of rupture in relation to the lived experiences of the participants signifies defining or critical moments when these women 'broke' or 'shattered' images of being typically Indian, which can be related to the heritage of patriarchy, contextual realities of apartheid, its abolishment or any other individual matter.

For Neela, apartheid signified 'being in a no-man's-land ... not in

India ... in South Africa but not in South Africa'. This indicated a sense of insecurity, uncertainty and ambivalence experienced by Neela in her land of birth. The dismantling of apartheid resulted in a rupture of how Neela experienced South Africa bringing about greater certainty. She felt a strong sense of belonging to South Africa when she heard its national anthem being sung at a conference in India, thus affirming her identity as a South African of Indian descent.

In the act of keeping separate, apartheid contributed to the social and cultural alienation of Indians from the white race group in South Africa. For Devina the insulation of different races according to the Group Areas Act meant that she did not have access to the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) of the dominant white culture. Her initial interaction with whites presented an upheaval for her and she felt 'inassimilable' into this new ground of multi-cultures. Her strategy was first to upgrade her qualifications to match those of the dominant white culture. Her PhD studies signified another critical moment resulting in a new line of flight where she sought to rupture and challenge traditional notions of academia with its strong western bias by incorporating Sanskrit terms from her Hindu culture.

Overall the findings indicate that, for these Indian diasporic women, becoming has been rhizomatic where they have chosen to chart their own maps instead of tracing the already established paths of a shared memory. The findings also indicate that, for these women, there are still traces of arborescence in selected experiences, affirming what Chowdhury (2008) terms a hyphenated identity where diasporics retain some shared memories from the motherland and assert the identity of their land of birth.

## **Conclusion**

Through memory work, this paper has contributed to the global interest in diaspora that seeks to understand the lived experiences of Indian diasporic communities living in South Africa. The qualitative study of the lived experiences of four Indian diasporic academic women has highlighted the symbolic dimension of the interaction between 'memory and metamorphosis.' It has also highlighted the way in which memory has shaped the stories shared by the participants and has emphasised the ways in which Indian diasporic women have selectively chosen to rupture from some of the cultural memories inherited from their motherland whilst holding onto others.

The value of using the theoretical lens of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic and arborescent models to explain the lived experiences of Indian diasporic academic women is to acknowledge that 'there are knots of arborescence in rhizomes and rhizomatic offshoots in roots'. The findings also indicate that while traces of arborescence are evident, the lived experiences of these Indian academic women are far from being structured, fixed and linear but have developed in unstable, metamorphic, and even contradictory ways against the background of various ideologies, namely apartheid, democracy and patriarchy.

The rhizomatic model explains the lived experiences of Indian diasporic academic women as a process of sustaining itself through perpetual collapsing and construction. The collapsing of cultural traditions regarding the memory of patriarchal practices of marriage and the role of the women are evident. Apartheid in a sense fostered the memory of Indianness by creating insular spaces. In post-apartheid South Africa, the women were able to metamorphose themselves through asserting their Indian diasporic identities in spaces that were previously not accessible. Against this sporadic rhizomatic growth, there are traces of arborescence emerging from these subjects' long-term memory (regarding family, race or society) that foregrounds these experiences.

As Indian diasporics, these women have experienced the constant tension between holding onto cultural memory and their own metamorphosis. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the line system of becoming is opposed to the point system of memory. Becoming is the movement by which the line frees itself from the point. This becoming is an anti-memory. Can the Indian diasporic free itself from cultural memory of the motherland?

## References

- Amin, N. & D. Govinden 2012. *Sari Stories. Fragmentary Images of Indian Women*. In Moletsane, R., C. Mitchell & A. Smith (eds.): *Was it Something I Wore? Dress, Identity, Materiality*. Cape Town: HSRC Press. Available at: [www.hsrcpress.co.za](http://www.hsrcpress.co.za). (Accessed on 5 June 2013.)
- Appadurai, A. 2003. *Disjuncture and Difference*. In Braziel, J.E. & A. Mannur (eds.): *Theorizing Diaspora*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

- B' Hahn, C. 2001. Be the Change you Wish to See: An Interview with Arun Gandhi. *Reclaiming Children and Youth* [Bloomington] 10/1: 6. Available at: [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mahatma\\_Gandhi](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi). (Accessed on 2 December 2014.)
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. The Forms of Capital. In Richardson, J.C. (ed.): *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc.
- Brazier, J.E. & A. Mannur 2003. Nation, Migration, Globalisation: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies. In Brazier, J.E. & A. Mannur (eds.): *Theorizing Diaspora*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Chase, S.E. 2008. Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches and Voices. In Denzin, N.K. & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.): *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. London: Sage Publications.
- Chowdhury, A. 2008. *Horizons of Memory: A Global Processual Study of Cultural Memory and Identity of the South Asian Indentured labour Diaspora in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean*. PhD thesis. Washington State University.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion & K. Morrison 2000. *Research Methods in Education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Denzin, N.K. & Y.S. Lincoln 2008. Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In Denzin, N.K. & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.): *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. London: Sage Publications.
- Govender, D.S. & R. Sookrajh 2013. Theorising the Lived Experiences of Indian Diasporic Academic Women: Stoic Arborescence or Rupturing Rhizomes? *Man in India* 23,4: 557-575.
- HLCID. Report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora 2002. Chapter 7, South Africa. Available at: [www.indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter7.pdf](http://www.indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter7.pdf). (Accessed on 14 June 2013.)
- Landy, F., B. Maharaj & H. Mainet-Valleix 2003. Are People of Indian Origin (PIO) 'Indian'? A Case Study of South Africa. *Elsevier Geoforum* 35: 203-215.
- Maharaj, B. & A. Desai 2009. 'After the Rainbow': South Africans and Ra-

- cial Conflict. In Chattopadhyaya, D.P. (ed.): *Interpreting the Indian Diaspora. Lessons from History and Contemporary Politics*. Volume 10, Part 8. New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers Pty. Ltd.
- Mazzei, L.A. & K. McCoy 2010. Thinking with Deleuze in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23,5: 503-509.
- Mitchell, C. & S. Weber 1999. *Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers: Beyond Nostalgia*. London: Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.
- Moodley, N. 2013. Race, Representation and the Crisis of Democracy: An Evaluation of the Works of two Artists of Indian Descent in South Africa. *Man in India* 23,4: 577-590.
- Nelson Mandela Quotes. Available at: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/278812>. (Accessed on 2 December 2014.)
- Presaud, P. 2013. Hyphenated Hindus: A Study of the Development of the Indo-Caribbean Identity. *Man in India* 23,4: 41-559.
- Stake, R.E. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research*. California: Sage Publications.
- Thomas, D. 1995. *Teachers' Stories*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Yin, R.K. 2009. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Sage Publications.

D. (Sagree) Govender  
School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
[sagree@the-alchemist.co.za](mailto:sagree@the-alchemist.co.za)

R. Sookrajh  
Education Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
[sookrajhre@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:sookrajhre@ukzn.ac.za)

# **What Happens in the Forest? Memory, Trauma, Repression and Resilience amongst Congolese Refugees Living in Durban, South Africa**

**Alain Tschudin**

## **Abstract**

A project entitled ‘Dialogics and the pursuit of solidarity’ brings together Congolese refugees and Zulu street traders and students who reside in the inner city of Durban, South Africa. The first phase was referred to as ‘Voices’ and allowed participants to share their unique life-stories with us. Our adult female Congolese participants reported having suffered experiences of violence, most extreme, before leaving the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Several of the men referred to traumatic incidents that were endured ‘in the forest’, but one of these, an elderly gentleman, referred to these as ‘unspeakable’. What happens in the forest, and why are these memories so unbearable? Is it a case of what transpires in the forest remains in the forest? Or is it that these experiences remain repressed in the mind; geographically remote from the forest, but embodied as an ever-present menace if revealed or exposed? Despite the immense trauma that has been lived by our participants, our study indicates a tremendous resilience on their part and an adaptability to life contexts that remain hostile, and at best uncertain.

**Keywords:** memory, DRC, forest, trauma, survival, resilience

## **Introduction**

The forest is not an equatorial forest, like you might imagine it to be. It houses villages, with no electricity and lots of

trees, far from the city. When the Rwandan troops and Kabila's rebel soldiers started attacking Bukavu, we fled westward to the forests in our thousands. The Hutus were already entrenched there and we had to pay them homage to cross bridges over water: food, money, clothes. Some of us only had bread. When the bombing started the Hutus would run with us, deeper and deeper into the forest. It was madness. Terrible things happened there; rape, killing, anything and everything taken by force, powerlessness. Babies were smashed to a pulp in front of their parents, mothers raped in their homes, in front of their families. I managed to return to our family home after about 100km, but others continued for hundreds of kilometres (D.M. 28).

This is one of the memories recounted to me of the period 1996-97, during the first Congolese War, by one of our participants, from South Kivu on the eastern boundary of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He has lived in Durban, South Africa, as a political refugee since 2003 and we have been working together since 2011 on a research intervention and community engagement initiative. One of our collaborative aims is to transform *xenophobia*, or hatred of the other (South Africa's scourge following the 2008 attacks) into *xenophilia*, or friendship with the other, through a phased, dialogical approach that mutually sensitises 'self' to 'other' and 'other' to 'self', over time. We engaged with 24 participants comprising gender-balanced and equal numbers of Congolese refugees and local (Zulu) South African citizens. The current paper is drawn from the narratives and observations emerging from one-on-one interviews with our research team.

Consider the instance of the elderly gentleman referred to in the abstract above. Upon recounting his traumatic experiences in the DRC, his dignified exterior and almost overly pronounced 'poker-face' are suddenly shattered. He becomes emotional and upon recalling the forest, he freezes. It is as if what has happened there, or rather, what it represents, is unspeakable, in another world. It is our concern to attempt to enter that world in order to better understand the relationship between violence, trauma, memory and resilience.

First we must turn to memory. Philippe Denis (2008:14) refers to the recent ‘flooding’ of academic journals with memory-related research. This surge in the uptake of interest with memory is not coincidental. Generally, the post-Cold War era has witnessed an increase in intra-state conflicts with devastating effects and a sweeping traumatic aftermath, both individually and collectively. Obvious examples from the 1990s include Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia. Certainly in the case of transitional societies entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as South Africa, the place of memory became pivotal to the agenda of change and transformation (see Colvin 2005; Denis & Ntsimane 2008).

In our attempts at ‘mapping memory’, therefore, Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz recognize that memory, in its ‘social location’, lies at the nexus of history, politics and ethics (2010:3). It is thus necessary to remain vigilant of the histories of remembering and forgetting, to accommodate various theoretical approaches whilst acknowledging limitations to analysis; there does not appear to be one ‘hold-all’ in this terrain.

Oral historian Sean Field notes that, ‘The dialectic of remembering *and* forgetting is not simply unavoidable; it is fundamental to constructing and maintaining self and identity.’ He continues to make the interesting suggestion that, ‘the notion of ‘memory work’ compels us to consider how people ‘work through’ the dialectic of remembering and forgetting (and silencing or denying) memories’ (2007a:21-22).

In picking up on the idea of the ‘memory work’, I would like to suggest a comparison of the ‘memory work’ with the ‘dream work’, as developed by Sigmund Freud. Given the significant contributions made by psychology and psychoanalysis to memory studies (see Walker 2005; Maw 2007) and mindful of potential challenges (see Radstone & Schwartz 2010) this proposition seems to offer a reasonable avenue for exploration. Field for one recognizes that ‘oral historians and psychotherapists share an emphasis on the importance of attentive listening and empathy’ (2008:159). More specifically, if one sets memory in relation to trauma, Colvin (2005:155) suggests that some engagement with ‘the languages and practices of psychiatry and psychotherapy’ is unavoidable, since ‘stories of ‘trauma’ are always already implicated in some way in a specific perspective on psychological suffering and recovery.’

As to concerns surrounding the application of a so-called ‘Western’ framework of analysis to an ‘African’ experiential reality, it would be prudent

to note that one of the pioneering ‘parents’ of an African critical approach, the formidable Frantz Fanon, himself emerged, albeit not uncritically, out of the psychoanalytic tradition and continued to adapt and use this method creatively in his own reflections (see Fanon 1990).

Hence, on the contrary to any ‘Euro-’, ‘Western-’ or other ‘sceptic’ school, in the quest for restorative solidarity and to build ‘a new history’, Passerini (2005:250-251) recognises the value of psychoanalysis in ‘pushing the bounds of disciplinary limits’ without any ‘specificity’ to European memory, but rather for human experience at large. It is in this spirit of engagement that the current approach seeks to advance a critical inclusivity that in turn can promote universal solidarity with respecting local particularly.

### **‘Memory Work’: An Entry-point to Reaching the Unreachable?**

We all have memories, just as we all have dreams. I would like to consider, momentarily, the ‘dream work’, before moving to discuss particular instances of violence and traumatic memories. To gloss a complex process, Freud recognises that the threats contained in the unconscious must somehow be filtered in order not to disturb the consciousness of the individual concerned. Dreams, which contain undesired wish fulfilment and which do not obey the parameters of moral acceptability are transformed from the latent dream to the manifest dream through what is termed the ‘dream-work’ (Freud 1991:204), in order to protect the individual from the trauma of the primal realm. The counter-movement, Freud suggests is the work of interpretation, which ‘seeks to undo the dream-work’ (1991:204). Earlier, Sigmund Freud noted that ‘interpreting means finding a hidden sense in something’ (1991:115).

Three points pertaining to the dream-work may prove useful for exploration with respect to memory. First, it entails *condensation*, by which process the manifest dream has a smaller content than the latent one and represents ‘an abbreviated translation’ (1991:205), which results in a fusion or a blurring vagueness. Next is *displacement*, which operates through censorship. This censorship operates via the substitution of something with only an unintelligible allusion to it (unlike waking associations) and

secondly, by shifting the emphasis from that which is important to that which is tangential (1991:208-209). Finally, and most psychologically interesting to Freud, is the *transformation* of thoughts into visual images. He argues that via this process, the dream-work ‘submits thoughts to a regressive treatment and undoes their development’; our thoughts originally arose from sensory images and it is thence that they return (1991:215). Upon deeper investigation into the interpretation of dreams, the meaning of representation and representability become pivotal, as developed by Freud elsewhere (1991b). This too, I shall argue, is critical to our topic.

Let us apply the above concepts to the experience of our protagonist who freezes after mentioning the forest. The forest somehow appears to represent the sum total of his experience: everything appears to have been shrunk or condensed into it. A tree or a wooded area might not be the most direct trigger to – or catalyst of – a traumatic memory, in this sense it represents a tangential allusion to it. However, in the case of some other victims of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, of course, it may serve as a literal symbol of their torture, as in the example of a mother who had her legs tied to two small trees whilst she was gang raped by armed militants (see Harvard 2010).

By zoning into – or out of ?– the forest, it was as if the man was allowing himself to be distracted by that which in fact does not appear to have been central. It is thus that disturbing memories, which often for victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) manifest as flashbacks or images, manifest as such and not as thoughts – for it is this regression to a more primitive survival state, such as experienced during times of primeval trauma that is precisely referred to as ‘unspeakable’ horror because it predates language. As Roberta Culbertson (1995:178) recognises, ‘because victimisation is communicated, if at all, only in the most primitive ways when it is occurring (as in cries of pain), any discussion of violence is always, whatever the problems, a discussion based on memory, in that it is about a kind of past knowledge.’

## **Violence, Memory and the ‘Survivor’s Paradox’**

Culbertson (1995:169) identifies a ‘curious circumstance’ that pertains to victims who have survived episodes of violence. As she recognises, the

victim mostly remains silent about the experience, which albeit muted, 'remains somehow fundamental to his (her) existence, and to his unfolding or enfolded conception of himself.' Through suppression or repression, the self is hidden, or perhaps shielded from its devastating experience. Notwithstanding this silence, the survivor is left with the memory of the event, which as Culbertson suggests, 'seems both absent and entirely too present'. Although they manifest themselves as 'bits of memory' and are 'undeniable presences', she writes of their 'aura of unbelievability': though presenting themselves as clearly past, real, and fully embodied, they appear in non-narrative forms that seem to meet no standard test for truth or comprehensibility' (1995:169).

This brings us to what might be referred to as the 'survivor's paradox': 'to live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable.' This phenomenon, Culbertson argues, 'obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech and so seems as unreachable, as other, as these, and as difficult to communicate and interpret, even to oneself. It is a paradox of the distance of one's own experience' (1995:170).

Whilst in broad agreement with the notion of the 'survivor's paradox', we have suggested something quite different from our own analysis; I have argued that it is precisely because memory 'obeys the logic of dreams' that it is reachable. Akin to the 'dream work' that allows the unreachable to be reached in dreams, so too does the 'memory work' enable a framework for interpretation to occur; hence enabling the unreachable to be approached, even if never fully reached. The reason for the incomplete bridging, for want of a better metaphor, exists on account of the particular and peculiar nature of trauma, the experience of which serves to maintain the disconnect between the experience and the memory thereof.

This tension leads us into the domain of 'contestation' and specifically, into what Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (2005) refer to as 'Contested Pasts'. Critical of simple 'traumatic memory theory' explanations, they take the more nuanced line that such theories are premised upon narratives that describe the psychological ramifications of a 'real event'. This becomes problematic, however, when set into play with whether the event actually occurred or not, or differed from narrativ accounts; hence invoking, 'the context of a contested past, in which neither their events nor their meanings can straightforwardly be known' (2005:6).

## **Trauma: The Paradox of Destruction and Survival**

For Cathy Caruth (1993:24), the problem of trauma is simultaneously one of ‘destruction’ and also, ‘fundamentally, an enigma of survival’. It is in ‘recognising traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognise the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience’. As she observes, “‘trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience’”. The problem of survival, in trauma, thus emerges specifically as the question: “‘what does it mean for consciousness to survive?’” (1993:24).

She proposes that the cause of trauma is ‘a shock that appears to work very much like a threat to the body’s spatial integrity, but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time’ (1993:25). The issue is that the mind registers the threat ‘one moment too late’ – its shock therefore is in missing the experience of the threat of death (see also Caruth 2001). It is thus that the experience of waking from the dream and coming into consciousness is associated with the reliving of trauma. Caruth suggests that ‘the trauma consists not only in having confronted death, but in having survived, precisely, without knowing it’; hence on her reading, ‘Repetition ... is the very attempt to claim one’s own survival. Violence cannot therefore merely be located in past destruction, but in an ‘ongoing survival’ that belongs to the future... because violence inhabits, incomprehensibly, the very survival of those who have lived beyond it’ (1993:25).

In a subsequent development of her thinking, Caruth (2001) proposes that the repetitive re-enactment of the memory of a painful reality may translate into a creative act of invention, through what she refers to as the ‘language of trauma’. She observes that ‘in the life drive, then life itself, and the language of creativity, begin as an act that bears witness to the past even by turning from it that bears witness to death by bearing witness to the possibility of origination in life... The language of the life drive does not simply point backward, that is, but bears witness to the past by pointing to the future’ (2001:14).

Yet, Culbertson raises a conundrum: ‘if violence leaves memories of wounding and transcendence that for different reasons have little connection with language, then how can this so-called memory be communicated? How can we – survivors and non-survivors alike – come to know anything about

violence and its effects if we encounter fundamental difficulties in describing these effects?’ (1995:179).

The answer:

what we normally call memory is not the remembered at all of course, but a socially accepted fabrication, a weaving together of the thin, sometimes delicate and intertwined threads of true memory ... so that these might be told. Memory is always in the end subjected to those conventions which define the believable. Often then there is a divide – between what is known and what can be said, or if said, made sense of, legitimated as part of a story’ (ibid.).

As such, Walker (2005:107) asserts that an ‘imagined scene’, one that appears to be barely, if at all, linked to the veracity of a real event, is somehow linked with that event. On this account, the ‘traumatic paradox’ points to ‘the inherent contradiction of traumatic memory... traumatic events can and do result in the very amnesias and mistakes in memory that are generally considered, outside the theory of traumatic memory, to undermine their claim to veracity’ (2005:107).

Hence, as Field and Swanson (2007:10) recognise, memory analysis involves the interpretation of myths, amongst others, not as a trade-off in establishing fact or fiction, but rather, as ‘internalized from popular mythologies or created with people’s memories and provide frames of understanding or ways of coping.’

## **Memory Narratives, Hermeneutics and Attestation**

Indeed, many survivors of trauma fear that their stories will not be understood, or at a more disturbing level, that they will not be believed or fail to cope. This can result in re-traumatisation and further alienation or victimisation. As Kelly McKinney (2007:287) argues, ‘both the registration of a traumatic event and the memory work that happens after are interpretive, culturally constructed, and socially mediated processes.’ Rather than evaluating the memory as accurate or inaccurate, or of prioritising ‘juridical’ memory over ‘therapeutic’ memory, she suggests that the memory narrative is ‘literally’ embraced.

One might add that a hermeneutical approach would emphasize an exploration of what meaning or purpose the memory would serve. Berger (1997:572), for one, recognises that ‘trauma’ is not synonymous with disaster:

‘The idea of catastrophe as trauma provides a method of interpretation, for it posits that the effects of an event may be dispersed and manifested in many forms not obviously associated with the event. Moreover, this dispersal occurs across time, so that an event experienced as shattering may only produce its full impact years later. This representational and temporal hermeneutics of the symptom has powerful implications for contemporary theory.’

Narrative can be held as ‘an accounting time of events in time’ that limits what can be told; it also speaks to the heart of the problem of violence for as Culbertson notices, ‘narrative requires a narrator, but the destruction of the self at the root of much violence makes this... nearly impossible’ (1995:191). Hence, ‘the survivor survives twice: survives the violation; and survives the death that follows it, reborn as a new person, the one who tells the story. Hence the compulsion to tell’ (1995:191). However, this ‘reclaiming of the self’ has an opportunity cost – certain dimensions of truth are lost in its telling.

In terms of the complexity of dealing with traumatic memory, McKinney (2007:266) notes that certain clinicians ‘subordinate social needs of clients to the ethical call to bear witness’; they fail to take account of the ‘moral complexity of political violence, and lose sight of the understanding that traumatic memories are politically and culturally mediated’. Such an approach is counter-productive, serving to deny their agency instead of restoring it (2007:267). Moreover, she asserts that clinical practice with trauma survivors predominantly assumes that ‘every client holds some sort of traumatic memory... that by definition disrupts the continuity of identity or self but can also ground the survivor’s identity or self. Each person has a unique story, a story of memories that both construct and represent the self at reflected and unreflected levels’ (2007:270).

Paul Ricoeur, with his seminal philosophical writings on time, narrative and hermeneutics, came to identify the key importance of ‘attestation’ as bearing witness to the truth, in his ethical framework, as

presented in *Oneself as another* (1992). I have detailed the significance of this move elsewhere (Tschudin 2013). Suffice it for our current purposes to note McKinney's observation that in order to bear such witness, the client 'must remember'; thus affording a pivotal role to 'the memory constituted within the therapeutic construct of the trauma' (2007:277). As she recognises, given its impact on identity, trauma ruptures the continuity of the self and of the community, the fall-out becoming greater when the event is denied or ignored by others or the self:

'Memory then becomes the vehicle through which identity can be reinstated. Private trauma and personal memory are thus connected with public and collective memory, simply in the act of telling and receiving, if there is a mutual awareness among the bearers of witness that the trauma occurred within a historical and collective context' (2007:266).

It is thus that we conclude with the leading role of memory in the reclaiming of identity. Different examples exist of the use of a dialogical approach to recovery and positive social change amongst those who are traumatised by violence and displaced, either within or beyond national borders. Recently Hermenau *et al.* (2013) documented the use of narrational therapy with child soldiers in the DRC, while Emmanuel Ntakarutimana (2008) documents the use of *ubuntu* in dealing with those affected by ethnic violence within Burundi. Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2006) considers the profound challenges associated with urban refugees living in Kampala, Uganda, with the related title of interest, 'I find myself as someone who is in the forest'.

## **So What Happens in the Forest? Survival, Repression and Resilience**

Annete Lanjouw (2003) suggests that while the African Great Lakes crisis has disrupted life in countries such as the DRC and Rwanda since the 1990s, the legacy of conflict reaches back into the colonial and pre-colonial past. She notices that much of the assistance post the Rwandan genocide has been provided to refugees and those who have been displaced, whilst many of the communities receiving these have been 'far worse' off (2003:93). On one day alone in July 1994, 500,000 refugees arrived in Goma, DRC from Rwanda, with another 300,000 arriving within a few days, finding shelter in the

Virunga National Park. The UNHCR Global Report (2000) is not exactly flattering about the level of refugee support provided to the DRC.

Indeed, the pre-existing poverty and lack of infrastructure and development have only been exacerbated by the devastation of war. Lanjouw records the profoundly negative impact of the war and resultant displacement on the environment and protected areas because of necessary human encroachment for survival or opportunistic exploitation of natural resources. As Draulans and Van Krunkelsven (2002) observe, the DRC is home to more than half of Africa's remaining forests; the impact of soldiers, refugees and the local people fleeing into the forest to avoid this influx and to survive off natural resources is astounding.

A 1998 World Resources Institute report already identified the problematic geo-politics involved, with the DRC serving as a staging ground for Cold War proxy battles and immense commercial exploitation, resource plunder and kleptocratic rule. Almost ten years on, Mulvagh (2007) identified the wholesale abdication of responsibility by Kinshasa to its international legal obligations; it is as if the national government benefits from the destabilisation and insecurity of the protracted conflict in order to maintain its position in power. Despite the death and destruction, the forest continues to represent a site of refuge and nourishment. As such it represents ambivalence and ambiguity.

Why did our participant go silent after mentioning the forest? There are most likely multiple and complex causes ranging from direct experience(s) to remote and vicarious reasons. When I asked another one of the men about the reason for the silence, he asked me if I was aware of the 'Massacre of Kasika'. I replied that I was not. He provided an answer to my question with an emotive story:

In 1998, some of the Mai-Mai or local militia had resisted those who had come to occupy and exploit the eastern DRC from Rwanda. The massacre was an act of retribution for the Mai-Mai assassination of one of the RCD (Rally for Congolese Democracy) warlords. On 24 August 1998, numerous villages were attacked and over a thousand local people were killed in retaliation by the RCD. The Mwami Francois Mubeza, chief of the Nyindu ethnic community, was murdered by the rebels. This occurred after he witnessed his wife, pregnant with twins, having her stomach slit open whilst still alive,

with the unborn children ripped out of her and butchered in public view.

Whilst it is not the aim of the current paper to assess the truth claims of the narratives shared, this episode has attained mythical status in the DRC and it holds truth value for the teller. Walker (2005) confirms that not all false claims 'signify pure invention' but rather that such fallibility attests to the traumatic experience (2005:155). Such a sentiment is further supported by authors such as Sean Field who go further to argue that, 'factually incorrect' memories have the capacity to reveal 'psychological truths' through the reconstruction of what happened and of what possibly happened' (2007b:115; cf. Portelli 1991).

Aside from the sheer horror of the episode and its literal visceral effect, the participant did say that it was taboo to speak about this and other goings-on in the forest amongst one's peers but that it was necessary to share with those who were outside of the frame. Whereas we can only speculate as to the silence based on our analysis of the 'memory work', we can attempt to understand its functionality based on the historical context, using our conceptual tools as interpretive guides. As Hodgkin and Radstone (2005:23) recognise, 'the past is not fixed, but is subject to change: both narratives of events and the meanings given to them are in a constant state of transformation.' Our aim is to consider the transformational significance both of remembering and forgetting and the dialectical movements and dialogical moments between.

Maw (2007:81) suggests that (as per the title of her own work), 'the quickest way to move on is to go back', citing the example of bomb blast victims where 'the struggle between forgetting and remembering is perhaps most clearly articulated in the physical avoidance of places reminiscent of the blast (trauma) and the need to return to the site of the bomb blast (trauma).'

In the case of the old man, he goes back to the forest in his articulation, but once there, he avoids it, as if in a 'double-bind' dilemma. It may well be the case that he directly experienced or witnessed 'unspeakable' crimes, as a victim, as a relative or friend, as a bystander, or possibly even as a perpetrator. It may also be the case that, as with the Massacre of Kasika, indirect or vicarious experiences of violence are sufficiently disturbing to enforce silence.

There are certain unavoidable realities that require mentioning. A report by HEAL Africa (Lwambo 2011) has identified the disturbing issue of masculinities in the eastern DRC, focusing on the mismatch between dominant male ideals and their realities on the ground. Men appear not only to be perpetrators of, but also victims of, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) although it is taboo to discuss the latter topic. Several Congolese men, however, have confirmed the phenomenon of indiscriminate male on male rape in the forest and the need for counselling, therapy and support, perceived to be solely provided for women.

A 'hegemonic' masculinity has been identified as promoting an environment characterised by generalised violence and SGBV, indicating an urgent need for holistic approaches that empower men to adopt non-violent strategies in daily living. However, it is the women who bear the brunt of the conflict and its aftermath in the DRC, and especially in the forest. For sombre reading and harrowing accounts of extreme sexual violence against women in the eastern DRC, refer to the Harvard Humanitarian Report (2010) flagged previously. This epidemic is characterised by the use of military rape as a weapon of war, largely involving gang-rape, torture and sexual slavery. More recently, accounts of civilian rape have escalated incrementally. The impact upon tens of thousands of women who have reported, and upon countless others, and their families, is indescribable.

One of our participants, a mother from Kivu, described how she witnessed the murder of her father in front of her by rebel soldiers. Following this, she was gang-raped by them in the presence of her children. My research team members indicated their own distress by the fact that she did not appear to be emotionally moved when recalling this episode. Instead, she was more pre-occupied with obtaining the rental money required to enable herself and her children to remain in their current accommodation in Durban. As researchers who subscribe to a rigorous ethical code we were unable to accommodate her request, as difficult as the situation was; all we were able to offer was free psychotherapeutic counselling which she politely turned down. She then appeared to carry on with group interactions unperturbed.

Our research indicates an extreme resilience on the part of the Congolese refugees with whom we interact. Nietzsche (1997) comments that everything deep loves masks, and this appears to be the case with many of the traumatic incidents experienced and confined to the recesses of memory. The encouragement to participate dialogically and share these memories

necessitates the creation and sustenance of a space, within which vulnerability is permitted and catharsis is encouraged.

Giving voice allows for the voluntary reclamation of identity, the ownership of experience and the celebration of life. This in itself becomes a form of ‘engagement’ that may sometimes, but not always, have ‘therapeutic benefits’ (see Colvin 2005 for a mixed account); ‘healing’ is too contested a word (see Field 2001; 2007b; 2008). As Maw (2007:90) suggests, oftentimes the ‘missing link’ is the lack of exploration, ‘the experiences of these survivors, the familial and social contexts from whence they emerge and in which they recover.’ As an illustration of this proposal, let us consider a somewhat alternative and more optimistic account from the forest.

An informant from South Kivu recounted how his sister’s child had been lost during the mass flight into the forest described above, when the invading Rwandan and associated Congolese rebels advanced. The boy was around nine years of age at the time. The family feared the worst and he was presumed dead.

Ten years later, a relative who is a senior officer in the Congolese military was assigned to eastern DRC. He encountered a group of young people living in the forest and sought to reintegrate them into their communities. The relative saw my friend’s sister on the street of their hometown and informed her of his mission. She hoped against hope that her child was alive, but when she went to look at the group to possibly identify him there was no register.

In a state of despair, she shouted out ‘Babu!’ at which point a young man looked at her. He could not recognise his own mother, but he remembered his name. He had survived as a child soldier and even profited diamonds from fleeing residents, although he lost these in a subsequent conflict. Now, several years later, he is happily married and re-integrated within his community. To his family, a dream has come true. The distance between trauma and dreams is not so far, perhaps, separated only by memory, resilience and creative possibilities for recall.

## References

- Berger, J. 1997. Trauma and Literary Theory. *Contemporary Literature* 38,3: 569-582.

- Caruth, C. 1993. Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals. *Assemblage* 20: 24-25.
- Caruth, C. 2001. Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival. *Cultural Values* 5,1: 7-26.
- Colvin, C.J. 2005. 'Brothers and sisters, do not be afraid of me': Trauma, History and the Therapeutic Imagination in the New South Africa. In Hodgkin, K. & S. Radstone (eds.): *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Culbertson, R. 1995. Embodied Memory, Transcendence and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self. *New Literary History* 26,1:169-195.
- Denis, P. 2008. Introduction. In Denis, P. & R. Ntsimane (eds.) *Oral History in a Wounded Country: Interactive Interviewing in South Africa*. Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Denis, P. & R. Ntsimane (eds.) 2008. *Oral History in a Wounded Country: Interactive Interviewing in South Africa*. Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Draulans, D. & E. van Krunkelsven 2002. The Impact of War on Forest Areas in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Oryx* 36,1: 35-40.
- Dryden-Peterson, S. 2006. 'I find myself as someone who is in the forest': Urban Refugees as Agents of Social Change in Kampala, Uganda. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19,3: 381-393.
- Field, S. (ed.) 2001. *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Field, S. 2007a. Sites of Memory in Langa. In Field, S., R. Meyer & F. Swanson (eds.): *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Field, S. 2007b. The 1994 Rwandan Genocide: Remembering and Imagining through the Limits of Time, Space and Words. *The Journal of Social Studies* 115: 99-120.
- Field, S. & F. Swanson 2007. Introduction. In Field, S., R. Meyer & F. Swanson (eds.): *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Field, S. 2008. 'What can I do when the interviewee cries?': Oral History Strategies for Containment and Regeneration. In Denis, P. & R. Ntsimane (eds.): *Oral History in a Wounded Country: Interactive Interviewing in South Africa*. Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Fanon, F. 1990. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin.

- Freud, S. 1991. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. London: Penguin.
- Freud, S. 1991b. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. London: Penguin.
- Harvard Humanitarian Initiative 2010. 'Now, the world is without me': *An Investigation of Sexual Violence in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Hermenau, K., T. Hecker, S. Schaal, A. Maedl & T. Elbert 2013. Addressing Post-traumatic Stress and Aggression by Means of Narrative Exposure: A Randomised Control Trial with Ex-combatants in the DRC. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 22,8: 916-934.
- Hodgkin, K. & S. Radstone 2005. *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lanjouw, A. 2003. Building Partnerships in the Face of Political and Armed Crisis. *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 16,3-4: 89-110.
- Lwambo, D. 2011. 'Before the war, I was a man': *Men and Masculinities in Eastern DR Congo*. Goma, DRC: HEAL Africa.
- Maw, A. 2007. 'The quickest way to move forward is to go back': Bomb Blast Survivors' Narratives of Trauma and Recovery. In Field, S., R. Meyer & F. Swanson (eds.): *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- McKinney, K. 2007. 'Breaking the conspiracy of silence': Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence. *Ethos* 35,3: 265-299.
- Mulvagh, L. n.d. *The Impact of Commercial Logging and Forest Policy on Indigenous Peoples in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Forest Peoples Programme.
- Ntakarutimana, E. 2008. The Challenge of Recovering from War Trauma in the African Great Lakes Region: An Experience from Centre Ubuntu in the Project Colombe Network. *Intervention* 6,2: 162-166.
- Nietzsche, F. 1997. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Common, T. (trans.). Ware: Wordsworth.
- Passerini, L. 2005. Memories between Silence and Oblivion. In Hodgkin, K. & S. Radstone (eds.): *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Radstone, S. & B. Schwartz (eds.) 2010. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- UN 2000. *Democratic Republic of the Congo*. UNHCR Global Report.

*Alain Tschudin*

- Walker, J. 2005. The Traumatic Paradox: Autobiographical Documentary and the Psychology of Memory. In Hodgkin, K. & S. Radstone (eds.): *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wolfire, D.M., J. Brunner & N. Sizer 1998. *Forests and the Democratic Republic of Congo: Opportunity in a Time of Crisis*. New York: World Resources Institute.

Alain Tschudin  
International Centre of Non-violence (ICON) and Peacebuilding Programme  
Faculty of Public Management and Economics  
Durban University of Technology  
amadumbi@gmail.com

# Multiple Layers of Memory: The History of Mpophomeni Told and Retold

**Philippe Denis**  
**Philani Dlamini**

## **Abstract**

In April 1985, the workers of a transnational corporation known as BTR Sarmcol in Howick in the Natal Midlands embarked on a strike to demand basic workers' rights. The entire workforce – 970 people, many of whom lived in the nearby township of Mpophomeni – was dismissed a few days later. This triggered a cycle of violence between the striking workers, mostly UDF-ANC supporters, and the people hired to replace them, usually residents from Inkatha-aligned areas. Deprived of income, many Mpophomeni families experienced extreme poverty. The brutality of the dismissal and the efforts of the community to develop alternatives soon attracted the attention of journalists, union leaders, academics, anti-apartheid activists, lawyers and cultural workers. Several oral history projects were dedicated to this history in subsequent years. The paper examines the manner in which the survivors' memories varied over time. At first their version of events aimed at challenging the dominant national narrative of the apartheid regime. The memories collected in recent years give a more nuanced view of Mpophomeni's history. The community appeared as having been less united and less cohesive during the years of the Sarmcol strike than previous narratives led to believe.

**Keywords:** memory, oral history, political violence, Mpophomeni, BTR Sarmcol, African National Congress, Inkatha.

Many South African black communities were plagued by violence during the last decade of apartheid. The case of Mpophomeni near Howick in the Natal Midlands is particularly remarkable. This small township, established in 1969 to accommodate people forcibly removed from Howick's 'black belts', lived rather unnoticed until November 1982 when a successful bus boycott, prompted by a fare increase, revealed a surprisingly high level of solidarity and activism among its inhabitants. In 1983 the residents started a rent boycott – which was to last for many years – over a rent increase backdated to 1978. On 30 April 1985, the workers of a rubber factory owned by a transnational corporation known as BTR Sarmcol embarked on a strike to demand basic workers' rights. The entire workforce – 970 people, a third of whom lived in Mpophomeni – was dismissed three days later (Labour Monitoring Group (Natal) 1985: 92-94; Leeb & Radford 1987a: 1-2; Bonnin 1988: 100-103, 198-244); This triggered a cycle of violence between the striking workers, mostly United Democratic Front (UDF) - African National Congress (ANC) supporters, and the people hired to replace them, in many cases residents from Inkatha-aligned areas. Deprived of income, many families experienced extreme poverty. The brutality of the dismissal and the efforts of the community to develop alternatives soon attracted the attention of journalists, union leaders, academics, anti-apartheid activists, violence monitors, clerics, lawyers and cultural workers. Several oral history projects were dedicated to this history in subsequent years.

## **Changing Memories as an Object of History**

The purpose of this paper is not to add to the existing knowledge on the history of Mpophomeni, however useful this might be. It is rather to take advantage of the exceptional richness of the literary, archival and oral documentation accumulated since the mid-1980s on the history of Mpophomeni to examine, in a historical perspective, the phenomenon of remembering and representing the past – what we shall call here public memory – in a community exposed to the trauma of forced removals, unfair dismissals and political violence before facing the challenges of the era of democracy, reconstruction and post-apartheid development.

The relationship between history, a narrative about the past, and memory, a process in which information about the past is encoded, stored and

retrieved as private memory at the individual level or as public memory at the social and cultural level, is complex. Starting with the pioneering work of French historian Pierre Nora on ‘sites of memory’ (Nora 1984-1992), this relation has only been a focus of academic research for three decades. In South Africa, since the end of apartheid and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which drew attention to the ways in which victims and perpetrators of human rights abuses dealt with a violent past, studies on memory and commemoration have also started to multiply. They analyse the manner in which events of the South African past such as the arrival of the Huguenots, the South African War or apartheid were reconstructed (Nasson 2000; Denis 2003), imagined (Field 1998) or occluded (Bonner 2013) by the people who took part in them or their descendants. In 2010 a study on commemoration and spatial memory in post-apartheid South Africa examined the ways in which commemorative monuments, memorials and statues contribute to the creation of a new shared public memory with its emphases, ambivalences and silences (Marschall 2010).

Memory is an active process. There is a consensus, among the authors having contributed to the field of memory studies in recent years, that, if memory is the capacity to store, retain and subsequently retrieve information about the past, it is also defined by its ability to select, organise, omit or even invent aspect of past experiences according to the needs, desires and emotions of those who remember. Memory is information actively reconstructed in the present, a process which is at the same time psychological, social and political (Thelen 1990; Radstone & Schwarz 2010; Thomson 2011).

Secondly, memory is a process, if not determined, at least influenced by the group to which the person sharing his or her memories belongs. As observed by Maurice Halbwachs, the author of a groundbreaking study on collective memory, we do not remember alone. We gain access to events reconstructed for us by others (Halbwachs 1950; Ricoeur 2004: 121). How the group – kinship, friends and neighbours, local community, nation – influences individual memory, however, is open to debate. As we shall see, the Mpophomeni community in the apartheid era has been presented by its defenders as a coherent group with a single set of experiences and memories. Yet, later interviews show a different picture, with a bigger variety of individual opinions than was imagined before. Even among people sharing similar experiences, there are always memories which do not fit the collective

pattern (Green 2011: 108). Rather than collective memory, we prefer to speak of public memory to make apparent the multifaceted process through which individual memories or memories shared by a small group of people find expression – or fail to find public expression – in the public arena (Ashplant *et al.* 2000: 20). To describe the complexity of the relation between past and present in the act of remembering other expressions, such as social or cultural memory, could also have been chosen (Radstone 2007: 33).

Whatever the term chosen, it is important to note, thirdly, that the reference to the past always includes an element of contestation. Remembering and sharing one's memories implies positioning oneself on a terrain, be it interpersonal, political, social or cultural, which, in one way or another, is disputed. It is in that sense that one speak of the 'politics of memory' (Radstone & Schwarz 2010: 3). From a phenomenological point of view, we can say, after Paul Ricoeur (2004: 56-92), that memory can be 'abused' in several ways: it can be blocked, manipulated or abusively controlled. The contradictions and oppositions inherent to public memory are put in evidence in the definition which John Bodnar, the author of an influential study on public memory and commemoration in twentieth century America, gives of this term:

Public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication its future. It is fashioned ideally in a public sphere in which various parts of the social structure exchange views. The major focus of this communicative and cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures. Public culture speaks primarily about the structure of power in society because that power is always in question in a world of polarities and contradictions and because cultural understanding is always in question in a world of polarities and contradictions and because cultural understanding is always grounded in the material structure of society itself. Memory adds perspective and authenticity to the views articulated in this exchange; defenders of official and vernacular interests are selectively retrieved from the past to perform similar functions in the present (Bodnar 1992).

A further aspect of memory, individual or collective, is its variability. As Carolyn Hamilton pointed out, the fluidity of the archive, whether written or oral, far from being a problem is an opportunity for a better understanding of the past (Hamilton 2002: 209-212). Only the tenants of a positivist view of history disqualify as unreliable the memories of events that change over time. They try to find the best record of these events and eliminate the memories which seem to contradict it. A more fruitful method, pioneered with great success by oral historian Alessandro Portelli in his work on partisans' memories in post-war Italy, consists in analysing the variations in memory for what they are: the signs of a constant evolution of representations and knowledge. One did not look at apartheid and political violence in the same way in the mid-1980s, when Inkatha *impis* (warriors) regularly threatened to attack the township under the eye of the South African police, as one does in the 2010s, when the youth has lost the memory of apartheid and when lack of service delivery, unemployment and crime are pressing challenges.

This paper will examine the various manners in which the Mpophomeni residents and other social actors involved in the life of the township have remembered and represented to wider audiences the establishment of the township, its early development, the working conditions at BTR Sarmcol, the strike, the dismissal of the workers, political violence and the return to peace and democracy. We shall ask ourselves how the social and political changes undergone in South Africa during these three decades affect the memories of the Mpophomeni residents. Taking a clue from recent work on war memory and commemoration (Ashplant, Dawson & Roper 2000), we shall pay attention to the various *narratives*, oppositional, sectional or dominant, and *agencies*, sponsored by the state, linked to civil movements or informal, which articulated the township's memories.

As already noted, an important turning point in that history is the BTR Sarmcol strike in May 1985. Another one, at local, provincial and national level, is the installation, in May 1994, of a democratically elected government which tried, among many other pressing tasks, to develop more inclusive heritage policies. In Mpophomeni's history there is a before and an after. Before 1994 the residents experienced land dispossession, the humiliation of the apartheid laws and regulations, a labour legislation enabling BTR Sarmcol to summarily dismiss hundreds of workers and, above all, the trauma of a civil war secretly manufactured by the white government. After 1994 the infrastructure developed, the wealthier residents moved to

formerly white-only areas in Howick or Pietermaritzburg and a new ruling class, including former Mpophomeni activists, took charge of the Umgeni municipality, a freshly-delineated territory encompassing the white town of Howick, the Indian and 'coloured' suburb of Howick West, Pietermaritzburg's posh suburb of Hilton, the black townships of Mevana near Howick and Mpophomeni and the surrounding rural areas.

## **From Obscurity to the International Limelight**

From the point of view of a history of memory, the history of Mpophomeni can be divided into five periods. As with any periodisation, the one we propose here is a construction of the mind, but we hope it will throw light on the phenomenon of memory development which this paper is attempting to document.

The period between 1963, when Montrose Farm was expropriated by the South African government to make room for the new township, causing Guy Lund, the farm owner, to commit suicide, and 1985, when the residents started to become restless because of bus fare and rental increases while, in Howick, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) was striving to obtain union recognition in the BTR Sarmcol rubber factory, can be described as being 'under the radar'. Apart from a few articles on the bus boycott in the December 1982 and January 1983 issues of *The Natal Witness* (Forsyth 1991: 45-46), an article on a conflict between the KwaZulu township manager and four pro-Inkatha councillors in *Echo*, the *Witness*'s supplement, in April 1984 (*Echo* 26 April 1984, quoted in Forsyth 1991: 62) and two articles on a call by Mpophomeni residents to Inkatha leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi to resolve the five-year-old rent controversy in March 1985 (*Echo* 4 March 1985; *The Natal Witness*, 7 March 1985, quoted in Forsyth 1991: 74), the local media, if we follow Paul Forsyth's inventory of violence-related newspaper articles (1991), had nothing to say on Mpophomeni. During this period no attempt was made to record the residents' stories and to commemorate their lives. Other communities displaced or harassed by apartheid agents were visited by human rights activists during this period and the story of their members received some publicity (see for example Desmond 1970). This was not the case for Mpophomeni. The memories of the township's residents remained in the private sphere.

In May 1985 a succession of events pulled Mpophomeni out of obscurity and subjected it to an unprecedented degree of local, national and international exposure. The residents' stories started to be shared, recorded and even acted out.. A body of memories – of living conditions prior to the establishment of Mpophomeni, of the early years of the township, of the first acts of resistance, of the BTR Sarmcol strike, of the sufferings of the dismissed workers and their families, of their mobilisation and of numerous acts of solidarity on the side of local, national and international human rights movements – came to the fore. To follow the typology outlined above, these memories can be termed oppositional. They reflected the movement of protest and resistance against the apartheid regime which spread throughout South African in the wake of the June 1976 Soweto uprising, culminating with the creation of the UDF in August 1983. Various civil society agencies, including trade unions, church-based human rights organisations and the University of Natal, articulated these memories through press statements, informal papers and academic studies.

The first of these events was the ruthless dismissal of the BTR Sarmcol's workforce referred to above. It had been recommended, one was to hear later, by a labour consultant as the best way to 'clean out the shop stewards' (Abel 1995: 141). In response the unions launched a boycott of white businesses in Howick. A one-day stay-away was organised in Pietermaritzburg on 18 July 1985 and another consumer boycott of white businesses in Pietermaritzburg in August. A variety of newspapers, including *The Natal Witness*, *Daily News*, *Business Day*, *The Star*, *The Citizen* and the *Weekly Mail*, reported on these manifestations. The issue was taken up by unions abroad. Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) called on the British government to act against BTR Sarmcol's alleged contraventions of the European Economic Community's code of conduct for companies operating in South Africa. In July the International Metalworker's Federation (IMF) urged the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, to intervene (Race Relations Survey 1986: 191; Mkhize 1995).

In a very short time the dismissed BTR Sarmcol workers, several hundreds of whom resided in Mpophomeni, attracted a vast range of supports, well beyond the scope of the labour unions, which immediately came to their defence. Among the first to be mobilised were the churches, or rather progressive elements within the churches, most notably Larry Kaufmann, the Catholic priest of Mpophomeni, who authorised the strikers to

meet in his church; Denis Hurley, the Catholic archbishop of Durban, who paid a pastoral visit to Mpophomeni on 26 June 1985; the Anglican synod who pledged solidarity with the workers after a delegation of strikers invaded its meeting on 11 July 1985; the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), an ecumenical human rights group which played an important lobbying role; the ecumenical agency Diakonia in Durban, which offered to bring the parties to the negotiating table; and the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which also contributed to the mobilisation of the Christian churches (Kumalo 1997; Denis 2013). In November 1985, to help the strikers survive, MAWU assisted them in setting up the Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (SAWCO), a cooperative with five projects: T-shirts and button making, agriculture, health, culture and bulk-buying (Bonnin 1988: 237, 355). Health professionals delivered medical services free of charge to the strikers and their families during the week-end (Kruger [1991]). Community theatre activists assisted the workers in developing and staging in South Africa and abroad a play called 'The Long March' (von Kotze 1987; von Kotze 1988; Sitas 1987; Kruger 1995). Lawyers offered their help to assist the dismissed workers in obtaining their reinstatement at the Industrial Court (Abel 1995: 123-172). With funds from international funding agencies, Archbishop Hurley purchased a farm of about six hectares of irrigated land for vegetable production on behalf of SAWCO in Merrivale near Howick (*Natal Witness* 12 June 1990; Kearney 2009: 233).

The second period in the history of Mpophomeni's memory – from the sacking of the BTR Sarmcol workforce in May 1985 to the dismissal of the striking workers' court application in July 1987 – is characterised by the emergence of a body of research reports and academic papers on the strike, its effects on the workers and the acts of solidarity and resistance it generated. No longer confined to obscurity, Mpophomeni became the object of a public discourse. Between 1985 and 1988, no less than four studies were dedicated to the labour dispute and its effects on the Mpophomeni residents. Written by a collective of labour activists known as the 'Labour Monitoring Group (Natal)', the first was published in the October-December 1985 issue of the *South African Labour Bulletin*. Essentially descriptive, with background information on BTR Sarmcol, MAWU and Mpophomeni, this twenty-three-page report aims at demonstrating that the Pietermaritzburg stay-away in support of the Sarmcol workers was a success (Labour Monitoring Group 1985). The second is a brief but well informed report on the dispute and its

aftermath in the 1985 *Race Relations Survey* published by the South African Institute of Race Relations the following year (Race Relations Survey 1986: 191, 203).

The third study is by far the most extensive. The author was Debbie Bonnin, a University of Natal postgraduate student involved in union activities through the ecumenical agency Diakonia who subsequently joined a group of Durban activists running awareness workshops on behalf of the Sarmcol strikers and ended up writing a Masters thesis on the Sarmcol workers under the supervision of sociologist and activist Ari Sitas (Bonnin 2013). In addition to a survey by questionnaire of about 200 workers, she conducted 22 individual interviews between March and October 1986 with the help of an interpreter. Large extracts of the interviews are reproduced in her thesis. They provide rich information on the life stories of the workers, their working conditions in the factory, the strike and the ensuing events (Bonnin 1988; Bonnin & Sitas 1988). The key findings of this research were presented during a court case launched in November 1986 at the Industrial Court to obtain the reinstatement of the dismissed workers. One of the interviews provided material for the 'Long March' play (Bonnin 2013).

Also used as evidence by MAWU's lawyers during the hearings of the Industrial Court (Leeb & Radford 1987a: 2) was the research conducted by Wendy Leeb, a mother of four with links to PACSA and the Black Sash who was completing a degree at the University of Natal (Leeb 2013) with support and guidance from John Radford, a lecturer in organisational and social psychology in the same institution, on the effects of job loss on Mpophomeni. In late August and early September 1986 Leeb, who knew well the community for having helped residents during the bus boycott in early 1983, distributed a 16-page questionnaire to 126 randomly selected residents, a quarter of whom were ex-Sarmcol workers, with the help of six isiZulu-speaking students. The research showed that the majority of the 1604 households – with an estimated population of 10,000 people at the time – were 'in a serious state of impoverishment' and that the ex-Sarmcol workers, who until May 1985 formed 'the basis of the stable foundation of the Mpophomeni community', had suffered 'a significant greater degree of psychiatric stress when compared with equivalent groups of employed men' (Radford & Leeb 1986: 27-28).

The findings of Leeb and Radford's research were not only used for the BTR Sarmcol Industrial Court case. They were disseminated in academic

circles and among local activists. An article summarising the results of the research appeared in the January 1987 issue of *Reality*, the bimonthly magazine founded by Alan Paton and other ex-members of the Liberal Party in Pietermaritzburg (Leeb & Radford 1987b). Analyses of the findings were presented at a conference of the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa in July 1987 in Cape Town (Leeb & Radford 1987a) and at a workshop on regionalisation and restructuring in Natal in January 1988 in Durban (Leeb & Radford 1988). These publications emphasised the negative consequences for the township of the strikers' dismissals.

As one can see, a non-negligible amount of documents on Mpophomeni and its residents was produced in the two years following the strike. Some included verbatim quotations from Mpophomeni residents. The most significant were the extracts of interviews of Sarmcol workers reproduced in Bonnin's Masters thesis. The extracts of conversations with Mpophomeni residents quoted by Leeb and Radford in their *Reality* article were also interesting. A new public memory, partly oral and partly written, of the township started to be constituted during this period. It was a militant memory, developed in a context of conflict, violence and death. It challenged the South African government's discourse which presented the anti-apartheid movement as a threat to peace and stability as well as the anti-union stance of the multinational company BTR Sarmcol. The dismissed BTR Sarmcol workers – and by extension the entire population of Mpophomeni – were presented as innocent victims of unfair labour practices who fought for their rights, suffered oppression and poverty, mobilised support and survived against all odds. It was a history with heroes and villains: on one side, the strikers, their families and their neighbours, the unions, the other workers who laid down their tools in solidarity and the civil society movements who supported the movement; on the other side, the management of BTR Sarmcol both in South Africa and abroad, the security forces, the 'scab' workers hired to replace the strikers, UWUSA, the Inkatha-led rival union, and, last but not least, the nine murderers, known to be linked to Inkatha, of Phineas Sibiya and Simon Ngubane, two MAWU shop stewards, and of Florah Mkanathi, daughter of a shop steward, all involved in SAWCO, on 5 December 1986 after an Inkatha rally in Mpophomeni.

The concluding paragraph of Leeb and Radford's *Reality* article illustrates the manner, empathetic, supportive and engaged, in which the Mpophomeni residents were spoken about in the mid-1980s. The

Mpophomeni residents were not only presented as victims but also as actors of their own history, remarkable for their courage, their resilience, their cohesion and their solidarity:

The community itself is a paradox. It is made up of ordinary individuals who are struggling to survive. Their lives are full of hardship and pain, and yet they have managed to struggle against the system several times. These people are battered but not beaten. In the midst of violence and conflict, neighbour shares with neighbour, and the more privileged feel a responsibility for those suffering. Against incredible odds parents struggle to bring up their children with values and use their scant energy to try and ensure their future. There is a surprising lack of bitterness and anger. There is a strong feeling that despite the problems something can be worked out, and a new tomorrow can emerge. People have hope, in the midst of their despair, and a faith which is childlike and strong. Every day they rise to a grim reality, and yet they carry on because they believe in themselves. This will to overcome is the backbone of Mpophomeni, and possibly, of our whole society. The question is – will we succeed? (Leeb & Radford 1987b).

## **Monitoring Political Violence**

From the point of view of a history of memory, the third period, which covers the years 1987-1993, was very different. To a large degree the memories of the Mpophomeni residents retreated to the private sphere for lack of public exposure. Once it became clear that the BTR Sarmcol workers had lost their case for reinstatement at the Industrial Court, the situation of the workers, painful and depressing as it was, ceased to attract attention. In 1990 SAWCO, which by then had only maintained three of the original five projects, closed down, the members complaining that the monthly allowance provided by the organisation was insufficient to support their families. The agricultural project continued its activities independently from SAWCO on land purchased on behalf of the workers by the Catholic archdiocese of Durban, but only with a reduced workforce (Ndlela 1990).

The spectacular movement of solidarity with the dismissed workers

observed in 1985 and 1986 gradually dissipated. Mpophomeni fell out of the limelight. The agencies which had articulated the Mpophomeni residents' memories in the preceding period moved to other terrains. As Simanga Kumalo noted a decade later for the churches – but his observation could have applied to other civil society movements, to the academic community or the media – after a few years the strikers discovered that they could only count on themselves. Material and moral solidarity could not be sustained in the long term:

The big problem is that all that [the church' response to the strikers] was to be short lived. The strike continued and suffering continued for the victims. As time went on, the workers were left alone by the church. All the church groups that had been assisting in ministering to the strikers and their families in Mpophomeni withdrew quietly. Some complained that funds had dried up. Others just disappeared (Kumalo 1997: 52).

As time went by, the Mphopomeni residents' most pressing concern no longer was Sarmcol and the fight for reinstatement. This battle was lost, at least for the time being. The biggest source of worry was political violence. Mpophomeni, a UDF enclave in Inkatha territory, became a hotspot of political violence in the Natal Midlands but because the conflict extended to the entire province Mpophomeni was nothing more than one theatre of political violence among many others, of no particular interest to journalists, academics and human rights activists. Only a small number of those continued to visit the township. Meanwhile the 'war', as the Mpophomeni residents described it, was unfolding with its litany of deaths, injuries, torture, loss of property and refugees. Between October 1987 and July 1990 the township residents and refugees from other parts of the Natal Midlands faced attacks from neighbouring Inkatha-dominated villages with no support from the police forces. In May 1991 a second wave of violence, worse than the first, hit Mpophomeni, this time between two groups of local youths, dubbed 'Umgovu' and 'Umgoqo'. There was no apparent reason for this violence, which resulted in random death and destruction as the police once more remained passive. The violence mysteriously ended after a last string of murders in March 1993. To this day the causes of the second eruption of political violence remain obscure, with no proof, despite rumours, of a 'third

force' conspiracy<sup>1</sup>.

As political violence took a higher toll, violence monitors started to visit the township and report on incidents of intimidation, police abuse, loss of property, injuries and murders. Some were linked to Christian agencies such as PACSA, the local Catholic parish or the Natal Church Leaders Group which included, among others, Michael Nuttall, the Anglican bishop, and Denis Hurley, the Catholic archbishop (Mbona 2010). Another regular visitor of the township was Radley Keys, the regional director of the Democratic Party, who directed the monitoring group Peace in Natal (PIN) between 1989 and 1994<sup>2</sup>. Also involved in Mpophomeni was the Unrest Monitoring Project, headed by John Aitchison, director of the Centre for Adult Education at the University of Natal. The Project's database, which covers the period 1984-1991, contains 139 entries related to Mpophomeni. They include newspapers articles, police unrest reports and reports submitted by individuals or monitoring groups. The BTR Sarmcol strike dominated the first three years of the database with respectively 2 (1984), 14 (1985) and 4 (1986) entries. The following two years were relatively calm with respectively 10 (1987) and 3 (1988) entries. The last three years, with respectively 56 (1989), 18 (1990) and 32 (1992), witnessed the highest number of incidents of violence<sup>3</sup>. Lastly we can mention the 24-hour Monitoring Group of the Midlands Crisis Relief Committee, an ad hoc monitoring group constituted in the wake of the Seven-Day War, a particularly devastating wave of political violence in late March 1990, which met from 25 March to 28 July 1990 (Political violence in the Natal Midlands 1990). The weekly reports list 27 entries related to Mpophomeni.

The incidents of political violence which struck Mpophomeni were thus recorded, if not all, at least many of them. But since political violence

---

<sup>1</sup> In late 1993 a team from the London-based Amnesty International came to investigate but found no evidence of involvement of white farmers or renegade policemen as some community members had suspected. Chris Khoza, ANC chairman of Mpophomeni in the early 1990s, personal communication with the authors.

<sup>2</sup> See the Radley Keys collection at the Alan Paper Centre (APC, PC159).

<sup>3</sup> We express our gratitude to Professor John Aitchison who gave us access to his electronic database. On the Unrest Monitoring Project, see John Aitchison, Leeb and Vaughn 2010.

affected the entire Natal province and also, from early 1990, the Witwatersrand, the township did not attract the attention of journalists, academics and political analysts in any particular way. The residents rarely received a chance to tell their stories. On one occasion, a group of residents led by Stanley Mbambo, an union leader, applied – with success – to the Supreme Court for an interdict restricting the South African Police from assaulting, harassing and intimidating them. Nineteen affidavits from residents and four from concerned people from outside the township were submitted to the Court on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 1989. They constitute one of few written sources available on political violence in Mpophomeni<sup>4</sup>.

The second wave of violence, which caused the biggest number of deaths, with rival gangs attacking people at random, made no lasting impression beyond the circle of Mpophomeni residents, violence monitors and ministers of religion coming to the township for Sunday services. The only exception was an article by Radley Keys – a member of the future opposition to the ANC after the advent of democracy – in a volume of essays on political violence published in 1992. Entitled ‘Mpophomeni: the ANC’s dilemma’ it traces the history of the conflict in Mpophomeni and describes, with some detail, the operations of the self-initiated ‘people’s court’ and the gang warfare between the ‘Mgoqo’ and ‘Mbovu’:

In the third quarter of 1990 the first reported death resulting from internal tension was reported. Gangs also developed. Reports emanating from Mpophomeni indicate that a few youths (boys) were initially involved in skirmishes. Labels of *Mgovu* (a word with connotations of scavengers, thieves and dogs) and *Mgoqo* (a word describing the barriers or obstacle placed at the opening of a cattle pen to prevent cattle from escaping or being stolen, also a connotation of bulwark or protection) were given to rivals in the skirmish. This expanded and drew in people from the wider community. What was initially a clash of individuals and small groups of gangs came to involve the parents of the *Mgovu* and the wider youth element of the *Mgoqo* (Keys 1992).

---

<sup>4</sup> All the affidavits are kept at the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, APC, PC 159-7-1 and 2.

## **A New Dominant National Narrative**

The fourth period in the history of Mpophomeni's memory, which corresponds to Nelson Mandela's presidency (1994-1999), was characterised by a desire, on the part of the residents and activists involved in the community, to keep alive the memory of their painful but victorious struggle against apartheid and political violence and to ensure that a proper understanding of the past was transmitted to future generations. With friends in government both at municipal and national levels, the Mpophomeni community, which continued to expand with a never-ceasing influx of new residents, made concerted efforts to retrieve and inscribe in the landscape its memories. The difference with the preceding period was that these memories no longer challenged the dominant national memory of the apartheid era. They aligned themselves with the emerging national memory of the rainbow nation, which the African National Congress government was busy articulating. The vision of history in favour during this period can be described as ideological in the sense of carrying a moral and political message: it was seen as part of a grand narrative of oppression, resistance and reconciliation which was meant to replace a European-centric view of history which relegated the experiences of African people to the margins. This vision of history also influenced Mpophomeni even though efforts were made to treat magnanimously the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the former enemy, now at the helm of the provincial government in association with the ANC. No place was given in the official memory of Mpophomeni to the conflict within the ANC and to the various forms of abuse and violence observed in the township which were not attributable to the former regime's security forces and its surrogates.

In some way Mpophomeni anticipated the spirit, if not the methodology, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which started its work in 1996<sup>5</sup>. Mpophomeni can claim to have created one of the earliest 'sites of memory' of post-apartheid South Africa, to use Pierre Nora's suggestive phrase (Nora 1984-1992). As early as March 1995 a group of residents, some of whom had been involved in the conflict between 'Mgovu' and 'Mgoqo' gangs, built on their own initiative and with virtually no external help a memorial to the victims of political violence, which was

---

<sup>5</sup> On the creation of memory during this period, see Nuttall and Coetzee 1998.

inaugurated by Jacob Zuma, then minister of economic development in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government. This self-made memorial was dedicated to Nokulunga Gumede, a six-year old child carelessly run over by an army vehicle on 21 March 1990, the anniversary day of the Sharpeville Massacre<sup>6</sup>. The organisers drew up a list of victims and asked the concerned families to authorise the inscription of the names of the deceased on the memorial wall. Eighty families responded positively. Even though the majority of victims were UDF/ANC members, the promoters of the project made it clear that, like the child who had lost her life, the monument had to be seen as apolitical.

Another manifestation of the spirit of this period was the oral history project of the Alan Paton Centre, now renamed Alan Paton Centre and Struggles Archives, which was carried out from 1995 to 1998. Veteran ANC activist Ruth Lundie interviewed for this project Stanley Mbambo and Philip Dladla, two MAWU shop stewards involved in the BTR Sarmcol strike who also played a role as community leaders in Mpophomeni<sup>7</sup>.

## **Alternative Memories**

The time for alternative memories was to come later, in the fifth and last period of the history of Mpophomeni's memory (2000-2014). This period is marked by the establishment of Zulu Mpophomeni Tourism Experience (ZMTE), a community-based organisation founded in the mid-2000S to stimulate heritage-based tourism and educate the youth about the history of the township. As we write these lines, Montrose Farm, the property of a white farmer until the area was expropriated by the South African government to make space for the new township, is in the process of being leased to ZMTE by the Municipality and already houses parts of the museum's collections.

This development is significant from the point of view of a history of memory. The Mpophomeni residents involved in the ZMTE project do not only have changing memories, they also make conscious efforts to retrieve and appropriate them. These memories do not always correspond to the narrative of oppression, unity and resistance promoted by the South African

---

<sup>6</sup> Alan Paton Centre, PC159-7-3, statement of Fr Edgar Weinman, Catholic priest on the death of Nokulunga Gumede, 21 March 1990.

<sup>7</sup> APC, 98APB 20 and 21.

government through the establishment of new museums, the revision of the history curriculum, the renaming of cities and streets and various commemorations. Alternative memories of Mpophomeni's past find expression through the channel of community-based oral history projects. For lack of documentation it is difficult to establish whether these memories had been shared privately among residents in earlier times, although it can reasonably be assumed that they were. Stories of 'necklacing' and sexual abuse by 'comrades', similar to those mentioned here, already circulated in South Africa in the 1980s<sup>8</sup>. But in the tense atmosphere of the 1980s and early 1990s they could not be aired publicly in Mpophomeni.

In her doctoral dissertation Judith Singleton, an African-American anthropologist who conducted field research in Mpophomeni from February 2004 to September 2005 gives an image of Mpophomeni in stark contrast to the view commonly accepted since the days of the BTR Sarmcol strike (Singleton 2008). The topic of the thesis – coercion and consent in sexual relations in post-apartheid South Africa – lent itself to a re-evaluation of Mpophomeni's history. Gender has no place in the literature produced in the 1980s and 1990s on Mpophomeni<sup>9</sup>. One of Singleton's informants, a twenty-eight year old woman by the name of Mpumelelo, depicts an Inkatha member not as an oppressor but as an innocent victim. Residents 'necklaced' him, with a rubber tyre set on fire around his neck, in front of many people. Mpumelelo who was still a child was there. At the time, she was led to believe it was right. By the time of the interview, she knew it was wrong:

Mpophomeni was terrible. It was violent. The IFP and ANC were fighting. It was very scary. People were dying like flies. My family was ANC because here we were ruled by [the] ANC and that's why they believed in [the] ANC. My mother protected us from the violence. People died in front of us. One day someone was

---

<sup>8</sup> In a speech given in Munsieville (Western Transvaal) on 13 April 1986, Winnie Mandela, the wife of the imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela, endorsed the practice of 'necklacing' (burning people alive using tyres and petrol) by saying: '[W]ith our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country.'

<sup>9</sup> A few studies on political violence and gender were however conducted in other parts of Natal. See Campbell 1992; Bonnin 2002.

‘necklaced’ in front of my eyes. They called him *amagundane* – the rats. It means that they believed [he was] Inkatha. He was an old man and he worked. One day he rode the wrong bus. He was lost. He lost his way. They [knew] that he was Inkatha and they killed him. We were young and we liked to watch. Everybody watched. Old men killed him. They shot him and they put the tire around his neck and poured petrol over him and burned him (Mpumelelo 2005).

An observation made by many academics and violence monitors when they visited Mpophomeni during the time of the Sarmcol strike was that there was a strong sense of cohesion in the community. ‘The neighbour shares with neighbour,’ Leeb observed in the passage quoted above, ‘and the more privileged feel a responsibility for those suffering’ (Leeb & Radford 1987b: 20). While noting that, having lost faith in the state’s judicial apparatus, the residents had started to take justice in their own hands and that in their repression of opposition UDF members committed atrocities in the name of the ‘struggle’, Keys also made the point that the people from Mpophomeni were united in the adversity. ‘The community of Mpophomeni,’ he wrote, ‘grew together in the hard times after the dismissal of their bread winners. COSATU was a driving force in keeping the community disciplined and attuned to self-reliance until the hope of resolving the dismissals with Sarmcol management had been realised’ (Keys 1992: 129).

The portrait Singleton gave of the Mpophomeni community on the basis of women’s testimonies was somewhat different. Far from manifesting their opposition to the state as would have been expected in a community under the authority of the ANC, some residents, and particularly young women, developed links with soldiers. They despised the ‘comrades’, she was told, for not having enough money to buy them presents:

Most of the girls were in love with the army men. We left the boys in the township. We didn’t care about them, we wanted the soldiers. The soldiers would buy things for us. I believe the men living in this township started hating women during that time. The girls would say to the township boys: ‘We don’t want you, we want soldiers. The soldiers have money and you don’t. You are not working.’ Sometimes when we were with our girlfriends we would meet the township guys. They would say to us: ‘You are looking at us, you

bitch[es] of the soldiers. You are nothing. We won't ask love from you because you are nothing, you are sluts' (NoSipho 2005).

This statement demonstrates, Singleton commented, that 'not all black township women in Mpophomeni openly supported young black African men and the liberation struggle' (Singleton 2008: 158). By the time these interviews were conducted – mid 2005 – opinions challenging the idea of a community united in the struggle against apartheid could be openly held.

Not long afterwards community members recruited by ZMTE and trained in oral history methodology by the Sinomlando Centre, a research and community development centre of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, started to interview residents on their lives in Mpophomeni. Eighteen individual interviews and three group interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011. This material is already available to researchers. Extracts of the interviews are on display in the Mpophomeni Ecomuseum at Montrose Farm. More interviews will be conducted in the years to come.

An analysis of the interviews conducted during this period reveals a diversity of opinions and points of view much bigger than during the years of the Sarmcol strike, mass mobilisation and political violence. The image of Mpophomeni as an UDF enclave in Inkatha territory, while basically correct, receives important nuances. One of the interviewees explained that, initially, all Mpophomeni residents were members of Inkatha. Things started to change after the dismissal of the Sarmcol workers and their replacement with people from Inkatha-dominated areas. But there was confusion on matters of political allegiance. In many instances the youth forced the elders to join them in the fight against Inkatha. 'When you tried to calm them down as elders,' a resident explained, 'they would tell you that you are old-fashioned. It was not easy to confront the youth because they carried big guns' (Mbanjwa 2009). One of the interviewees confirmed that 'necklacing' took place but he did not want to expand on the subject (Bhengu 2009). Another one referred to the practice of 'modelling' – forcing girls caught sleeping with soldiers to run naked in the streets (Khoza 2011). This echoes the testimonies collected by Singleton on township girls preferring soldiers to local boys because they had more money for presents.

One of the most interesting findings in the ZMTE/Sinomlando oral history project was that some of the former BTR Sarmcol workers had second

thoughts on the strike. They went on strike in the hope of being reinstated, but in July 1987 the Industrial Court dismissed their application. In March 1998 the Supreme Court of Appeals found that BTR Sarmcol had unfairly dismissed the workers and referred the matter back to the Industrial Court to determine the amount of the compensation to be paid to each worker. BTR Sarmcol tried to settle the matter with 1,5 million rand, that is, 1500 rand per worker. Some compensation money was eventually paid but not to the satisfaction of the workers. One of the interviewees expressed discontent at the manner the unions had handled the case:

From what I heard, we need to say these people do not want the truth. We were supposed to go back to Sarmcol and we were supposed to go to the Industrial Court and the Industrial Court was going to determine how much we should get including our service. But there were people..., maybe our lawyers had teamed with Sarmcol because nothing happened until today though we were told that we would later get our money for our service but we ended up not getting it (Mtshali 2010).

They did not earn much at Sarmcol, he further said, but at least they earned something. 'If we did not go on strike it would have been better.'

A fellow resident concurred. If he had not gone on strike, he pointed out, he would still have a job. Finding another job proved impossible:

The factory strike was very painful. If we did not go for a strike, we would not be suffering as we do now. People are struggling to get jobs but during our days nobody would be unemployed. You are now self-employed but most of the youth are unemployed. I was already working at your age but now you are struggling to get proper jobs (Mbanjwa 2009).

The strike was a futile exercise, one of the women commented in a tone of despondency. It was naïve to believe that the manager would change his mind:

People kept saying; 'We must strike so that this *umlungu* can see that we are not playing.' So they had the strike but the *umlungu* did not

care. When they sat at work, he called the police to chase them (Nxumalo 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the various expressions of public memory in a community affected by forced removals, unfair labour practices and political violence. Compared to other areas of KwaZulu-Natal which had suffered from political violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mpophomeni offered two advantages from a historiographical point of view. The first was to have generated a considerable amount of documentation after the shocking dismissal of the entire BTR Sarmcol workforce in July 1985. Secondly it is a locality where sites of memory, Montrose Farm and the Nokulunga Gumede Memorial in particular, are maintained and put on display by the residents themselves with minimum involvement of state institutions.

The archival sources, printed documents and oral testimonies we have examined show that the way in which the Mpophomeni residents have remembered and commemorated their common past has undergone significant changes during the period under review. Until 1985 the residents' stories received virtually no publicity. During the period of the BTR Sarmcol strike the Mpophomeni residents were presented as innocent victims of unfair labour practices and state repression struggling to survive in a context of extreme poverty with the assistance of a host of benevolent civil society agencies. The residents were interviewed by journalists, activists and academics on several occasions. Their memories can be said to constitute an oppositional narrative, that is, a version of events challenging the dominant national narrative of the apartheid regime. This manner of portraying the community was still in favour in the years of the Mandela presidency, as shown by the interviews conducted by Ruth Lundie for the Alan Paton Oral History Project. The difference was that the stories recorded during this period corresponded to a new national narrative articulated by the ANC government, in power since 1994. Alternative memories, however, started to find expression. As early as 1992 Radley Keys, a violence monitor with no link to the ANC, mentioned in an essay on political violence in Mpophomeni the existence of 'people's courts' dispensing justice in a summarily manner

and violent clashes between gangs of ANC sympathisers. In 1997 Simangalis Kumalo heard from dismissed Sarmcol workers that they felt abandoned by the churches after a great display of solidarity in the early days of the strike.

Thanks to the presence in the township of an American doctoral student and the setting up of a community-driven oral history project, more stories were told in the following decade. The memories to which these stories give expression offer a more nuanced view of Mpophomeni's history. The community appeared as having been less united and less cohesive during the years of the Sarmcol strike than previous narratives led to believe. The Mpophomeni residents were not as unanimous in their opposition to Inkatha as was said. Ethically objectionable practices such as 'necklacing' and 'modelling' were remembered and spoken about. Lastly, and more importantly, some BTR Sarmcol workers, frustrated by the low level of monetary compensation received after the 1998 Appeals Court ruling, expressed the view that, in the end, joining the strike probably was a mistake.

The memories of township residents recorded by Judith Singleton and the ZMTE/Sinomlando interviewers during the past ten years differ on a number of counts from those recorded and put in form by the union leaders, academics and social activists who wrote and spoke about Mpophomeni in the mid-1980s in a context marked by political violence and state oppression. At the time a sample of BTR Sarmcol workers and other community residents were interviewed or surveyed – as part of two separate projects – by Debbie Bonnin and Wendy Leeb. If there were dissident views at the time, they did not take a public form. It was only later, in the 1990s and even more so in the 2000s and early 2010s, that a certain number of Mpophomeni residents distanced themselves, in oral history interviews, from the dominant narrative of oppression, unity and resistance promoted by the ANC government.

## **References**

- Abel, R.L. 1995. *Politics by Other Means. Law in the Struggle against Apartheid, 1980-1994*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Aitchison, J., W. Leeb & J. Vaughn 2010. *Political Violence in the Natal Midlands. The Unrest Monitoring Project Papers 1988-1994*.

- Pietermaritzburg: Centre for Adult Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Ashplant, T.G., G. Dawson & M. Roper (eds.) 2000. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. London and New York, Routledge.
- Bhengu, N. 2009. Interview conducted by Thulani Mkhize on 9 June. Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Bodnar, J. 1992. *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bonner, P. 2013. Apartheid, Memory and Other Occluded Pasts. In Opondo, Patricia (ed.): *Culture, Memory and Trauma. Proceedings of the Third Annual National Oral History Conference, Richards Bay, 7-10 November 2006*. Pretoria: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa.
- Bonnin, B. 2002. Claiming Spaces, Changing Places: Political Violence and Women's Protests in KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26,2: 301-316.
- Bonnin, D. 1988. *Class, Consciousness and Conflict in the Natal Midlands, 1940-1987: The Case of the B.T.R. Sarmcol Workers*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Natal.
- Bonnin, D. 2013. Interview conducted by Philippe Denis on 25 February in Durban.
- Campbell, C. 1992. Learning to Kill: Masculinity, the Family and Violence in Natal. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18,3: 614-628.
- Colvin, C. 2003. 'Brothers and sisters do not be afraid of me': Trauma, History and the Therapeutic Imagination in the New South Africa. In Hodgkin, K. & S. Radstone (eds.): *Contested Pasts. The Politics of Memory*. London: Routledge.
- Bonnin, D. & A. Sitas 1988. Lesson from the Sarmcol Strike. In Cobbett, W. & R. Cohen (eds.): *Popular Struggles in South Africa*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Denis, P. 2003. The Cape Huguenots and their Legacy in Apartheid South Africa. In Van Ruymbeke, B. & R.J. Sparks (eds.): *Memory and Identity: The Huguenot in France and the Atlantic Diaspora*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- Denis, P. 2013. The Churches' Response to Political Violence during the Last Years of Apartheid. The Case of Mpophomeni in the Natal Midlands.

- Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 39,1,May: 13-34.
- Desmond, D. 1970. *The Discarded People. An Account of African Resettlement*. Johannesburg, Christian Institute.
- Field, S. 1998. From the 'Peaceful Past' to the 'Violent Present': Memory, Myth and Identity in Guguletu. In Howarth, D. & A. Norval (eds.): *South African in Transition. New Theoretical Perspectives*. London, Macmillan Press.
- Forsyth, P. 1991. *Pietermaritzburg Conflict Chronology. Political Developments in Pietermaritzburg, 1980-1986*. Project on Contemporary Political Conflict in Natal. Pietermaritzburg: Department of Historical Studies, University of Natal.
- Green, A. 2011. Can Memory be Collective? In Ritchie, D. (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford and New-York: Oxford University Press.
- Halbwachs, M. 1950. *The Collective Memory*. New-York: Harper and Row.
- Hamilton, C. 2002. 'Living by Fluidity': Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Archiving. In Hamilton, C. et al. (eds.): *Refiguring the Archive*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Kearney, P. 2009. *Guardian of the Light. Denis Hurley: Renewing the Church, Opposing Apartheid*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Keys, R. 1992. Mpophomeni: The ANC's Dilemma. In Minnaar, A. *Patterns of Violence. Case Studies of Conflict in Natal*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Khoza, C. 2011. Group Interview with other Mpophomeni Residents Conducted on 20 August in Bishopstowe. Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Kruger, L. 1995. That Fluctuating Movement of National Consciousness. Protest, Publicity and Post-Colonial Theatre in South Africa. In Ellen Gainor, J (ed.): *Essays on World Drama, Theatre and Performance, 1775-1975*. London, Routledge.
- Kruger, V. [1991]. SARMCOL Workers Cooperative (SAWCO) Health Project. In Owen, C.P. & E.M. Thomson. *People's Health. The Way Forward. Report of the 1988 NAMDA Annual Conference*. Johannesburg: NAMDA.
- Kumalo, R.S. 1997. *An Assessment of the Involvement in the Churches with their Own Members with Regard to the BTR Sarmcol Strike: Towards a*

- Theology of Work*. Unpublished Honours dissertation, School of Theology, University of Natal.
- Labour Monitoring Group (Natal) 1985. Sarmcol Strike and Stayaway. *South African Labour Bulletin* 11,2, October - November: 89-112.
- Leeb, W. 2012. Activists Murdered, an Old Woman Cries out and the People Mourn. *The Witness* 12 December.
- Leeb, W. 2013. Interview conducted by Philani Dlamini on 19 October 2013 in Pietermaritzburg.
- Leeb, W. & J. Radford 1987a. The Sarmcol Struggle and the Effects of Job Loss in the Community of Mpophomeni. Paper presented at the Eighteenth Conference of the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa, Cape Town, July 1987, Department of Adult Education and Psychology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
- Leeb, W. & J. Radford 1987b. Research in the Black Township of Mpophomeni: Is there Hope? *Reality. A Journal of Liberal and Radical Opinion* 19,1: 17-20.
- Leeb, W. & J. Radford 1988. Ongoing Effects of Mass Dismissal on the Community of Mpophomeni. In Workshop on Regionalism and Restructuring in Natal, University of Natal, Durban, 28-31 January 1988, Paper N° 33.
- Marschall, S. 2010. *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-apartheid South-Africa*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Mbanjwa, P. 2009. Interview conducted by Thulani Mkhize on 9 June. Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Mbona, M. 2010. On Embassy to Ulundi. The Natal Church Leaders Group's Mediation Attempts in War-torn Natal (1987-1990). *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36,1: 141-162.
- Mkhize, S. 1995. *Mass Mobilisation and Resistance: A Study of Selected Stay-aways and Protest Marches in Pietermaritzburg, 1985-1989*. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Natal.
- Mpumelelo 2005. Interview conducted by Judith Singleton in February. Quoted in Singleton 2008: 156.
- Mtshali, J. 2010. Interview conducted by Adam Mafika on 4 December. Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Nasson, B. 2000. The South African War/ Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 and Political Memory in South Africa. In Ashplant, T.G., G. Dawson & M.

- Roper (eds.): *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ndlela, M. 1990. Letter to Jacques Briard, 27 January. Document communicated to the authors by Jacques Briard, former Southern Africa desk officer at Entraide et Fraternité in Brussels.
- Nora, P. (ed.) 1984-1982. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vol. Paris : Gallimard. English translation: *Realms of Memory*, 3 vol. New York: Columbia University Press.
- NoSipho 2005. Interview conducted by Judith Singleton on 10 July. Quoted in Singleton 2008: 158.
- Nuttall, N. & C. Coetzee (eds.) 1998. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Oxford Press.
- Nxumalo, M. 2010. Interview conducted by Msawenkosi Xaba on 2 September.
- Political Violence in the Natal Midlands 1990. Reports from the 24-hour Midlands Monitoring Group of the Midlands Crisis Relief Committee. Unpublished document. Rod Bulman, private collection.
- Portelli, A. 1991. *The Death of Luigi Trastelli and Other Stories*. Albany: State of New York University Press.
- Race Relations Survey 1985* 1986. Johannesburg: South African Race Relations.
- Radford, J. & W. Leeb 1986. *An Investigation into the Effects of the Job Loss on the African Township of Mpophomeni*. Unpublished document. Copy in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg.
- Radstone, S. 2008. Memory Studies: For or Against. *Memory Studies* 1,1: 31-39.
- Radstone, S. & B. Schwarz (eds.) 2010. *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Singleton, J. 2008. 'I love you.' *Coercion and Consent in Postapartheid South Africa*. Unpublished PhD, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University.
- Sitas, A. 1987. The Flight of the Gwala-Gwala Bird: Ethnicity, Populism and Workers' Culture in the Natal Labour Movement. Paper presented at the Wits History Workshop: The Making of Class, 9-14 February, 1987.

*The History of Mpophomeni Told and Retold*

Available at: <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/8086>. (Accessed on 30 March 2013.)

- Thelen, D. (ed.) 1990. *Memory and American History*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Thomson A. 2011. Memory and Remembering in Oral History. In Ritchie, D. (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford and New-York: Oxford University Press.
- von Kotze, A. 1987. 'Worker' Theatre in South Africa'. *New Left Review* I,163,May-June: 83-92.
- von Kotze, A. 1988. *Organise and Act. The Natal Workers Theatre Movement 1983-1987*. Durban: University of Natal Press.

Philippe Denis  
History of Christianity  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Denis@ukzn.ac.za

Philani Dlamini  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
210534167@stu.ukzn.ac.za



# ***Alternation***

---

**Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the  
Arts and Humanities in  
Southern Africa**

**Media and Cultural Studies**

Guest Editor  
*Jean-Philippe Wade*

2015

CSSALL  
Durban

## **Acknowledgement of Reviewers**

We wish to acknowledge the participation of the following reviewers in the production of this issue of *Alternation*.

### **Media and Cultural Studies Reviewers**

Anna Banks, Department of English, University of Idaho

Damian Garside, Northwest University

Corinne Sandwith, University of Pretoria

Anusha Sewchurran , University of KwaZulu-Natal

Johannes A. Smit, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Jean-Philippe Wade, University of KwaZulu-Natal

# Editorial: Media and Cultural Studies

**Jean-Philippe Wade**

*Alternation* has kindly agreed to this special collection of recent academic work from the Department of Media and Cultural Studies (Durban) of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Cultural Studies is an inter-disciplinary field with an endless generosity towards new theoretical emigrants, with the result that it has constantly developed from its early days at the University of Birmingham to its present postmodern incarnation. It encourages experimental and innovative research, and this is reflected in the articles gathered here, which work in that ‘blurred’ space between the humanities and the social sciences - a key and liberating element of Cultural Studies work in our department.

Adam Meikle and Marco Gennaro Bozza – both young academics – have been doing ethnographic research into very contemporary South African subcultures. Adam Meikle’s focus is the local videogaming subculture, and his research drew attention to the necessity of making his careful way through the highly contested terrain of subcultural theory, a journey that was greatly helped by his field-work, whose data entered into a dialogue with competing subcultural conceptualizations. Marco Gennaro Bozza researched the local ‘modder’ subculture – people whose obsessive interest is in the modification of computer hardware, a community sustained on the Internet. Both Meikle and Bozza in their separate ways concluded that these subcultures were ‘substantial’, rather than superficial and transient, as some more adventurous postmodern subcultural theory would have it: their members were dedicated, committed and profoundly passionate about their subcultural activities. In an age of self-fashioning, subcultures were also importantly about the making of identities. What emerges from their studies is the great distance of contemporary subcultural studies from the model provided in the 1970s by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, whose perception of subculturalists as youthful romantic outlaws no longer obtains in a globalized postmodern consumer culture.

Cultural Studies prides itself on encouraging experimental – even carnivalesque – work, drawing the lessons from the ethnographic ‘crisis of representation’ from the 1980s to explore ‘post-objectivist’ research that draws on ‘narrative knowledge’, and uses the genres of poetry, short stories and drama to write about the unique and creative ethnographic encounter between researcher and researched. Genevieve Akal’s article is the most experimental – a postmodern autoethnography written in a fictional form. It is an ethnographic study of the Hipster subculture in Durban: the usual qualitative research of participant observation and interviews was conducted, but then the gathered data was imaginatively transformed into a fictional story, with Akal herself – a hipster insider – autoethnographically providing data on the subculture, and appearing in fictional guise.

Akal’s article – a small part of a larger project – brings to our attention the importance of ‘narrative knowledge’, the insight that social knowledge is not the monopoly of social scientists and their abstract conceptualizations, but can also emerge in fictional story-telling, which also has the unique advantage of showing the concrete ‘lived experience’ of (often everyday) social life. Literature has the added advantage over social science of being able to give *meaning* to human experience: what does it *mean* to live in Sophiatown in the 1950s? This has of course always been assumed in literary studies – why else do we read James Joyce or J.M. Coetzee or T.S. Eliot? – but it is remarkable how resistant more traditional social scientists are to the rival claims of literature to produce truths. For Carolyn Ellis, ‘There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story’ (Ellis 2003: 194), while for Alasdair MacIntyre (1981: 20) ‘man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth’.

If we are a *Homo narrans*, our narrative truth-telling has a great advantage over others who anchor their knowledge-production in claims of detached objectivity, because fiction always has a narrator who situates the fictional discourse within a subjective frame. Fictional writing is almost always a specific *contextual* and thus *embodied* view on human reality, and thus reveals the truth of all research on human beings by human beings – that it can never be objective or naively scientific, and that the great insights into our humanity are not the result of fact gathering and the setting into motion of pseudo-scientific methodologies, but the consequence of the creative imagination at work.

Because it is so challenging to orthodox ways of conducting social science research, I was inspired to write an article which works through the extensive writings and debates on experimental ethnographies, especially the increasingly popular autoethnographies. Nowadays, it is quite usual to encounter in academic ethnographic journals poems, stories, plays, and so on, and Akal's difficult article works within that innovative tradition. I hope my article will provide the theoretical framework necessary to appreciate and understand these new – and powerfully imaginative – ways of doing ethnography.

Zakia Jeewa explores the often huge fandoms that congregate as global virtual communities on the Internet, particularly the social media site *Twitter*, and pays particular attention to role playing, where fans masquerade as fictional characters, and in so doing reveal the remarkable ability of cyberspace – as an autonomous zone – to enable a *playing* with individual identity. Identity is no longer the determined and stable effect of omnipotent social and ideological apparatuses, but instead suddenly appears as malleable, fluid, something to be creatively (re-) made rather than suffered. Such self-inventing, where fans move effortlessly between 'reality' and 'fiction', enables the deconstruction of the reality/fiction opposition itself. As Jeewa explains it, 'with fandom, *the fictional becomes real, and reality becomes fictional*'.

These essays then draw attention to the remarkable ability of Cultural Studies to ask properly *subversive* questions of the traditional academic logics which prevent us from creatively encountering the nature of our contemporary world, including the disabling binary logics of abstract concepts/narrative truth, truth/fiction, and reality/fiction. The only serious work will be that which chooses to live in the exhilarating deconstructing spaces 'in-between' these rigid oppositions, to which we need to be relentlessly opposed.

## References

- MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After Virtue*. Los Angeles, California: University of Notre Dame.
- Ellis, C. 2003. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

*Jean-Philippe Wade*

Jean-Philippe Wade  
Media and Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
wade@ukzn.ac.za

# A New Approach to Subculture: Gaming as a Substantial Subculture of Consumption

Adam Meikle  
Jean-Philippe Wade

## Abstract

The article works within and against both modernist and postmodernist conceptualizations of subcultures in order adequately to theorize the contemporary videogaming subculture in South Africa, researched using qualitative methodologies in 2011-2012. Distancing itself from the early left-modernist 'subculture as proletarian resistance' model by drawing on postmodern accounts that stress fluidity, diversity, and a subcultural location within consumer culture, this study nevertheless resists their claimed ephemerality and superficiality of subcultural commitment. Hodkinson's 2002 subculture study as a compromise between the two schools stressing subcultural *substance* was profitably used to study contemporary videogaming.

**Keywords:** videogaming, subcultural theories, consumer culture, cultural economy, subculture of consumption, Paul Hodkinson.

## Introduction

Anyone embarking upon research into a contemporary subculture is faced with two opposing schools: the 'modernist' approach to subcultures seminally defined by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the founding department of the discipline of cultural studies at the University of Birmingham (Hall & Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979), and the more recent 'postmodernist' school (Thornton 1995; Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2000; Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003). The latter offered a sustained critique of the

very foundations of the CCCS approach to the analysis of subcultures, and has much of value to say, but my own journey through these rival claims was intimately bound up with the data I was obtaining from my own qualitative ethnographic research, so that a dialectical process emerged where theoretical concepts and ethnographic data entered into dialogue with each other, and the results of that I will discuss below. The focus of my research was to identify how serious gamers (those who play videogames) manifested themselves as an authentic contemporary subculture in South Africa, with most of the research taking place in Durban and extending to Johannesburg over a two year period (2011-2012). The study was not interested in games as texts, that is, their semiotic or other textual analysis to reveal their meanings and themes; instead I was interested in the community of lived experiences that developed around the acts of gaming, a subculture with its own interests, dynamics and boundaries that differentiated itself from others. In this article I will draw attention to (a) the theoretical model for subcultures I eventually settled on, explaining how my ethnographic and other evidence influenced my conceptualizations, and (b) provide ethnographic evidence of how that theory and its set of concepts illuminated the gaming subculture.

For Don Slater, consumer culture ‘denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets’ (1997: 8). It is, that is, not only a consumer economy, but a market-mediated *culture*, where the citizens of contemporary societies live out their meanings and subjectivities. In their seminal work on the ‘anthropology of consumption’, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood argue that:

Instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that *they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture*. It is standard ethnographic practice to assume that all material possessions carry social meanings and to concentrate a main part of cultural analysis upon their use as communicators (1979: 38: my emphases).

Material goods made by capitalist corporations for the motive of profit are dignified by their vocation to communicate culture. Lash and Urry (1994: 64) identify the ‘blurred’ contemporary division between the economy and

culture, and Paul du Gay (1997: 3-5) identifies a new 'cultural economy', with the economic sphere 'thoroughly saturated with culture'. Not only are global entertainment corporations like Sony and Time Warner selling 'culture' on an unprecedented scale, but increasingly goods are 'aestheticized', encrusted with cultural meanings by the 'cultural intermediaries' of advertising and marketing. Baudrillard (1975) wrote of 'sign-value' replacing 'use' and 'exchange' value, so that what we actually purchase is not some functional object, but cultural *meanings* in a game of status and prestige. Hence also his 'commodity-sign', which helpfully captures the processes of advertising itself, because, as McCracken (1986) argued, advertisers transfer meaning from the 'culturally constituted world' to consumer goods, and what the consumer therefore buys are those *cultural* meanings with which the products are now associated: we purchase not the cigarette, but the masculinity.

For Bourdieu (1984), social distinctions are not explained solely by economic differentiation, but by the differing cultural 'tastes' of social classes which are materialized in what (material and symbolic) goods you buy and do not buy. And indeed if we look for the central impetus behind contemporary consumption, it is in the self-fashioning of *identity*, as Bocoock (2002: 67) explains:

Consumption has become an active process involving the symbolic construction of a sense of both collective and individual identities. This sense of identity should no longer be seen as given to people by membership of a specific economic class, or social status group, or directly by ethnicity or gender. Identities have to be actively constructed by more and more people for themselves. In his process of active identity construction, consumption has come to play a central role.

For Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994), the traditional institutional machinery of identity production is weakening in our period of 'reflexive modernity', and ordinary people are therefore obliged to take on the responsibility of reflexively fashioning their identities, and, as we have seen, they generally do so through consumption.

These cultural and economic developments have also shifted the focus of cultural studies, as McRobbie (1992: 730) pointed out:

Identity could be seen as dragging cultural studies into the 1990s by acting as a kind of guide to how people see themselves, not as class subjects, not as psychoanalytic subjects, not as subjects of ideology, not as textual subjects, but as active agents whose sense of self is projected onto and expressed in an expansive range of cultural practices, including texts, images, and commodities.

If therefore ordinary people are no longer considered, as McRobbie showed, to be the unwitting products of determining structures, but are instead understood as ‘active consumers’ or ‘active audiences’ reflexively acting upon reality and themselves, then the meaning of ‘consumption’ shifts from its almost entirely derogatory meaning, with its suggestions of mindless manipulation, to a much more nuanced appreciation of the complex role that consumption plays in everyday *culture* as a way not only of materializing culture, but also of fabricating subjectivities. The rigid division between the economic and the cultural is simply no longer tenable.

It is in this light that we can speak of a ‘subculture of consumption’ which Schouten and McAlexander (1995: 43) define as ‘a distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity’. They continue that ‘people identify with certain objects or consumption activities and, through those objects or activities, identify with other people’ (1995: 48). Their focus is the Harley Davidson motorcycle, and the subcultural sociality that is voluntarily formed around it and its deeply-held cultural meanings, such as that of outlaw freedom. The focus of this article is the video gaming subculture in South Africa, a ‘distinctive subgroup’ with a ‘shared commitment’ to gaming, and a contemporary one where the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’ constantly ‘blur’ into each other.

Videogames are often posited as a trivial media form not worthy of in-depth analysis and study (Newman 2004: 13). To the non-gaming individual, videogames may appear ‘impenetrably complex and monotonous’, and even incomprehensible (Newman 2004: 13), and stereotypically belonging to a world of estranged lonely youths with a predilection for violence! And yet, the sheer size of the gaming industry, and its penetration into the everyday life of millions upon millions of people around the globe, surely invites topical academic attention. A recent statistical survey conducted by the ESA (Entertainment Software Association

2011) revealed that in 2011 72% of American households play videogames, and that the videogaming industry in the USA generated sales of 16.6 billion dollars. Every sizeable shopping mall in South Africa has a gaming outlet. While it may have begun as a niche interest, videogaming is now part of the mainstream leisure experience, a process no doubt accelerated by the emergence of the gaming console (Playstation 3; XBOX 360; and Ninetendo Wii). There are only a few scholarly texts on videogames, and no comprehensive critical history of video games and the gaming subculture (Murphy 2004: 228). This is in contrast to the strong academic focus on the history and analysis of computer-mediated communications. However, the lack of critical scholarship of video games and the gaming subculture is hard to understand when the field is so huge, due to the size of the videogames industry and its mass appeal in modern society (Murphy 2004: 228-229).

The ‘massification’ of videogaming has led to the rise of different types of gamers. Frans Mayra (2008: 27) argues that there exists (a) the casual gamer, a person who invests time into playing one specific game, type of game style, or genre of game; and (b) the *hardcore* gamer who embraces gaming culture to the fullest and in many cases is involved in its social aspects (online and offline), and also differs from the casual gamer in the intensity of their dedication to gaming. The gaming subculture I researched is made up of these second ‘hardcore’ gamers who, as we shall see, also consciously differentiate themselves from the more casual gaming masses. If subcultures traditionally separate themselves from the ‘mainstream’, then ‘mainstream’ for hardcore gamers largely means the casual gamer.

## **Subculture Theory**

I will critically examine the CCCS approach by confining myself to Hebdige’s seminal *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). His argument largely rested on an examination of the original punk movement in the late 1970s. He argued that a youth subculture can be seen as a type of ‘noise’, a semiotic and cultural resistance disrupting the social normality of the hegemonic order. It can become ‘an actual mechanism of semantic disorder’ creating a ‘blockage in the system of representation’ (1979: 355). This is achieved through ‘spectacular style’ (a way of dressing and appearance). Style is indicative of the differentiation of a subcultural grouping from

mainstream society; punks, for example appropriated everyday commodities and re-signified them in aberrant, counter-hegemonic ways. He argued further that these 'distinctive rituals of consumption, through style' allow the subculture to reveal 'its 'secret' identity and communicate its forbidden meanings'. Subcultures are defined by group identity, with strong boundary maintenance, stylistic homogeneity within the membership of a subculture, and with a high degree of commitment from members (Muggleton 2000: 52), their very spectacular style ensuring a clear line between themselves and outsiders. There was a strong dose of CCCS Marxist theory at work in Hebdige's analysis: subcultures were made up of working-class youth, and authenticated themselves through their symbolic acts of resistance to the dominant capitalist system.

For Hebdige, subcultures are eventually 'incorporated' into the dominant cultural paradigm through two ways (1979: 356). Firstly, this is achieved through the conversion of sub-cultural signs into mass-produced objects (commodities): punk fashion is sold on the High Street. Secondly, there is a re-labelling and re-definition of deviant behaviour by the mainstream media in order to ideologically incorporate the subculture into dominant meanings. Now absorbed by the consumer culture of capitalism to which they were unremittingly hostile, subcultures like punks become a parody of themselves, their erstwhile signs of rebellion now empty fashionable and profitable gestures.

Sarah Thornton (1995: 104) pioneered the usage of the concept 'subcultural capital', which can be defined as the pertinent cultural knowledge necessary for members to acquire in order to obtain legitimacy within a subculture. She defines subcultural capital as 'a currency which correlates with and legitimizes unequal statuses' (1996: 104). She drew attention to the internal hierarchies present in contemporary subcultures, in her case club culture, determined by the possession of subcultural capital. In other words, far from being revolutionary enclaves à la CCCS, subcultures actually contained their own hierarchies and inequalities of power, most notably around being an 'insider' or on the fringes, and around being in possession of arcane subcultural knowledge of which outsiders are ignorant. Those in possession of large amounts of subcultural capital in effect policed the boundaries of the subculture, deciding who was 'in' and who was 'out'.

Furthermore, Thornton pointed out, far from being determinedly (working-) class conscious, the clubbers she researched saw themselves as

‘classless’, temporarily free as youths from the pernicious British class structure.

Finally, Thornton argued, Hebdige’s study, with its assumption that the media and commerce only intervened at the end to kill off a subculture, was unable to provide proper assessment of the essential role of the media and commerce from the very beginning of a subculture’s life:

The idea that authentic culture is somehow outside media and commerce is a resilient one. In its full-blown romantic form, the belief suggests that grassroots cultures resist and struggle with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world. At other times, the perspective lurks between the lines, inconspicuously informing parameters of research, definitions of culture and judgments of value. (1995: 116).

She showed how various media play strongly supportive roles in the growth of a subculture, form enabling communication between subculturalists to producing a defining coherence to the subculture. With regard to Hebdige’s punks, we can for example point to the important role that Malcolm McLaren and Vivien Westwood’s Chelsea commercial clothes shop played in the emergence of punk style (it did not spontaneously appear from the streets), and indeed in the emergence of punk’s leading band, The Sex Pistols (who were assembled by McLaren), whose music was also distributed by major record companies. For Thornton, and postmodern subculture theorists generally, Hebdige’s ‘romantic’ narrative of anti-capitalist resistance from a youthful force initially outside of its ambit, is both necessary to his Marxist analysis and greatly misleading. My own work on videogaming found these insights to be particularly helpful, since the subculture is defined primarily by a medium – videogames - which is fuelled by commerce. With gaming, capitalism and consumption and the media are there right from the beginning.

A further postmodern criticism of the CCCS approach stems from the fact that the approach cannot effectively deal with the gap between scientific constructs (theoretical models) applied by academics and the ‘common sense reality of social actors’, whose crucial subjective views and meanings can only be accessed through qualitative ethnographic research (Muggleton 2000: 11). Instead, a Marxist/Semiotic model is imposed upon the subculture: typically the approach identifies a historical problem faced by the working

class, and semiotically ‘decodes the political and ideological meanings of the subcultural response’ (Muggleton 2000: 12). Hebdige’s modernist reliance on High Theory portrays the punk subculture in the light of political struggle when arguably that resistance may have not been apparent to the punks themselves. Punks, perhaps, saw their subcultural groups more as ‘casual friendship networks’ than resistance movements that were created to oppose the dominant cultural paradigm, and societal authority (Crawford & Rutter 2006: 153). Hebdige’s commitment to working class struggle is glaringly revealed when he excludes middle-class ‘Hippies’ from the definition of subculture (1979: 148).

The final group of postmodern concepts I found useful emerges from the ‘post-structuralism’ of postmodern theory, which is to say its stress upon the *limits* of structures: that systems are far less stable than they appear, that they are not internally homogenous but more usually trying repressively to contain a multitude of heterogeneous energies, and that a more useful metaphor for our times is that of fluidity and flow. We live in a ‘highly elaborated social structure’, where individuals are constantly realigning their social allegiances into different formations (Fiske 1989: 24), and where people form ‘cultural allegiances with different, not to say contradictory, social groups’ whilst carrying on their lives (Fiske 1989: 30). Muggleton (2000: 20-34) notes that the fundamental flaw of the CCSS approach is in not fathoming the importance of the mobility of contemporary subcultures, and instead providing portraits of rather static structures (social class; subcultures), and where moreover, the individual is deemed irrelevant and is rather argued to be representative of the whole subculture. As a result, homogeneity is emphasised, disregarding the heterogeneous nature of subculturalists.

In a similar light, membership of contemporary subcultures was seen to be ‘fluid’ (Weinzierl & Muggleton 2003), and thus it was argued the CCCS approach is ineffective in assessing the fluidity of the membership and structure in contemporary subcultures. Bennett (1999) was one of the first academics to write about this fallacy and address it with his concept of ‘Neo-Tribes’. Bennett adapted Maffesoli’s concept of *tribus* (tribes) and applied it to youth involved in the dance scene in Britain, and argued that these groupings which had previously been understood as ‘coherent subcultures’ were something else entirely. Rather he argues they are to be understood as a ‘series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating

memberships' (Bennett 1999: 600). Postmodern subcultures thus have these qualities: membership is defined by sense of fragmented identity; members have transient attachment to the subculture with a lower degree of commitment; and have multiple stylistic identities. As such, there is stylistic heterogeneity within these subcultures, with weak boundary maintenance for the membership, a higher rate of mobility for members, who are concerned with the 'surface' of style and image (Muggleton 2000: 52).

The gaming subculture's own membership is loose and fluid, not bounded by traditional conceptions of subculture such as the punk movement as described by Hebdige, where rigid structure is apparent (Mayra 2008: 25). There is enormous difficulty in defining exactly what the gaming subculture is when using the CCCS approach (Mayra 2008: 25). Consequently, the gaming subculture fits well into the post-subculture notion of present day subcultures that are fluid and do not follow the traditional conception of a subculture (Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003: 7).

In my field-work while observing and interviewing gamers, I found most of the postmodern critique of the CCCS model convincing, and I rejected the following CCCS concepts: the Marxist theory of youth working-class resistance to capitalism (there was no evidence in my research of anti-capitalist militancy, or any social class identification as gamers, while the average age of a gamer in the USA is 37 years old (ESA 2013): this is not exclusively a youth subculture); the notion that subcultures necessarily focused on 'spectacular style' (this obviously was not what gaming was about); that authentic subcultures are outside of commerce and the media (gamers belong precisely to a 'subculture of consumption' focused on the media products called games); and the notion that subcultures were rigidly structured and homogenous (my research revealed a wide subcultural heterogeneity. The gaming subculture has a varied membership, and because of the nature of the gaming industry, which produces a multiplicity of titles, within different genres, there are many different groupings of people around these many titles and genres).

In recent decades, consumer culture has expanded dramatically, its growth greatly assisted by globalization (Muggleton 2000: 30). Therefore, it is inevitable that a subculture may arise from the trenches of modern consumerism, where both media and commerce intersect (Muggleton 2000: 57). Videogames are a prime example of this trend. Gaming can be viewed as an authentic contemporary subculture, born out of the act of consumption of a

mere product, which is the videogame. One could helpfully describe gaming as a ‘subculture of consumption’ (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Arnould & Thompson 2005; Thompson & Troester 2002), as I earlier did. Thus, through the pursuit of common consumption interests participants in a subculture of consumption create distinctive, yet at the same time fragmented, subcultures of consumption (Arnould & Thompson 2005: 873). The networks of ‘meanings and practices’ that characterise a subculture of consumption are not fixed in a ‘particular set of socioeconomic circumstances’ which is reflected in the membership (Thompson & Troester 2002: 553).

## New Model of Subcultural Analysis

However, my ethnographic research also threw up a problem with the postmodern approach to subcultures, and this was to do with what I take to be an excessive reaction to the highly structured notion of subculture one found with Hebdige/CCCS: the new affirmation was not only a stress on ‘fluidity’, but also on *superficiality* and *ephemerality*, with subculturalists flitting from one slightly interesting subculture to another like television channel hopping, and never seriously committing to any. It was all ‘depthless’ postmodernism. In my interviews with gamers, I discovered quite the opposite, that the subcultural commitment to gaming was treated very seriously by the members of the gaming subculture.

My theoretical research drew me to the recent work of Hodkinson (2002) on the Goth subculture. Hodkinson’s model offers what seems to me to be an entirely helpful theoretical compromise between the ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodernist’ subcultural schools. This had the virtue of allowing research to focus on what Hodkinson calls subcultural ‘substance’ – the depth of *commitment* to the subculture and its activities by its members, as he points out:

But in spite of overlaps and complexities, the initial temptation to describe goths using a term such as *neo-tribe* or *lifestyle* was gradually tempered by the realization that such a move would have over-inflated the diversity and instability of their grouping (2002: 29).

Hodkinson allows the researcher to examine subcultures born out of modern consumerism, which have distinctive values that set them apart as ‘authentic’ subcultures.

His subcultural concepts are also useful for subcultures which have a global membership. Therefore gaming as an authentic contemporary subculture, entrenched in a paradigm of modern consumerism, has a shared ‘translocal sense of identity’ within its membership (Hodkinson 2002: 28). This means simply that the membership of the gaming subculture is global, and that many of the qualities and values shared by South African gamers are similar to those found abroad. A contemporary subculture would have to be understood as ‘translocal’ (Hodkinson 2002: 28). This is contrary to the nature of the understanding of traditional subculture, as most often subcultures were tied to specific locales, at specific moments in time. However, the reality is that globalisation has changed the way in which subcultural dissemination operates. Therefore, it was necessary to identify comparable ‘consistent and distinctive sets of tastes and values’ across the whole gaming subculture to understand how the subculture operates on the local, and national, level.

Hodkinson (2002: 28) proposes a model which identifies ‘translocal cultural groupings of substance’, with ‘substance’ referring to the criteria relevant to proclaiming the authenticity of a contemporary subculture. Hodkinson also abandoned the Hebdige/CCCS emphasis on political resistance through ‘semiotic warfare’ and its allied working-class focus, as well as the necessary subversion of consumer culture, and rather concentrated on identifying what makes a subculture ‘substantial’. He favours his own model entitled the ‘Four Indicators of (Sub)Cultural Substance’ which conceptualises such cultural substance, yet does not entail any major return to traditional forms of subcultural theory.

Hodkinson (2002: 29) found it difficult to categorise Goths because of their stylistic diversity, dynamism, non-absolute boundaries and their varied levels of commitment. Additionally, he found their spontaneous creative practices and usage of external (and internal) networks of information and organisation involving media and commerce perplexing. Crucially, fluidity and substance are not matters of binary opposition, but of ‘degree’.

His central theme of ‘cultural substance’ is broken down into four indicative criteria of identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness and

autonomy (Hodkinson 2002: 29-30).

The criterion of 'consistent distinctiveness' is the necessity for an 'authentic' subculture to have a set of shared tastes and values which are distinctive from those of other groups. These shared distinctive values must also be reasonably consistent across all members of the subculture from various locations, to the past and present forms of the community. However, the reality of any research study means that there are limitations: time progression differences are quite difficult to measure around gaming in South Africa with the limited research period. Ultimately, one has to accept internal variation among members of a subculture, and variable changes over time.

Hodkinson (2002: 30-31) notes the lack of focus on individual members of a subculture, in terms of their own subjective accounts, throughout the history of subcultural study. In other words, he takes issue with a lack of focus on 'Identity' in subcultural study. The indicator of identity is for Hodkinson where the researcher focuses on the subjective perceptions of the subculturalists themselves that they are 'involved in a distinct cultural grouping and share feelings of identity with one another'. This will lead, for Hodkinson, to the identification of a clear awareness of a sustained sense of group identity. Centrally what this does is help to define structural understanding from the perspectives of gamers themselves, who are internally involved in the 'subculture' of gaming.

'Commitment' (Hodkinson 2002: 31) means that subcultural activities can saturate, and dominate, members' entire lives, invading their free time, determining their friendships, where they shop, what commodities they collect, where they go out, and internet usage. The levels of commitment vary from member to member, and an increasing display of open commitment to the subculture can further a member's standing. This defines insiders and outsiders. Fundamentally, this type of concentrated dedication can be indicative of distinguishing subcultures from more 'fleeting' cultural groupings.

Hodkinson (2002: 32-33) regards both commerce and the media as crucially important to 'the construction and facilitation of subcultures': a sign of a substantial subculture is that subculturalists are themselves involved in commerce (running a shop selling subcultural goods, for example) and media (promoting or articulating the subculture, or a website community forum). Within this criterion, known as 'Autonomy', the importance of different

scales and types of media and commerce is essential. Inevitably, a subculture will be connected to the society and politico-economic system that it is situated in, but retaining a high level of subcultural autonomy. This criterion acknowledges the fine line between profit-making in subcultural businesses which are voluntary and grass-roots in origin, and commercial profiteering. Hodkinson's interest lies in theoretically distinguishing between internal (subcultural) and external (non-subcultural products and services) forms of media and commerce.

For the purposes of researching the gaming subculture as a contemporary subculture, per Hodkinson's (2002) model, a qualitative research methodology was implemented. Essentially, qualitative research gives the researcher the opportunity to describe the 'lifeworlds' of subcultural gamers, and represent their subjective point of view within the research (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke 2004: 3). The research framework of participant observation was employed to allow the researcher to become immersed in the gaming subculture, and participate in the social activities of gamers like multiplayer competitions, gaming-centric exhibitions and social gatherings, and doing so for an extended period of time (Whyte 2001: 162-163). This allowed for the opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews, which consisted of a list of pre-determined questions to ask, but the method of asking remained as casual as possible (Berger 2000: 112). Research subjects - gamers - were sampled purposively which meant subjects could be picked due to prior research experience fitting within pre-determined criteria, mainly being that gamers are either 'hardcore' or 'casually' committed players of videogames (Bertrand & Hughes 2005: 68). Thematic analysis was chosen as the means of analysis as it allowed for an easier method of 'data reduction' and made it easier, as important themes (or concepts) could emerge from within the 'data set' (Ayres 2008: 867).

13 gamers were interviewed. Both 'hard core' and 'casual' gamers were interviewed; six independent game developers were interviewed; nine gamers were men, and 4 were women. Participant observation was mostly carried out at venues where gamers congregate: in Durban I attended many monthly DBNGamers events, and in Johannesburg I attended twice the annual and very large rAge Expo, the mecca for South African gamers. I am a serious gamer myself, and therefore a participant in the subculture I was researching. For example, I play as a member of 'squad' in the game Battlefield 3 online, and I am currently working as part of the gaming

industry as a journalist for a local South African website called ‘eGamer’, which focuses on all things gaming.

## **Analysis**

Data resulting from the usage of Hodkinson’s model proved to be both interesting and often unexpected. A perspective of the inner-workings of the gaming subculture’s structure were gained, and where I assumed the subculture to be structurally fluid, it was surprising to find a more definite and hierarchical structure. This was interesting because despite the claims of fluidity by postsubcultural theorists such as Muggleton (2000), the gaming subculture proved to have a ‘structure’ propelled by a sustained shared sense of group identity (Hodkinson 2002: 31). This structure was informed by a connection of gamers to other gamers, achieved through a ‘set of shared tastes and values’ (Hodkinson 2002: 30). This was found to be quite consistent among hardcore gamers, be it if they were hardcore female or male gamers, and this covered the area of Hodkinson’s first and second criteria of ‘consistent distinctiveness’ and ‘identity’, which I have run together.

For example, one of the hardcore gamers interviewed, named Caveshen, had much to say in regards to the shared values that gamers have, and it was from this one can discern a structure emerging in gaming as a contemporary subculture. As a result, these shared values inform a sustained ‘shared sense’ of group identity among peers within the gaming subculture, who felt the same way about videogames. It was revealed that largely hardcore gamers felt this way.

Gaming itself is somewhat ‘interior’ in displaying its values, as an external display of one being a gamer is not a universal practice among gamers. This is part of the larger question of what exactly the signs of being a gamer are, if external displays of commitment are not universal among the core of the gaming subculture. Caveshen (2012) had this to say:

I think if there’s a level of confidence. If you mentioned a game you get a response. You could pick up that they’re a gamer. A certain ‘what are you talking about’ kind of look. If you mention a game you get this sort of knowing sense from them.

This element factors into the ‘level of knowledge’ that a gamer has, their

subcultural capital. Caveshen (2012) defines this knowledge by saying, 'It's this inbred knowledge that you can only have if you've played games. And then if you don't have it, it's easily identifiable'. Displaying this 'knowledge' to other games can be seen as a qualifying statement that you are a 'gamer', because you demonstrate your knowledge in conversation, or other such situations. This is easily one of the most important shared values among gamers, and is a consistent factor in considering who is and is not a gamer, at the subcultural core of gaming. Being considered a gamer, according to Caveshen, is about having the knowledge in order to be what gamers term a 'hardcore gamer', and many revere as the 'true' ideal of what a gamer is and should be. As such, Caveshen (2012) further says that these types of gamers have a varied language discourse that differs from what they would consider 'casual gamers', or in the subcultural sense 'periphery members' of the overall gaming community. Caveshen (2012) argues that:

Gamers like to speak in memes, especially. They'll try their hardest with a lot of 'awesomes' and hyperbole in their speech, and match something to a game. They'll use metaphors to compare something to a game, or relate something back into conversation to a game they played, for effect.

This agreed to by a female hardcore gamer who was interviewed, named Nadine. She agreed that 'game speak' (knowledge about games) is an important determining factor of whether a person can be validated as a 'gamer' by other games, as she says:

Well if you talk to someone and you go to the topic of gaming, or entertainment, or hobbies, or whatever and they say they play games. It easy to know if they're a casual gamer if they give you the 'Oh yeah, Modern Warfare!'. You know that's all they play, or Need For Speed or something. That's all they play (Nadine 2012).

Nadine (2012) recognises that distinguishing a person as a gamer is through the 'things they mention', and gamers themselves are more knowledgeable than those on the periphery, who are normally considered casual gamers. For Nadine, a true gamer is someone who knows what's happening in the current gaming 'scene', and this is an expression of their explicit interest in gaming.

Typically, casual gamers would not have this in-depth knowledge.

Regarding Hodkinson's next criterion of 'commitment', the gaming researcher quickly learns that for hardcore gamers their dedication to gaming is a serious life commitment. Commitment is a shared value for many hardcore gamers because it largely defines who they are. The sheer number of hours per day that hardcore gamers spend on gaming emphasised their deep commitment. Gaming – new game titles, for example - was also the main topic of conversation. Caveshen (2012), who is intensely committed to videogaming, had to say this regarding a gamer's dedication:

I think it's the willingness to want to play games everyday, and if they don't play games they feel incomplete with their day. It's just their dedication towards gaming. They will for instance want to talk about gaming all the time, and if they go out and have money their first thought is to spend it on games (Caveshen 2012).

When asked about other indicators of a gamer, such as clothing, Caveshen (2012) said:

Yes, to some extent I have come across people who are wearing gaming t-shirts. I'll walk up to them and ask if they play games. If they know this and that, and sometimes they won't know the character on the t-shirt, and they just bought it somewhere. And that's a shock because you wouldn't see that usually. For the most part, like 90% of the time, ya, if someone's wearing a gaming t-shirt then, ya. First of all they're brave to wear it in public and for playing games it's an easy indicator. Just now and again you get the one or two who don't really play games.

Of course, if someone is wearing a gaming related t-shirt that may be a visual indicator of the person's status as a gamer, but it is not a shared value that all gamers wear gaming t-shirts in order to express their distinction as a gamer. Gaming does not follow the trends of more traditionally viewed subcultures such as punks, where the visual appearance of participants is a key part of the subcultural experience.

The final criterion of 'autonomy' refers to the presence of subcultural media and commerce. Looming everywhere in gaming research is the

presence of videogame studios who make all the games that are played. There was a difference between the subcultural (internal), albeit grass roots, approach of some independent videogame studios, and the more commercial studios backed by huge global publishers (external) that are solely profit-driven. Throughout the research process, independent videogame developers and studios (or indie studios) were interviewed to provide the ‘subcultural’ and an ‘internal’ perspective about the videogame industry. One of the most notable South African studios interviewed called *QCF Design* (2011), renowned for their game called *Desktop Dungeons*, had much to say. In connection to the question of whether they were driven by profit in developing games, they said:

It doesn't make sense to say we're an indie studio; we're going to make something for profit. Yeah, we're trying to survive and obviously we like to and do want to continue and succeed in making things, because we're making things that we believe in. But we're not trying to go at like no point 'okay' that we are designing by committee. There are no publisher meetings (QCF Design 2011: 2).

This demonstrates a lack of interest in profits. For *QCF Design*, being creatively passionate in the development of their videogames is paramount. For them, videogame development starts ‘out as personal projects’ and develops into a business venture only much later down the line (QCF Design 2011: 2). *QCF Design* (2011: 7) emphatically state, ‘Look we're definitely gamers. You can be a games developer without being a gamer, but you're missing out if you're not playing games’. They demonstrate a link to being ‘gamers’ that develop games as a means of expressing their passion, and this makes them connected subculturally to the gaming subculture. Their own imperative is not commercial by nature, but rather one of personal dedication to gaming.

South Africa's subcultural gaming media is mostly made up of independent gaming websites such as eGamer (egamer.co.za), MyGaming (mygaming.co.za), EL33TONLINE (el33tonline.com), Lazygamer.net (lazygamer.net), ZOMBIEGAMER (zombiegamer.co.za) and ITF Gaming (itfgaming.com), where gaming developments are discussed, and new games reviewed. Opportunities for discussion ensure that these websites also play a

role in maintaining a gamer subculture by supporting virtual communities of gamers. Gamer magazines produced in South Africa are limited to *NAG* and *PC Format*. However, *PC Format* is centered explicitly on PC hardware and the PC modding scene rather than actual gaming, which is a minor focus. Therefore *NAG* is really the only paid-for gaming magazine published in South Africa, and relies upon advertising and subscription costs. The independent gaming websites and *NAG* are equally subcultural in their approach in both subcultural employment and being motivated by a love for gaming. For example, *NAG* hosts the rAge Expo in Johannesburg every year and brings the overall South African gaming community together, whilst independent gaming websites have their own communities and followers, and these websites directly discuss gaming-related issues and communicate with gamers on a regular basis. And so we can conclude that there is a rather rich presence of both subcultural media and commerce in the South African gaming subculture.

What Hodkinson (2002) does not account for is the overlapping of his own criteria in terms of thematic structure, as they are linked to one another. One of the implications of this overlap is that Hodkinson (2002) does not factor into his own criteria the position of women, and this came across strongly in the research conducted. One must understand that although female gamers frequent the gaming subculture, it is still male dominated. One of the research participants Lisa, a female gamer who works as a professional gaming journalist, had much to say about the reception of female gaming journalists within the industry. She said:

Definitely, like I mean especially in this industry there's not that many game journalists that are girls. When you go to an event and you might be the only girl there. I don't know what other people feel about, but I feel a little bit left out like I'm the only girl here what do these guys think about me (Lisa 2012).

Lisa (2012) further elaborated upon this saying that she had a similar experience at an international gaming-related conference called *Captive*, where she was one of three female journalists, out of sixty journalists from across the world. It was in these situations that Lisa felt a sense of exclusion because of her gender, and in turn experienced a diminished sense of group identity. This was indeed an interesting research development as it showcased

a side of subcultural gender politics that both the CCCS model and Hodkinson's model do not effectively take into account.

## **Conclusion**

Emerging from the research data was the central idea that gamers *define their own subculture*, its structure, its lifestyle, and what it means to be a 'gamer'. This is one of the most valuable aspects of subcultural research, the recognition that these micro-worlds, including the vital structures of ongoing *sociality* and the shared meanings circulating within the subculture, are entirely the voluntary creation of the subculturalists themselves, these 'active consumers' who invent cultural worlds around acts of consumption. When critical academic attention is focused on centres of oppressive power located in the State or in the offices of corporations, it misses this grass-roots creativity and unwillingness to simply follow the 'mainstream' by subculturalists, who on the whole bring an enormous passion and commitment to the micro-world they inhabit. It is a passion that is often missing in the alienating structures of corporate and bureaucratic environments. The postmodern assumption that contemporary subcultures are impetuously fluid has therefore proved to be only partially appropriate when applied to gaming as a subculture.

Another interesting result from the collected data was the realisation that gamers are directly involved in the videogames industry as videogame developers, and that the gaming community is involved in a conversation with videogame developers, studios and publishers. The reality is that gamers are a part of a subculture which is defined by the videogames industry; however, gamers simultaneously also have a direct effect on the videogames industry itself. For these intensely committed gamers, however, buying a game is not only leisure, as it no doubt is for most of those millions who play games. For the members of this subculture, it is finally about fashioning an appropriate identity for oneself, and what more serious a game is that?

## **References**

Arnould, E. & C. Thompson 2005. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, 4: 873.

- Ayres, L. 2008. Thematic Coding and Analysis. In Given, L. (ed.): *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Volumes 1 & 2. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Baudrillard, J. 1975. *The Mirror of Production*. St. Louis: Telos Press.
- Beck, U., A Giddens & S. Lash 1994. *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bennett, A. 1999. Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste. *Sociology* 33, 3: 600.
- Berger, A.A. 2000. *Media and Communication Research Methods: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Bertrand, I. & P. Hughes 2005. *Media Research Methods: Audiences, Institutions, Texts*. Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bocock, R. 2002. *Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.
- Crawford, G. & J. Rutter 2006. Digital Games and Cultural Studies. In Rutter, J. & J. Bryce (eds.): *Understanding Digital Games*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Douglas, M. & B. Isherwood 1979. *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Du Gay, P. (ed.) 1997. *Production of Culture/ Cultures of Production*. London: Sage.
- Entertainment Software Association 2011. *2011 Sales, Demographics and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Videogame Industry*. Washington: Entertainment Software Association. Available at: [http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa\\_ef\\_2012.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa_ef_2012.pdf).
- Entertainment Software Association 2014. *2014 Sales, Demographics and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Videogame Industry*. Washington: Entertainment Software Association. Available at: [http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ESA\\_EF\\_2014.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ESA_EF_2014.pdf).
- Fiske, J. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Flick, U., E von Kardorff & I. Steinke 2004. What is Qualitative Research? An Introduction to the Field. In Flick, U., E. von Kardorff & I. Steinke (eds.): *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

- Hall, S. & T. Jefferson (eds.) 1976. *Resistance through Rituals*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hebdige, D. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen.
- Hodkinson, P. 2002. *Goth: Identity Style and Subculture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Lash, S. & J. Urry 1994. *Economies of Signs and Space*. London: Sage.
- Mayra, F. 2008. *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*. London: SAGE Publications.
- McCracken, G. 1986. Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. *Journal of Consumer Research* 13-84.
- McRobbie, A. 1992. Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies: A Post-script. In Grossberg, L., C. Nelson & P. Treichler (eds.): *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Grossberg, L., C. Nelson & P. Treichler (eds.) 1992. *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Muggleton, D. 2000. *Inside Subculture : The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford: Berg.
- Muggleton, D. & R. Weinzierl (eds.) 2003. *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Murphy, S. 2004. 'Live in your world play in ours': The Spaces of Video Game Identity. *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, 2: 228-229.
- Newman, J. 2004. *Videogames*. London: Routledge.
- Schouten, J.W. & J.H. McAlexander 1995. Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, 1: 43-61.
- Slater, D. 1997. *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Thompson, C. & M. Troester 2002. Consumer Value Systems in the Age of Postmodern Fragmentation: The Case of the Natural Health Microculture. *Journal of Consumer Research* 28, 4: 553.
- Thornton, S. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Weinzierl, R. & D. Muggleton 2003. What is 'Post-subcultural Studies' Anyway? In David, M. & R. Weinzierl (eds.): *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Whyte, W. 2001. On Making the Most of Participant Observation. In Bryman, A. (ed.): *SAGE Benchmarks in Research Methods: Ethno-*

*Adam Meikle & Jean-Philippe Wade*

*graphy*. Volume I. London: SAGE Publications.

Personal Interviews in 2012 with Cavershen, Nadine and Lisa.

Adam David Meikle  
Post-graduate student  
Media and Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
adam.meikle@gmail.com

Jean-Philippe Wade  
Media and Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
wade@ukzn.ac.za

# Computer Case Modding: A Case of Subcultural Substance

Marco Gennaro Bozza

## Abstract

With the popularisation of the home computer there has been a remarkable emergence of a subculture of consumption: Case Modding. Through interviews and ‘nethnographic’ study of modders’ online activity, an argument is made that positions their active consumption of computer hardware as a subculture. I argue that postmodern subcultural theory focussing on fluidity of cultural groupings does not account for the somewhat highly committed and stable practices witnessed in the modding scene. As such Hodkinson’s model of Subcultural Substance was tested and seen to be an appropriate model to account for the high levels of commitment, identity, distinctiveness and autonomy exhibited by modders.

**Keywords:** home computer, subculture of consumption, Case modding, Nethnographic, virtual community, postmodern subculture theory, Hodkinson, Subcultural Substance.

## Introduction

Most people who have personal computers at home or in the office simply accept the hardware as it is, a nondescript box of an unmemorable colour; indeed the machinery is to a large extent invisible. However, in recent years a remarkably creative ‘subculture of consumption’ has emerged: ‘prosumer’ computer hardware modification (or ‘modding’, performed by ‘modders’). To be a ‘prosumer’ is to occupy that indeterminate space between being a

‘consumer and a ‘producer’. It developed largely due to video gaming culture (Simon 2007), with its attendant interest in computer hardware to improve gaming performance, but soon took on a subcultural life of its own. This essay is a report on my qualitative ethnographic research into the computer-case modding subculture in South Africa. Participant observation and interviews were carried out in 2011 and 2013 on the Internet forum Carbonite Classifieds ([www.carbonite.co.za](http://www.carbonite.co.za)) with the aim of identifying the modders’ own subjective sense of their activities by using the techniques of a ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2002), as the modding subculture gathers predominantly on the Internet. This study will illustrate how modifying computer cases showcases extraordinary individual creativity while feeding into the creation of a space of shared significations that congregate participants into a recognizable and substantial subculture. This cultural studies project contributes to that central branch of ‘active audience’ studies – research into subcultures – which confirms the rejection of those theories of mass society which posit a passive and manipulated consumer totally dominated ‘from above’ by the interests of capitalism. Instead our attention is drawn to those everyday acts of grassroots creativity and autonomous meaning fabrication by ordinary people ‘from below’, which emphasises the active role that they play in the *production of culture* (De Certeau 2002; Fiske 1989; Gelder 2007; Sassatelli 2007; Schouten & Alexander 1995; Willis 1990).

Modding can be generally defined as the active manipulation by computer users of their computer hardware which is sold on the market as stock or standard. In this study the focus of modding activities will be limited to case modding, which is the manipulation of computer cases by a user. Case modding can be described as personalised additions to computer cases where modders showcase their individual technical and aesthetic virtuosity. Such aesthetic additions could be adding Perspex windows (see **Image 1**) on the side panel on the case thus showcasing their computers internals; additions of neon lighting to light up their case; or case painting to a particular theme or style. The more technical-aesthetic ‘mods’ are also done such as cutting/ drilling/ welding to the case to add aesthetic elements (Perspex side) or making space to add performance enhancing parts (Water-cooling), or simply drilling holes to reroute cables and make the electronic innards ‘neat’. What is deemed the most important part is that physical alterations must be made to the case, while also making it look aesthetically pleasing to the modder.

Beyond the artistic and culturally productive creativity witnessed in case modding, I noticed a strong collective ethos amongst modders. By sharing their progress, ideas and final modded designs publically on local Internet forums – Carbonite Classifieds – modders received enjoyment and subsequent recognition by subcultural peers as well and possibly non-subcultural outsiders like case manufacturers.



**Image 1**

Modding exists as an example of the ‘power of consumption to organize consumers into social collectives’ (Schouten, Martin & McAlexander 2007: 68). Most of the sparse literature that exists on computer modification by modders has focused on its relation to gaming culture (Simon 2007) or

gaming LAN<sup>1</sup> subculture (Raimondo 2005). This position is adequately explained by Scacchi (2010):

PC case mods ... serve to signify a game player's interest or technological projection of self-identity onto their game play platform. Such projection denotes an unabashed choice to display one's enthusiasm, alignment, and commitment to game play as more than just entertainment, but as part of one's personal identity, fetish, cultural experience and life-style preference.

My study does not dispute this, as people who modify computers generally also play computer games, go to LANs, and might affiliate themselves strongly to a gamer identity. However, my criticism of these analyses is that they *exclusively* understand the practice of modding through gaming culture or simply as performance enhancing of computers (e.g. Simon 2007: 190; Colewell 2004). Crucially lacking from studies on modders is any qualitative research, particularly any actual ethnographically-obtained first hand subjective accounts and insights from the modders *themselves*, rather than academically interpreted 'cultural politics' at LANs (e.g. Simon 2007). It seems to me extraordinary that, when researching the 'active consumer', some academics continue to ignore those 'active' voices themselves through interviews. My own research demonstrates that there are important social processes and features to modding that are not explained by an exclusive focus on gaming identity or a LAN event; these largely unexplored areas are to do with forms of online *subcultural sociality* related to a strong affective commitment to computer hardware and aesthetics.

## The Active Consumer

De Certeau (2002) argued that consumers consume commodities *actively* and *divergently* in order to create a 'secondary production' of individual pleasurable meanings often at odds with dominant meanings, and through this

---

<sup>1</sup> LAN gaming -refers to many computers in close proximity to one another connected to a Local Area Network(LAN) in an effort to play games together.

‘bricolage’ activity appropriate mass-produced commodities to their own interests (2002:66). This positions consumers as active and creative *producers of culture* ‘from below’. This is because, as Fiske argues, once a commodity has been profitably sold, it leaves the ‘financial economy’, and takes on a second life in the *cultural economy*, where it ‘becomes a resource for the culture of everyday life’ (Fiske 1989: 35): the activity of production now becomes the (re-) making of (often aberrant) meanings and pleasures for commodities, reflecting the autonomous cultural interests of ‘the people’. Sassatelli reinforces this notion by asserting that, ‘the moment of purchase is clearly only the beginning of a complex process in which the consumer works on a commodity to *recontextualize* it, so that it may eventually end up no longer having any recognisable relation with the world of monetary exchange’ (2007: 102). Fiske gives a simple example of a pair of bought jeans which are then ‘re-signified’ by the wearer by being embroidered with personal or subcultural meanings (Fiske 1989).

This active everyday culture is richly full of what Paul Willis calls ‘symbolic creativity’ (1990: 206), and, according to Jagose, these recontextualized commodities are drawn into the circuits of meaning in consumers’ construction of their lifestyles, and by extension their very *identities* (2003: 113): the consumer is an individual who ‘speaks’ through (re-written) commodities. There is a large amount of creative work that goes into modding computer cases. Modders do not passively accept their computers as is; they invest a large amount of time and energy into creatively individualising and personalising their computers to reflect their enthusiasm for computer hardware.

This consumption process potentially leads to shared consumption practices forming between active consumers. Thus a subculture of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander 1995) is essentially a grouping of active consumers of the same or similar products who share and actively construct a particular frame of reference when participating in the cultural economy of meanings; they are not only producers of culture in for example their modding practices, but also *producers of subculture*.

My own research into subcultural theory in order to make fuller conceptual sense of modders’ shared consumption practices revealed a highly contested space from which I was eventually able to distil a limited range of key helpful concepts, which I briefly recount.

## Subculture Studies

The pioneering subcultural study by Hebdige (1979), drawing on the innovative work of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (Hall & Jefferson 2006; Willis 1978), theorized subcultures as a specifically *cultural* struggle – of ‘spectacular’ *style* – by working-class youths (in Britain) against the hegemonic system increasingly subject to the logic of consumerism. As in the case of punks, that consumerism became the site of a highly creative semiotic *subversion* of dominant meanings by these disaffected youth, generating an autonomous social space – a group identity – defined by clothing, magazines, music, argot, dancing, hair-styles, etc. For Hebdige (1979) this authentic grass-roots resistance to capitalism would eventually be neutralized by the media (domesticating subcultures) and business (commodifying subcultural style).

This seminal model proved largely unworkable for my purposes, having absorbed the following criticisms of it. Muggleton criticized the CCCS approach for situating youth subcultures within the Marxist ‘theoretical framework of class oppression, conflict and exploitation’ (2000: 16) whereby subcultures were about identifying signs of youthful working-class ‘resistance’ to the hegemonic ‘power elite’. Not only were subcultures not confined to the working-class (think of hippies, or hipsters), but they were also not necessarily about political resistance (think of clubbing). Secondly, for Muggleton, Hebdige’s Marxist/semiotic analysis entirely avoided any ethnographic phenomenological accounts of subcultural participants’ subjective points of view (2000: 13), thus avoiding the complexity and variety of any subcultural membership. Thirdly, Hebdige’s identification of authentic subcultures as being untouched by the media and commerce – seen as the forces of hegemony – until the latter enter to destroy the subcultures – is for Thornton and McRobbie (Thornton 1996; McRobbie 1997) simply inaccurate: for both theorists, media and commerce are there from the very beginning of any subcultural life. Thornton for example points to the role media plays in giving a positive (imaginary) coherence and identity to a subculture (a subculturalist identifies with the image a subculturalist magazine presents of that subculture), while McRobbie shows how commercial aspects do indeed ‘produce a subculture in the first place’ (McRobbie 1997: 198).

The fourth criticism is that subcultures are far more ‘fluid’, internally

diverse, ‘temporary’, and more sensitive to individualism, thus not determined by the highly structured, working class, and delimited groupings identified by CCCS (Bennet 1999; Bennet & Khan-Harris 2004; Muggleton 2000; Hodkinson & Deicke 2007), and are more commonly identified as ‘neo-tribe’ (Bennet 1999; Cova, Kozinets & Shankar 2007), ‘scene’ (Straw 1991), ‘genre’ (Hesmondhalgh 2005), and ‘postmodern subculture’ (Muggleton 2000).

The first three criticisms (above) have been borne out by my own research with modders: a class analysis is unhelpful; the allied concept of counter-hegemonic subcultural ‘resistance’ is equally misleading; and ethnographic research allows for a far richer understanding of subcultures. However, in attempting to distance their concepts from traditional subculture theory, including its rigid structuralism, postmodern theorists have overemphasised the fluidity and ephemerality of groups and individuals to the detriment of possible *relatively* stable collective groups of people in contemporary subcultures of consumption (Hodkinson 2002; Shouten & McAlexander 1995; Williams 2011). They have also ignored subcultures that do not concern themselves with popular music and dance, for example, online digital geek subculture (Hesmondhalgh 2005; McArthur 2009). Therefore my research took me to the recent work of Hodkinson, whose study of Goths is something of a theoretical compromise between earlier and postmodern positions, and whose central concepts I drew on rigorously in my own research.

Hodkinson (2002; 2004) resists the attractions of a superficial ‘fluidity’, and continues to identify a deeper *substance* to contemporary subcultures, while accepting their diverse membership, and their indifference to working-class resistance. He identifies four central characteristics of subcultures that in combination allows us to identify such cultural substance, all of which proved of enormous usefulness for my research: (1) consistent distinctiveness: ‘a set of shared tastes and values which is distinctive from those of other groups and reasonably consistent, from one participant to the next, one place to the next and one year to the next’ (2002: 30); (2) identity: the participant’s own subjective evaluations of actually belonging to a collective with a sense of group identity and affiliation with others distinguishing them from outsiders (2002:31); (3) commitment: being a substantial member of a subculture is ‘liable to influence extensively the everyday lives of the participants in practice, and that, more often than not,

this concentrated involvement will last years rather than months' (2002: 31); and autonomy: those '*subcultural* forms of media and commerce – which operate mostly within the networks of a particular grouping' (2002: 31) which enable the subculture to have a degree of material autonomy from mainstream society.

## Methodology

The research proceeded using a qualitative approach in which the aim is to understand 'the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved' (Merriam, 2009: 9). Besides my extensive, long-term participant observation of the South African modder meeting place on Internet forum Carbonite Classifieds ([www.carbonite.co.za](http://www.carbonite.co.za)) website between 2011 and 2013, I chose four participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews (guided by interview techniques outlined by Brenner 2006) through purposive sampling (where samples are chosen who 'will yield the most relevant and plentiful data' (Yin 2011: 88), based on their commitment to modding, and gauged by their active involvement with the website. Online pseudonyms were used as these online names are the means by which they identified themselves in the online modding community/forum. The interviews were conducted through online text-based conversations via Instant Messaging (IM) service (Gtalk) conducted in November 2011 with three participants (DAE\_JAA\_VOO; Kuga; and Orihalcon), and in March 2013 with a single respondent (Squigly). All four participants are spread across South Africa: DAE\_JAA\_VO and Squigly reside in Johannesburg, Kuga in Port Elizabeth, while Orihalcon lives in Stellenbosch, etc. A basic thematic analysis was applied to understand the consistent patterns or themes that arose out of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). This data was coded into themes which were then tested in relation to active consumer theories and, most importantly, to Hodgkinson's (2002) four indicators of subcultural substance model.

## Active Consumers

A consistent theme arising from the data was that modifying one's computer is an exercise in manipulating it to reflect something custom-made and uniquely personal. As Kuga (IM Interview 2011) said: 'It's taking something

that's stock and changing it to your liking. Personalizing it to your character, to who you are as a person. It's creating something unique out [of] something standard. Usually a once in the world type of feeling'.



**Image 2**<sup>2</sup>

This viewpoint is shared by Orihalcon (2011):

It's about taking something that you attach great joy to – as a hobby or profession – and changing it for personal enjoyment... It gives me the opportunity to create something unique. To invest time and energy into a project watching it take shape and come to completion is a great feeling.

**Image 3**<sup>3</sup> is an example of a stock standard mass produced case whereas **Image 4** is an example of participant Kuga's modification to his computer case. He painted the interior and some of the exterior white as opposed to Image 3 which consists of standard aluminium finish on the interior and an all-black exterior.

---

<sup>2</sup> A case mod by DAE\_JAA\_VOO

<sup>3</sup> Image 3: the Cooler master HAF 932. It sold as a 'stock standard' case [http://www.cooler-master-usa.com/product.php?product\\_id=2810](http://www.cooler-master-usa.com/product.php?product_id=2810).



**Image 3**



**Image 4**

To the respondents' pleasure in consumption is their ability to create something unique in their modifications of their computer cases. There is also an understanding that the active consumption of computer hardware is about being creative, and similar to Willis' (1990) conception of the 'everyday' artist as expressed by DAE\_JA\_VOO (2011):

It's art. That's really what it comes down to. I'm an artist, and case modding is a form of art (for me, at least). It's quite interesting: Once I'm FINISHED with a mod, and It's standing on my desk, I'm not actually all that 'attached' to it. I could happily sell a project I've been working on for a year a week after I've finished it, because once it's done, I get to look at it, appreciate the art, the work, the effort,

and then I'm happy. That moment right there, when it's done, that's the satisfying moment.

This comment by DAE\_JA\_VOO indicates that case modders' consumption of computer hardware is an act of *cultural production* whereby objects are re-contextualised for individual pleasures and meaning-making by the user (Fiske 1989; Sassatelli 2007). Thus, through case modifications, computers enter the cultural economy as resources modders use in their secondary production of meanings and pleasure.

Squigly is a modder that takes this view to the extreme in that he has discarded a conventional gaming case design (e.g. **Images 1/2/3**) in pursuing what the modding community terms a 'scratch build'<sup>4</sup>, in this instance a computer case-as-desk (**Image 5**) whereby all his computer hardware is built around and housed within a desk he himself designed and built.



**Image 5**

---

<sup>4</sup> A scratch build is simply defined as a computer enclosure that the modder has built 'from the ground up'

---

As Squigly (2013) commented with regards to modding conventional cases as opposed to a highly personalised scratch build:

You are still essentially using the framework that comes to you in the basic case. So you kind of limited as to where you can put components. There are certain aspects you can change round and things that you can change. But in a scratch build you can then convert it to absolutely anything that you want... it's to make the machine to your taste.

### **Subculture: Consistent Distinctiveness**

As we can see, there are a variety of creative ways in which modding can be expressed by the participants, thus ensuring their distinctiveness from one another. However, the underlying premise with regards to consistent distinctiveness is the recognition that there is room for variation exhibited by modders in their modifications of computers; as Hodgkinson argues, internal difference ‘usually took the form of creative, yet subtle variations and additions rather than the sort of diversity that would undermine group boundaries significantly’ (2004: 143). There is however a strong sense of shared values and tastes in regards to modding. To determine the level of consistent distinctiveness questions posed to the participants aimed to elucidate what they considered a mod to consist of. This gave a set of shared ideas modders have with regard to modding. The responses varied somewhat, but mostly the participants classified that a mod must be physical or other alterations to the case. As Kuga (2011) says:

Well changing anything that makes it stock standard. Adding fans to a chassis would not be modding as the chassis supports it, however if you need to cut holes in the side panel, or whatever, and [then] adding a fan, that would be modding.

By contrast, DAE\_JA\_VOO (2011) defined modding as ‘Any customization. Colour change, lighting additions, physical changes to the insides, etc. Modding is short for ‘Modifying’, so if it's been modified, it's modded’. This is also reflected in what Orihalcon (2011) responded to, as he shared the

understanding that different modder communities have different criteria for modded systems:

I have found however that the view of what constitutes a modded system differs community to community....If you look at sites like Bit Tech, OCN, Extreme Systems<sup>5</sup> etc . where the hardware community and focus is immense, the level of what constitutes a mod changes accordingly.

But he still considered that a mod has ‘to change the case in some way - paint it, cut it, extend it etc.’ (Orihalcon 2011). Below (**Image 6**) is a case modded by Orihalcon in which he has cut circular holes into the case to provide space for extra high performance cooling fans; as well as rectangular holes for cable routing work to be done to enable better ‘cable management’ within the enclosure, thus making the inside of the case neater.



**Image 6**

DAE\_JA\_VOO (2011) succinctly summarised the concept of consistent distinctiveness: ‘some people like having 50 million different colours in a mod, and I prefer keeping it down to one or two. That's just taste, you know? But we're all still modding at the end of the day’. Kuga reinforces the role of

---

<sup>5</sup> International Computer enthusiast websites with sections dedicated to modding.

---

aesthetics within modding (2011): ‘Adding bling to something doesn’t make it modding [if] it has nothing to with changing the chassis. If you need to cut holes in the chassis then I would consider that modding’.

So in essence there is an understanding that while what exactly constitutes a modified computer case can vary from person to person, there is a definitive *shared* ideal to be found, and that is basically altering the case in some way from stock standard, not merely as something aesthetic that just adds ‘bling’. The act central to the subculture – modding as physical alteration to one’s case - is therefore agreed upon by members.

## Identity

There was indeed a subjective shared sense of identity and affiliation the respondents shared with other modders. Modders also definitely perceived a distinction between themselves and outsiders/non-modders. As Orihalcon (2011) commented in regards to modding and social life:

Socially it affects you as well, as your PC becomes a show item of sorts and it generally sparks conversation form [*sic*] other PC users and enthusiasts. However it can just as well attract nothing from people not sharing your hobby – cue the uninformed non tech heads haha.

Importantly, there is also the practice of individuals identifying with other like-minded people by how and why they interact with each other. As Squigly (2013) said in response to posting his ideas on a scratch build:

Most guys are really helpful. They [are] willing to jump in and give advice on things that they've tried on other machines...It was my first scratch build that I had really undertaken, so I knew a lot of the guys had done this before so I was looking for a bit of feedback.

This is authenticating other modders by invoking their shared ‘technicity’ (the ‘interconnectedness of identity and technological competence ... [whereby] people's tastes, aptitudes and propensities towards technology become part of a particular 'identity' (Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 64)) with

others. A point of interest is how modders distinguished between themselves in order to claim status within their modding subcultural groups, for example Squigly (2013) expressed the opinion that mods are not all 'equal' so to speak, as he commented that a scratch build 'obviously takes a lot more work so that I'd put it in a slightly different league to a standard modded case'. This comment is arguably infused with subcultural capital (Thornton 1996) meant to garner status-inducing properties within and external to the modding subculture, such as presenting himself as highly committed or skilled within the modding subculture.

With regard to group affiliation and like-mindedness, Kuga (2011) commented in relation to his perception of group affiliation and the outcome of that affiliation: 'Yeah most definately [*sic*]. I can relate to someone that shares the same passion as what I have...their choice of components would tell me if they made informed decisions or not'. In one case realisation of wider group affiliation of like-minded people made one respondent have a sense of 'formalization' of their activity, regardless that they already knew they were 'modders':

I didn't know that there was a huge community built around this stuff, I thought I was one of FEW... I knew I was a modder before that, because I was modding. I just didn't know that that 'Modding' label even existed, and I only realised that I was a 'Modder' once I had actually discovered that label (DAE\_JAA\_VOO 2011).

Importantly, as opposed to literature conflating modding with gamer identity (Simon 2007; Scacchi 2010), it was pointed out by Squigly (2013) that a gaming-influenced identity and lifestyle played a part in initially creating interest around computer hardware, but it then developed into a deep interest in modding and customising his computer. As he said: 'I would say it starts in the gaming community, but I wouldn't say it's necessarily confined to it' (2013).

So in summation, there is indeed a sense of group affiliation and shared identity and sense of distinction from outsiders, built around what Orihalcon (2011) calls 'A great love for pcs and making them look good'.

## Commitment

An important part of modding subcultural ‘substance’ is essentially how committed the participants are in their everyday lives to consumption practices around computer modification. All of the participants have modded to varying degrees for years as opposed to months. Sticking with the modding scene is important and this is partially where the individual and social rewards are felt: ‘When you really put sweat and blood into creating something unique, you can appreciate the final result once it's all done...I have pretty high end hardware. I want people to see what I have’ (Kuga 2011).

A large amount of time and activity in the scene is seen to be an important marker of commitment for modders, as opposed to other activities they could do, as Squigly reveals: ‘It took me nine months to build this desk. Basically it was Saturdays only. The free time that you do have you kind of pour into that’ (2013). There is definitely commitment in terms of money and personal preference as DAE\_JA\_VOO (2011) comments:

I spend the R4000 or R5000 on a watercooling system not because it'll allow me to overclock<sup>6</sup> my machine further, bringing me higher performance, but rather because I think it looks good. It's a big price for aesthetics, but that's more important to me than performance.

As a show of commitment to the practice of modding a large amount of time and activity in the scene is seen to be an important marker of commitment for modders. This reinforces the notion that commitment is a valuable marker of subcultural substance felt by members:

That there is a community there is no doubt. Do I feel I belong to it? No I don't. I am not nearly active enough, mod enough or contribute to modding sites to consider myself a member of said community (Orihalcon 2011).

---

<sup>6</sup> A term used to describe a computer user making their computer components (CPU, RAM, Graphics cards e.t.c.) ran at above specification. Arguably it is a form of modification, as people manipulate the hardware in order to get more performance.

---

Orihalcon's comments relating to *levels* of involvement is useful in telling us they do not see themselves as 'full on' modders as they do not mod or contribute enough and are thus not as committed.

This leads to an important practice witnessed in the online space; a lot of time was spent *talking* about modding within the Carbonite modding community via build logs<sup>7</sup>. Squigly's build log on Carbonite (<http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/>) ran from April 2012 through to January 2013, showing early stages of his creative work (**Image 6**) to its final completed form (**Image 7**). This build log was updated regularly in terms of progress and a compelling dialogue developed with other modders and non-modders targeting problems, tips, solutions or adjustments, and more personally for the modder, garnering general praise and admiration.



**Image 6**



**Image 7**

---

<sup>7</sup> A build log is often a detailed online blog (on a forum, personal website etc.) that show the early conceptions or ideas for a mod and then the different stages of a mod build- from its early stages to its finished state, usually accompanied by many pictures detailing the stages.

---

Regarding this aspect of sociality witnessed online, Squigly (2013) speaks of the shared commitment he witnesses when starting build logs and the responses from modders and non-modders: ‘Look at how we interact really on the forums. It's generally just a good group of guys that want to see something come together and are willing to put in their two cents you know’.

Activities that show heightened commitment are also seen in the shopping habits that would seem extremely outrageous for anyone not within the subculture: ‘I'm still not done modding my chassis<sup>8</sup> yet though. Still need more stuffs {sic} that I can't find in SA. I need to import from USA which is gonna cost me R1900 odd’ (Kuga 2011). Kuga is willing to import his desired components, as opposed to ‘making do’ with what is available locally to personalise his PC. Respondents did realise that their daily life activities are influenced in different degrees depending on their level of commitment to the modding practice:

As for expenditure...oh yes. Dremel<sup>9</sup> disks, engraving bits, motor brushes, paints, etc etc. It definitely affects shopping habits and what you look at in a shop. The more serious you take modding the more it impacts general day to day activities (Orihalcon 2011).

From these comments we see that commitment within the practices of modding pervades all areas of the respondents’ lives. High levels of commitment were shown by the modders. The subculture of case modding did indeed influence aspects of their everyday lives, be it in terms of money, time spent doing it, interacting with other like-minded people, shopping habits and limiting participation in other activities.

## **Autonomy: Commerce & Media**

Hodkinson distinguished between subcultural forms and non-subcultural forms of media and commerce. There were not many instances that subcultural commerce and its role were discussed in the interviews, and perhaps this is due to the perception that ‘there are not many modders in the country anyway’ (DAE\_JA\_VOO, 2011). Kuga (2011) commented on the

---

<sup>8</sup> Formal terminology for computer case.

<sup>9</sup> Compact cutting tool.

lack of modder-supporting enterprises which supply modding equipment in South Africa: '6 fans and pre-sleeved cable extensions...can't find them anywhere in SA which sucks so much .... I've spoken to most of the distributors, they can't help me either'.

Similarly Squigly (2013) mentions with regard to the small size of the community: 'I mean there isn't a very large modding, local community. There are quite a few guys on carbonite. There's not many other local spaces really'. These comments point out that there seems to be a small amount of local South African modders and also consequently not much formal subcultural modder-focused infrastructure to support a subculturally run economy. An intriguing aspect that was brought up was the robust second hand 'e-commerce' market place for computer hardware on the Carbonite website. As Squigly (2013) commented:

So with it [modding] being kind of hand in hand with the second hand forum a lot of guys are then able to go out and purchase some of this equipment second hand and then build some of these machines and...it kind of gives them that little bit of extra resource to pour into it as opposed to buying all their stuff new...it's a good symbiosis of the two really. The second hand and the modding, they play well into each other.

As this shows, there is a small degree of subcultural commercial enterprise associated with the wider computer hardware enthusiast market, something possibly akin to the findings made by McRobbie (1997) that the development of punk and hippy subculture was commercially supported by subculturalists' entrepreneurial involvement in a robust second hand rag market. Thus there does seem to be an autonomous space of economic activity witnessed as there are low levels of second hand trade in which modders can buy components from other modders or sometimes non-modders.

An intriguing nexus was reached in the subcultural and non-subcultural commercial space. It must be noted that of the modders involved in this study, only two have attained some sort of commercial reward related to modding (DAE\_JAA\_VO 2011 and Squigly 2013). As such, within the South Africa mod scene observed in this study, the participants are not what we would call 'subcultural producers' in that their subcultural practice was not readily transferable into a subcultural commercial space. What was

observed, however, was a general sense of pride was associated with subcultural capital and status generation when a computer manufacturer borrows ideas developed by modders. As Squigly (2013) points out:

I think it's excellent really .... A lot of people will just buy a case and 'oh well that's what it allows me to do' and they just move ahead with it. Where modders then say 'hang on that doesn't work for me, change it'. And the fact that they then try and incorporate it into their final products shows that they actually do listen to the community. They see value in some of the stuff these guys do and try incorporate it.

Similarly expressed by DAE\_JAA\_VOO (2011):

They've adopted what we've done on a MASSIVE scale. All high-end 'gaming' cases have the mods we used to do ourselves. They all have windows, lights, colourful fans, etc. Many of them even have provision for modding that WILL be done, like they might have holes at the back for watercooling tubes to go through. So yes, they've adopted what we've done.












This does not at all infer that commercialization was rejected by the modders; in fact commercially acquired rewards for modding were talked about positively: 'Some case modders are even lucky enough to get involved directly with these case manufacturers' (DAE\_JAA\_VOO: 2011), and similarly expressed by Orihalcon (2011): 'In fact there was a modder who had his case design bought by Lampton a few months ago – and this will be Lampton's first PC case'. Thus there are some cases in which subcultural commercial enterprise is entered into. However there does not seem to be some vague notion of 'resistance' to incorporation in their activities, but a subcultural understanding that commercial incorporation validates their status standing amongst each other and amongst the wider computer hardware enthusiasts. We are indeed a great distance from Hebdige's (1979) notion of subculture as 'resistance' to capitalism.

Thus there is a role subcultural commerce plays in the South African modding scene; instead of a more or less subculturally focused commercial infrastructure, there are micro level commercial interactions between

modders on the online second hand market place whereby modders and non-modders can buy and sell parts from each other. **Image 8** is an example of what the second hand ‘market’ looks like and where members (modder and non-modders) can sell and or buy parts. More importantly though, in the findings, there were overwhelming positive views expressed by modders over commercial incorporation of their designs. This arguably insider perceived incorporation is used by the modders to reinforce their notions of creative and commercial autonomy and distinction from the case and hardware manufacturers as well as other from computer hardware enthusiasts.

www.sexyforum.com/111/mv/12345

Sorted by: 19-03-2013 09:51 AM 26-03-2013 11:09 PM

	<b>* [Wanted] Long SLI Bridge</b> Started by mikrouwel, 27-03-2013 07:10 AM	Replies: 0 Views: 26	mikrouwel 27-03-2013, 07:10 AM *
	<b>* [Wanted] 60gig SSD</b> Started by uil_boelle, 26-10-2012 08:51 AM	Replies: 9 Views: 266	uil_boelle 27-03-2013, 06:23 AM *
	<b>* [Wanted] 2 x 3Tb Hdd's - Re-sellers Welcome</b> Started by uil_boelle, 06-03-2013 02:41 PM	Replies: 3 Views: 118	uil_boelle 27-03-2013, 06:22 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] WD 1TB - Warranty to 07/14/2014</b> Started by uil_boelle, 19-03-2013 09:51 AM	★★★★★ Replies: 4 Views: 102	uil_boelle 27-03-2013, 06:22 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] 1Tb Samsung/Seagate Hdd</b> Started by uil_boelle, 15-03-2013 03:26 PM	★★★★★ Replies: 7 Views: 277	uil_boelle 27-03-2013, 06:21 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] Black Ice GTS 360 Radiator</b> Started by mikrouwel, 12-02-2013 05:05 PM 1 2	Replies: 12 Views: 321	mikrouwel 27-03-2013, 06:06 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] Danger Den Rampage III Extreme Waterblock</b> Started by mikrouwel, 12-02-2013 05:09 PM	Replies: 8 Views: 214	mikrouwel 27-03-2013, 06:06 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] i7 Quad Core + 24" LCD + G15 Gaming Keyboard.</b> Started by Davesbes, 23-03-2013 09:00 PM	Replies: 8 Views: 340	NomNom 27-03-2013, 02:27 AM *
	<b>* [Wanted] Coolermaster HAF</b> Started by salvador, 26-03-2013 10:45 PM	Replies: 1 Views: 43	supramad120 27-03-2013, 12:36 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] EVGA GTX580, Corsair SSD</b> Started by RS4, 27-03-2013 12:20 AM	Replies: 0 Views: 135	RS4 27-03-2013, 12:20 AM *
	<b>* [Sale] Fujitsu Laptop For Sale!!!</b> Started by Chile53, 21-03-2013 11:09 PM	Replies: 1 Views: 96	Chile53 26-03-2013, 11:57 PM *

**Image 8**

Although Hebdige only saw media involvement in subcultures as a later intrusion by the dominant system to ideologically neutralize them, I am more drawn to Thornton's more recent work, which explicitly challenged Hebdige by pointing out the incessant media presence in subcultures,

including the important role of defining subcultures, as, in her example *Face* magazine did with regards to clubbing (1996).

With modders the role of the media has become even more central, because modding is a child of the digital age, not only because it is focused on computers, but because almost the only space where modders congregate as an active, participant community is online on dedicated web-sites. The Internet creates the meeting space for modders, and provides them a platform – a forum - for constant interaction. The website Carbonite Classifieds ([www.carbonite.co.za](http://www.carbonite.co.za)) is a locally (South African) owned and run forum primarily dedicated to the second hand reselling of computer hardware and electronics. There are sections relating to modding, but it is wholly a sub-section of the wider website community:

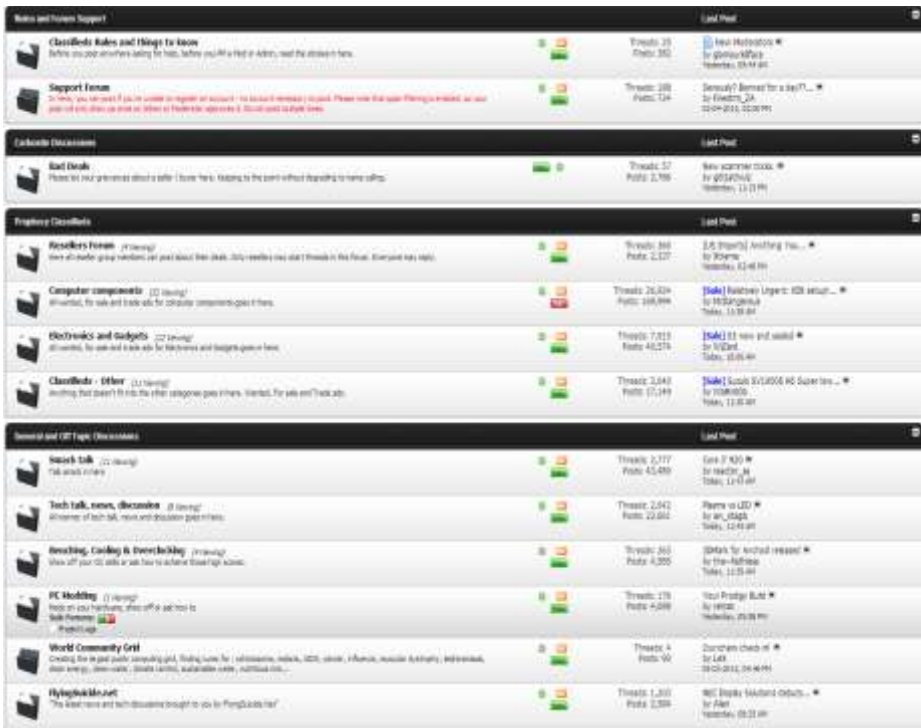


Image 9

Regardless of its 'small' footprint in relation to the wider forum, the modding community in South Africa seems to regard it as 'their' local virtual space; as was mentioned earlier Squigly (2013) believes that there is not a large local modding community. Arguably then, the internet media of Carbonite has provided the *only* realisable platform from which the geographically spaced modders (Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, Stellenbosch) can come together, forming a local 'virtual community' to share and exhibit their interest in modding. Arguably there are more locally realised modding activities and sociality in each of the cities these participants hail from, but as Hodgkinson (2002:28) remarks, the 'translocally' consistent nature of subcultural formations is a marker of subcultural substance. Carbonite seems to have embodied the ideas of a virtually realised translocal community of modders.

The participants used Internet media in a variety of ways for personal subcultural enhancement as well to grow and sustain the subcultural community. All of the participants have used the Internet media to exhibit their modifications (and often the progress of them), discuss their ideas, borrow modding ideas from other modders, and generally to get praise and recognition for their accomplishment from others.<sup>10</sup>What is also occurring here is a form of 'subcultural incorporation' so to speak, whereby modders look to other modders' works to incorporate some aspect of it into their design. As Squigly (2013) commented on his use of forums like Carbonite, 'I frequent them quite a bit and comment on a lot of the other guys builds. Get a lot of inspiration from their builds as well'. Similarly Kuga (2011) says: 'I build what I think looks good. I see some ideas on the [inter]net floating around. Take them and personalize them to my own taste'.

---

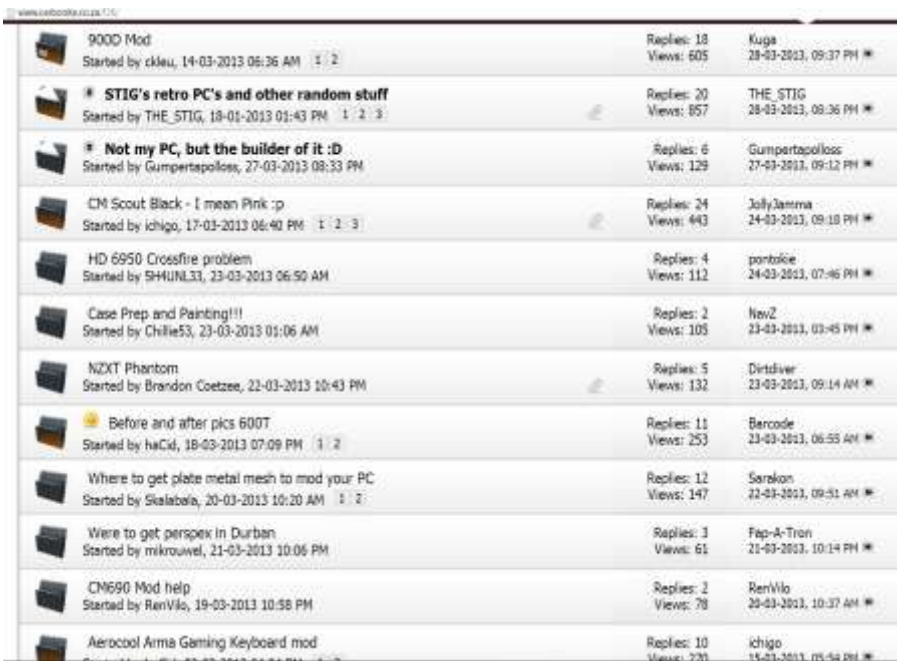
<sup>10</sup>Orihalcon build log - <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/project-orihalcons-uv-cosmos-12190/>

Squigly build log- <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/>

Kuga's build - <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/project-kugas-custom-haf-21557/>

DAE\_JAA\_VOO-  
<http://www.thebestcasescenario.com/forum/showthread.php?t=9156>

As **Image 10** shows, there is a large amount of threads displaying modders modified PCs as well as threads with discussion topics centred on activities and help relating to modding.



900D Mod	Started by ckleu, 14-03-2013 06:36 AM	Replies: 18 Views: 605	Kuga 28-03-2013, 09:37 PM
* STIG's retro PC's and other random stuff	Started by THE_STIG, 18-01-2013 01:43 PM	Replies: 20 Views: 857	THE_STIG 28-03-2013, 08:36 PM
* Not my PC, but the builder of it :D	Started by Gumpertapolloss, 27-03-2013 08:33 PM	Replies: 6 Views: 129	Gumpertapolloss 27-03-2013, 09:12 PM
CM Scout Black - I mean Pink :p	Started by ichigo, 17-03-2013 06:40 PM	Replies: 24 Views: 443	JollyJamma 24-03-2013, 09:18 PM
HD 6950 Crossfire problem	Started by SHUNL33, 23-03-2013 06:50 AM	Replies: 4 Views: 112	pontskie 24-03-2013, 07:46 PM
Case Prep and Painting!!!	Started by Chilie53, 23-03-2013 01:06 AM	Replies: 2 Views: 105	Hex2 23-03-2013, 03:45 PM
NZXT Phantom	Started by Brandon Coetzee, 22-03-2013 10:43 PM	Replies: 5 Views: 132	Dirtdiver 23-03-2013, 09:14 AM
Before and after pics 600T	Started by haCa, 18-03-2013 07:09 PM	Replies: 11 Views: 253	Barcode 23-03-2013, 06:55 AM
Where to get plate metal mesh to mod your PC	Started by Skalabala, 20-03-2013 10:20 AM	Replies: 12 Views: 147	Sarakon 22-03-2013, 09:51 AM
Were to get perspex in Durban	Started by mikrouwel, 21-03-2013 10:06 PM	Replies: 3 Views: 61	Fap-A-Tron 21-03-2013, 10:14 PM
CM690 Mod help	Started by RenVlo, 19-03-2013 10:58 PM	Replies: 2 Views: 78	RenVlo 20-03-2013, 10:37 AM
Aerocool Arma Gaming Keyboard mod	Started by RenVlo, 19-03-2013 10:58 PM	Replies: 10 Views: 720	ichigo 15-03-2013, 05:54 PM

Image 10

Media was often used by the modders as a means to learn about new mods or to get advice: ‘I do have sites and projects that I actively follow. Whether it is to admire the skill or the originality in the mod itself, or sometimes both, it’s good to have places where you can go for inspiration and advice’ (Orihalcon 2011). Orihalcon’s comments reveal an acknowledgment that subcultural Internet media related to modding is an important space to learn new skills:

I have a few choice blogs of personal modders that I follow and frequent the bigger sites that have large modding communities. I love

looking at mods – no matter how big or small as there is always something you take away from it; weather {sic} it's creating a unique paint pattern, a way to hold a dremel or a design choice, there is always something to learn and enhance your own skill set with (Orihalcon2011).

DAE\_JA\_VOO (2011) commented that, 'keeping up with modding was a matter of staying in the community. Forums, websites, etc, where other modders show their work and chat about things to do - that's absolutely the best way to keep up'. Thus Internet media, from the participant's point of view, does play a central role for the upkeep and maintenance of the modder community.

Within the Internet space of Carbonite Classifieds, a subcultural community was brought to life and sustained through the constant conversations between members, which produced meanings which defined the nature and limits of a South African modding subculture. Thus media was used to enhance the subculturalists' participation and construction of the subculture; arguably a case can also be made that without the media format afforded by the Internet this subculture would not exist in its current form: it is in many respects a virtual subcultural community.

## **Conclusion**

The results revealed that modders do seem to constitute a subculture of substance when applied to Hodkinson's model. It was found that modders actively and creatively consume computer cases as a cultural resource to produce 'consistently distinctive' pleasing meanings related to computer modding. There was a display of similar values and tastes in regards to case modding and what constituted a 'mod' as well as an understanding that it was a distinct cultural activity compared to other cultural activities. The modders showed a subjective understanding of their identity; one informed by shared group identification with insiders as well as recognizing difference from outsiders. Crucially, in one of the cases a point was made whereby the applicability of a *gamer* identity to the study of modders was limited. The commitment indicator showed that modders, instead of fleetingly partaking in the practice, invest large amounts of their time, money and online and offline

activities related to modding. Importantly it was observed that modders emphasised concerted and dedicated participation in the modding community was a requirement to be a modder. On the autonomy front we see that the media of subcultural internet via visiting websites, blogs and creating personal build logs are crucial not only to maintain and grow the 'community' of modders but also is used by modders to great effect by observing and using other modders' ideas and builds into their own designs-possibly a protean form of 'Subcultural incorporation'. With regards to the niche commerce associated with modding in South Africa, there are some links made between sustaining the modding scene via a second hand marketplace. However, as noticed in this study there does not seem to be any case modder enthusiast-run commercial infrastructure in South Africa.

For the subculturalist analysts of CCCS, subcultures were flamboyant youthful eruptions of cultural resistance in an otherwise drab world of mass uniformity, optimistic signs that, with the working-class now almost entirely incorporated into the logic of capitalism, opposition to the System was still possible. Thus these subcultures such as punks were romantically drawn as cultural warriors heroically disrupting the sign systems of late capitalism before surrendering to the twin assaults of corporate commodification and ideological neutralization. In this period of the 1960s and 1970s, 'culture' was still understood in the modernist manner as an autonomous terrain from which resistance to the capitalist economy could be launched, and yet all too soon, as Jameson argued (1991), the postmodern was upon us, and the erstwhile autonomous spaces of the 'cultural' and the 'economic' fatally merged, obliterating all possibility of cultural critique: capitalism, he argued, had colonized everything.

And so subcultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century no longer accept a call to arms, but are instead more readily described, as in my study, as 'subcultures of consumption', a phrase Jameson would understand all too well: communities gathered in fetishistic celebration of a commodity, as in the Harley Davidson motorbike subculture famously identified by Schouten and McAlexander (1995). But is there room for a less pessimistic narrative of the present, read through the prism of subculture theory, and, in this particular case, of modders?

I believe there is, because if there is now no 'outside' to capitalism, then ordinary people are increasingly demanding that it operate more in *their* interests, as in the globally burgeoning 'ethical consumption' movement,

where consumers will only buy goods from corporations if they treat their workers, suppliers and the environment decently. This may not be a revolutionary politics, but, unlike revolutionary politics, it is a politics of the possible. Moreover, in our example of modders trading their computer parts in an online micro-market, we can see in a small way of how ordinary people actively use capitalism to work for themselves, rather than being mere passive victims of its perfidy. As Hodgkinson has shown with regard to Goths (2002), subcultures create their own autonomous micro-economic climates, where the goal is not the endless generation of exchange-value but the sustaining of a subcultural existence.

But if the modernist study of subcultures assumed a grey world of passive masses against which cells of rebellious youth seemed so attractive, postmodernism has borne witness to the emergence of the ordinary ‘active consumer’, who actively appropriates commodities to re-signify them in the autonomous cultural language of the people, fabricating in the process what Fiske (1989) understands as a properly ‘popular culture’ ‘from below’. And in these very actions – whether it is making a YouTube send-up of Lady Gaga, writing a Harry Potter short story involving gay romance, ‘role-playing’ on Twitter, or modding your computer – ordinary people are asserting their desire, as Henry Jenkins (1992) argues, to be part of the *production of culture* itself. In this emerging *participatory culture* (Jenkins: 1992), above all revealed in the user-generated content of the Internet, our modders are exemplary, a subculture of active and creative consumers who also interactively use the Internet to construct new forms of virtual sociality, a world of localized meanings entirely envisioned ‘from below’ and sustained ‘from below’ by nothing more than the affective commitments of its members. It is therefore also a rigorously democratic world, held together by the voluntary consent of its members – a participatory culture in a deep and convincing sense. That, it seems to me, is the grounds for a more optimistic appraisal of the postmodern than Jameson was willing to allow.

## References

### Primary Resources

DAE\_JA\_VOO 2011. Instant Messaging Interview. [Interview] 10 November 2011.

- Kuga 2011. Instant Messaging Interview. [Interview]. 6 November 2011.  
Orihalcon 2011. Instant Messaging Interview. [Interview]. 8 November 2011.  
Squigly 2013. Verbal Online Interview. [Interview] 23 March 2013.

## Secondary Sources

- Bennet, A. 1999. Subcultures or Neotribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste. *Sociology* 33, 3: 599-617.
- Bennet, A. & K. Khan-Harris 2004. Introduction. In Bennet, A. & K. Khan-Harris (eds.): *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Braun, V. & V. Clarke 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, 1: 77-101.
- Brenner, M.E. 2006. Interviewing in Educational Research. In Green, J.L., G. Camilli & P.B. Elmore (eds.): *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Colwell, B. 2004. The Zen of Overclocking. *Computer* 37, 3: 9-12.
- Cova, B., R.V. Kozinets & A. Shankar 2007. Tribes, Inc.: The New World of Tribalism. In Cova, B., R.V. Kozinets & A. Shankar (eds.): *Consumer Tribes*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- De Certeau, M. 2002. Chapter 6: General Introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In Highmore, B. (ed.): *The Everyday Life Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Dovey, J. & H.W. Kennedy 2006. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media. Issues in Cultural and Media Studies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Fiske, J. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Gelder, K. 2007. *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. & T. Jefferson (eds.) 2006. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. Second Edition. London, New York: Routledge.
- Hebdige, D. 1979. *The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. 2005. Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, 1: 21-40.

- Hodkinson, P. 2002. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Hodkinson, P. 2004. The Goth Scene and (Sub) Cultural Substance. In Bennet, A. & K. Khan-Harris (eds.): *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hodkinson, P. & W. Deicke (eds.) 2007. *Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes*. London: Routledge.
- Jagose, A. 2003. The Invention of Lifestyle. In Martin, F. (ed.): *Interpreting Everyday Culture*. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Jenkins, H. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kozinets, R.V. 2002. The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing Research* 39, 2: 61-72.
- McArthur, J.A. 2009. Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, 1: 58 - 70.
- McRobbie, A. 1997. Second Hand Dresses and the Role of the Rag Market. In Gelder, K. & S. Thornton (eds.): *The Subcultures Reader*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Merriam, S.B. 2009. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. The Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Muggleton, D. 2000. *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Raimondo, N. 2005. *Design Consumption and the Diffusion of Technological Innovations in LAN Gaming Culture: Considering the Potential for Subcultural Contributions to the Development and 'Humanisation' of Mainstream PC Hardware Technologies*. A Thesis Submitted in partial fulfilment of the Requirements of University of South Australia for the degree of Master of Design, University of South Australia.
- Sassatelli, R. 2007. *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Schouten, J.W., D.M. Martin & J.H. McAlexander 2007. The Evolution of a Subculture of Consumption. In Cova, B., R.V. Kozinets & A. Shankar (eds.): *Consumer Tribes*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann.

- Schouten, J.W. & J.H. McAlexander 1995. Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, 1: 43-61.
- Straw, W. 1991. Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music. *Cultural Studies* 5, 3: 368-388.
- Thornton, S. 1996. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Willis, P. 1978. *Profane Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Willis, P. 1990. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Williams, P.J. 2011. *Subculture Theory: Traditions and Concepts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Yin, R.K. 2011. *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. New York: Guildford Press.

## Online

- Simon, B. 2007. Geek Chic: Machine Aesthetics, Digital Gaming, and the Cultural Politics of the Case Mod. *Games and Culture* 2, 175: 175- 193. Available at: <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/2/3/175>. (Accessed on 11 October 2011.)
- Scacchi, W. 2010. Computer Game Mods, Modders, Modding, and the Mod Scene. Available at: <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~wscacchi/GameLab/ModSquad-Scacchi.pdf>. (Accessed on 11 October 2011.)

## Images

**All Images have been downloaded and reproduced with permission from Participants and Owners of website Carbonite Classifieds**

- Image 1 - *Skiet-te-kat*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f16/skiet-te-kat-5454/>. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)
- Image 2 - *Project: Epiphany*. <http://www.thebestcasescenario.com/forum/showthread.php?t=9156>. (Downloaded on 12 November 2011.)
- Image 3 - *HAF 932* - [http://www.coolermaster-usa.com/product.php?product\\_id=2810](http://www.coolermaster-usa.com/product.php?product_id=2810). (Downloaded on 12 November 2011.)
- Image 4 - *kug4's album: Custom HafEyefinity Setup*. <http://s34.photobucket.com/albums/d101/kug4/Custom%20Haf%20Eyefinity%20Setup/?action=>

view&current=IMAG0065.jpg. (Downloaded on 12 November 2011.)

Image 5 - *ForumOmega Desk April 2012*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/index27.html>. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 6 - *ForumOmega Desk April 2012*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/index2.html>. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 7 - *Omega Desk April 2012*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f27/omega-desk-april-2012-a-28683/index27.html>. (Downloaded on 25 March 2013.)

Image 8 - *Forum: Computer Components*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f10/index13.html>. (Downloaded on 04 April 2013.)

Image 9 - *Carbonite Classifieds*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/forum.php> . (Downloaded on 04 April 2013.)

Image 10 - *Forum: PC Modding*. <http://www.carbonite.co.za/f26/> . (Downloaded on 03 April 2013.)

Marco Gennaro Bozza  
Postgraduate Student  
Media & Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
mbozza1@gmail.com

# Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster

**Genevieve Akal**

## **Abstract**

This is a re-worked section from my fictionalized autoethnography which originally appeared as an MA thesis, a study of the postmodernist subculture of the Ironic Hipster which, unlike earlier ‘modernist’ subcultures, is opposed to mass culture yet simultaneously immersed in it, while also and paradoxically celebrating individualism like no other subculture. Ironic Hipsters spend their days casting ridicule on commercialism, ironically assimilating mass identity constructs and constantly altering their pastiche style to stay ahead of the system and to expose the inherent inauthenticity of mass consumer culture identity. Ironic Hipsters in effect become playful and ironic postmodern texts, inevitably leading to a crisis of self-authenticity.

**Keywords:** irony, ironic hipster, authenticity, mass culture, individualism

## **‘BEGINNINGS’**

FADE IN:

INT/EXT. MOROCCAN CAFÉ - MORNING

SYBIL, a young woman in her mid-twenties, sits at a small mosaic corner-table in a Moroccan themed café. The table sits between two booth seats lavished with decadent cushions. Placed next to her is a black vinyl backpack bursting with books and papers.

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

Her dark eyes are framed by equally dark long hair, cut in a 1920's up-style. Her lips are painted Betty-Boop\*<sup>1</sup> red. She's dressed in a 1950's circle skirt made of maroon suit fabric with thin neon pink pinstripes; bright pink tulle forms a layer underneath. We see the sleeves of a tight fitting plain black t-shirt underneath a waistcoat. The front of the waistcoat is decadent upholstery fabric and the back is maroon satin. Popping out of the waistcoat is bright pink Edwardian ruffle. A gaudy television-shaped brooch is pinned on the waistcoat, and on her right arm is a black leather, gladiator style armband. She wears bright pink legwarmers that start mid-calf and hang loosely over her black and white Adidas sneakers.

She pours mint tea out of a brass pot into an amber glass. Taking a sip she looks around at the other patrons. A Ford Bantam bakkie pulls up outside and BELLA, also in her mid-twenties, clumsily exits the car struggling with her seatbelt and belongings. Putting on a pair of bright yellow roller skates she half-steps, half-skids out of the vehicle and locks the door.

Bella has 'Amelie\*' styled sandy blonde hair tied into two little pigtails with bright yellow 1980's-style bobble hair bands. She wears black lace leggings and a short punk-styled red, yellow and black tartan skirt. Around her waist hangs a black studded belt. She has on a light wool, buttoned up mustard cardigan with black lace showing above the top button from her shoestring camisole underneath. Around her neck is a classical string of pearls to match her dainty pearl earrings. She has a worn leather sling bag.

At the same time JOSH, another twenty-something, arrives at the café on a sector nine<sup>2</sup>. He swerves to avoid the unaware Bella. He stops, flicks up his board, and shakes his head at her ungainly exit before giving her a hug. Josh has brown, curly, perfectly messy hair. He wears a fitted white suit shirt with a thin 'swing style' red tie. The shirt is tucked into black skinny jeans with a black studded belt. On his feet are chunky black, red and gold Adidas sneakers. He wears a black hip-hop style baseball cap with the word 'Hustler' embroidered in gold. Around his neck are two gold 'bling' chains; on one

---

<sup>1</sup> Asterisk means person or thing referred to exists in reality.

<sup>2</sup> A type of skateboard.

---

hangs a gold pendant in the shape of a ‘J’, on the other the word ‘Dawg’, also in gold. A suit style tweed jacket is casually held over his shoulder.

Josh and Bella approach Sybil at the corner table and take a seat. They greet each other casually with the familiarity of old friends.

SYBIL

(Self-aware in a Moroccan accent)

Welcome, welcome, make yourselves at home.

JOSH

The suburban girl who wishes she hailed from a place less ordinary, a place where they drink tea out of amber glasses and negotiate the price of textiles on street corners.

BELLA

I wanna be Scandinavian, like from Iceland or something.

JOSH

You just wanna be Bjork\* and live in a lighthouse.

SYBIL

You’d have to lose the roller-skates, what with the stairwell and everything.

BELLA

Whatever guys, I don’t wanna live in a lighthouse, I just wanna have one for days when I feel all Virginia Woolf\* and stuff.

SYBIL

Tea?

JOSH

Cool.

(Noticing Sybil’s backpack)

So what’s all the literature?

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

BELLA

(Condescending)

Sybil's tryna find herself.

SYBIL

I can't believe you just reduced my self-exploration to that.

BELLA

I'm just joking.

SYBIL

Don't you guys wanna know why we're like this? Why we dress like this and talk like this and-

JOSH

(Raising his amber glass to eye level and looking through it)  
-I wonder if the 'Bell Jar' would read the same if ol' Plath\* had been looking through amber eyes?

BELLA

(Mimicking the way the character Elaine says 'Stella' in the Seinfeld\* episode 'The Pen')  
Sylvia! Sylvia!

SYBIL

(To Bella)

You know, for somebody that detests mindless woman in their kitten heels, you really do have the habit of avoiding a real conversation.

BELLA

Are you scolding me?

SYBIL

No.

JOSH

Yes.

BELLA

Okay fine. Let's unpack our existence. Just know that when you open it up all you're gonna find is a broken TV giving off white noise.

We're,

(Clears her throat and puts on a poncey voice)

Ironic Hipsters ... let's leave it at that.

SYBIL

You're being like your mother.

BELLA

Whatever, that's hectic.

JOSH

She's right.

SYBIL

I just wanna know why the hell we're like this.

(Pulling a thin paperback out of her backpack)

There's hardly anything written about 'us', but I found this-

JOSH

-That's because peeps<sup>3</sup> gave up before they started. I don't even know what we are. We're definitely a subculture. It's too complicated.

BELLA

Ooo, let's rather go to hell! Let's go to 'Club Vidamatta' tonight!

SYBIL

You see. You see what you just did there?

JOSH

'Vidamatta' with its pseudo Cuban vibe and vacuous patrons?

---

<sup>3</sup> Slang term for the word 'people'.

---

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

BELLA

Yes. Come on guys we had so much fun last time.

(Laughing)

Sybil remember when that guy was flirting with you and you told him that he should walk away because you were too existential for him and he thought you were talking about a country!

SYBIL

I don't know if I'm in the mood to make fun of the little people tonight.

JOSH

I'm keen.

(He puts on a Jock voice)

'Club Vidamatta's' like my fav. Come on dudes, the chicks are so hot.

(He drops the Jock voice)

It's either that or we stay in and watch reruns of 'Snoop Dogg's Father Hood\*'.

SYBIL

I'd rather have Kim Kardashian\* explain the death of the subject to me.

BELLA

(Dreamy eyed)

Wouldn't we all.

SYBIL

But that's just it, why the hell do we put ourselves through mindless jock hangouts like 'Vidamatta'? What the hell is the point!?

BELLA

Cos it's funny!

JOSH

Funny ass.

SYBIL  
(Snickering)

It is funny.

(Reluctantly)  
Fine I'll go, but only if you two humour me with this whole 'who am I' thing.

JOSH  
Cool.

BELLA  
Okay, but can I wear your cabaret stilettos?

SYBIL  
Sure.  
(Paging through a paperback riddled with neon Post-Its)  
Check it out, it says:

Ironic Hipsters are both concerned with, but at the same time take part in, consumer society. The difference, however, is that the Ironic Hipster is entirely aware of popular culture and dislikes it, but their irony is seen when they take part in mass culture, if only momentarily, in order to cast ridicule on it.

JOSH  
(Pulling a self-aware gangster hand sign)  
Word! And that's exactly what we're gonna do tonight. We all know that 'Vidamatta's' absurd-

BELLA  
-It represents everything that we're against.

JOSH  
Yeah. It's like free tickets to the best show ever!

BELLA  
Exactly! And besides, if the paperback says it's fine then-

SYBIL

-It doesn't say it's fine, it just says that it's-

BELLA

-But if we're aware of the pretence of the place then it's cool.

JOSH

Yeah, we're not being suckered by it.

SYBIL

I guess so...but my irony's running very thin.

JOSH

Thinner than Nicole Richie\*?

FADE OUT.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Oracle of Irony**

After deliberating whether Josh was dressed smart enough because he wasn't wearing those pointy, nose picking, smart shoes that most guys his age are wearing, they let him into the club. I was stopped short by a protein-induced forearm. Apparently the club prefers the girls to wear high heels. I tried to explain the meaning of my outfit and how without my Adidas sneakers the juxtaposition would be meek to the point of redundancy. I think protein boy thought I was speaking French. He drooled and grew more defensive. So I simplified my argument and pointed out the nearest pair of stilettos explaining that my phat-ass Adidas sneakers cost three times as much. Protein boy didn't seem to buy (or understand) the economic argument either. I gave up and told him I would go home and get some heels. Protein boy was happy to be rid of me. Bella and Josh continued through the club of obscenity and I manoeuvred around the side of the building. At the back I walked until I was under the balcony. I looked up and there was Bella hanging by the

railing. Josh shielded her with his back while she slipped off her heels and sent them flailing through the air toward me.

With my feet squeezed into heels two sizes too small I faced Protein Boy again and gave him a head cant and a girlie smile. He flicked his log of a neck and let me through. I teetered through the herd trying to negotiate tipping glasses, rows of girls with linked arms, biceps, and broken glass. Finally I reached Bella and Josh and I could breathe again. Bella and I exchanged shoes again and the three of us nodded in agreement at the absurdity of the show interlude. Josh and Bella, perhaps noticing an aggression creeping up in me, said that they would go to the bar because I'd been through enough.

Why was I even here? Oh yes, I was being ironic. There's a fine line between irony and melancholy. I looked around the pulsating room. It was like a peacock farm. Everybody flaring their feathers trying to attract a mate. The guys had their chests out like they'd been inflated with bicycle pumps. And too much hair gel. Little spikes stuck out in all directions matching their pointy shoes. The girls paraded with too much skin, too much make-up and too much interest in the guys' conversation. So much talking or shouting, with so little eye-contact, so little being said; like a silent treaty of pretence.

I scanned the room, hungrily seeking out isolated moments in this hive of absurd social pretence.

- Two girls closed in on a guy as they laughed obscenely at his joke.
- A group of girls peered over their shoulders as they followed the discreet directions of the ringleader to look at a guy across the room.
- A guy bought a girl a drink and waved off a large handful of change.
- A girl asked her friend to check her make-up.
- A girl pulled at her under-wire bra and propped up her breasts.
- A guy gave a girl a little paddy whack on the ass, she smiled back flirtatiously.
- A guy rearranged his crotch while another surreptitiously corrected his cockatiel tufts in a mirror.

I was in a state of cynical complacency picturing how funny it would be if I had a Hessian sack of feed. I would walk up to each group and leave a scoop of grain between them. Let them peck away at it. Peck and flare, peck and flare. Then Gwen Stefani's\* song 'Hollaback Girl' kicked in on the dance floor. I jostled to the terrace overlooking the pit of chronically inexpressive dancers. Some girl in a low cut top with a skirt the size of a sweat towel threw her arms in the air and proclaimed,

'This is my Sonnnng!'

She proceeded to 'dance'. The usual unconscious self-consciousness; step to the side and tap with the other foot, step to the side and tap with the other foot, seductively raise the arms and do a slight pelvic sway, flick the hair and entice with the eyes. In fact, every girl on the dance floor was doing the exact same moves, just in a different order.

It was as if they'd all been to a slumber party the night before, and after politely consuming low calorie delicacies and lightly buttered popcorn the Regina George\* of the group would have hustled them to their feet, ordered a change into gym gear and put on a Jane Fonda\* instructional video titled, 'Whorish Dancing for the Unthinking,' with the tag line, 'Scared of being an individual? Just want to have a good time and lure any man? This video is for you!'

There were two of them dancing in a spherical cage elevated in the centre of the depravity. I've never grasped the idea of arbitrary raised platforms in clubs. In theory it's a stage but the show was desperately mediocre. Six feet above the rest I expected more conviction in their performance, but apparently they'd also watched the video.

Animals.

People also put animals in cages. I remembered visiting the zoo and being locked in a perpetual gaze as I watched Max the Gorilla's desperate attempts at avoiding the crowd's stares. At first he sat with his head drooped, his shoulders a picture of despair. A solemn and excessively melancholic repose. With furrowed brows and a measured pace his head would rise and as it

reached the pinnacle of his relentless existence it would sink to the other side. His irises seemed deeply set, like he was holding himself a step back from the surface of things. Slowly he eased up his weight and would trudge to the farthest end of the enclosure where he reassumed his repose with his back to the audience. The hordes with their cameras and greasy sandwiches shuffled to the other side and continued to point and prod at Max's unpleasurable condition. In the same manner he moved again, and so did the crowd along with their inability to register his disturbed body language. This charade carries on day after day, entry ticket after entry ticket. It's a farce for the damned and not once did Max step out of character. He isn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing his primal self. They want a show but he gives them a showdown. Even if he wanted to, his performance would be melodramatic in this simulated wilderness.

Maybe that's why the two caged women were inadequate. How could they show their true selves in a place like this? After years of conditioning they'd given in. Do they even know? For the most part I've relinquished my disdain and aggressive criticism for the people that those two girls represent. Glossy magazines come to life. Thinking they've experienced a divine moment of honesty because they told their friend that she doesn't look her best with her hair scraped back. Instead of anger I use irony. I think irony means that I don't give up entirely.

We all exist. We all choose. Surely the spherical cage was like the system we live in and those two girls could be interchanged with any human being? Some are indoctrinated with apathy, knighted with a constructed identity, classed according to their possessions and fooled into believing they are unique. Then there are others. They are my comrades. Those that rile against the steel like the jaguar in Ted Hughes's poem.

## **The Jaguar**

The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.  
The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut  
Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.

Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion

Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil  
Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or  
Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.  
It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But who runs like the rest past these arrives  
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,  
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged  
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom-  
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,  
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear-  
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:  
His stride is wilderness of freedom:  
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.  
Over the cage floor the horizons come.<sup>4</sup>

I manoeuvred my way to Josh and Bella who had finally got the barman's attention. I told them that the jaguar was going to pay a quick visit and they could find me on the dance floor. I prowled into the cage and began to move and sway like an M.TV\* disco goddess. The two girls, the shrieking parrots, managed to make room while doing the pseudo lesbian dance where they stood back-to-back and mildly gyrated each other with orgasmic eyes and a porn star gape. My feet stomped to the bass, my torso elaborated the treble and the lyrics were in my arms. They were clearly out of their depth. They retreated, scolded by the rhythm. I grabbed hold of the bars and rattled them as my knees dipped into a demonstrative Beyonce Knowles\* style back roll. I flung myself in every direction imitating pop movements with an alternative candour. I played up to an imaginary camera, and when I suspended a move between the beat, with my eyes fixed on the audience's lens, they were

---

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, 1972, p. 11.

clearly enjoying the show. The guys were whistling and the girls had their arms in the air giving me props. I danced with increased ferocity, savagely mimicking their lascivious moves, and slammed my feet harder against the steel, sparks shooting out from the base of my sneakers. Still they cheered! Feeding off my energy and adding vivacity to their own cliché.

Bella and Josh were buckled over in hysterics, the only two that appeared to be catching my irony. I increased the spectacle adding a bit of Michael Jackson\* from ‘Thriller’ and some Daft Punk\* robotic arms. Still they grinned like a bunch of deranged Cheshire cats. Amid this absurdity I didn’t notice that the base of my sneakers were melting, I was too busy mouthing the lyrics, ‘Let me hear you say this shit is bananas’<sup>5</sup>, and directly to the audience with outstretched accusatory arms pointing at a different person on every beat, ‘B-A-N-A-N-A-S!’ The cage was shuddering. Bolts and screws shot out in a stop sequence against the strobe. My sweat was blurring my vision. The cage began to levitate. All I could think was ‘why don’t they get it?’ Sure I was a glam pop spectacular but how could they not see my revolutionary edge?! A contemporary Joan of Arc\* wielding a sword against conformity! On the last beat I spun around like Michael Jackson with my feet pursed together. This was the final abrasive move and the cage ignited as it burst through the roof in a flurry of ironic mayhem!

I was flying through space, suspended in the cage as it spiralled around me in a sort of epic slow motion. Silence. Only the shards of neon flashes fizzing past me interrupted the sound of my breathing. My body floated, knees up, reclining in zero-gravity. The steel bars disintegrated. I extended my hand trying to touch the stars that felt just in reach, ethereal flakes of glitter that hovered as if on a universal mobile.

Suddenly, a voice cut short my dream sequence, ‘I suppose you want to know why no one got it’.

‘What?’ I diverted my attention to the left and immediately recognized the office.

---

<sup>5</sup> Lyric for ‘Hollaback Girl’ by Gwen Stefani and Pharrell Williams, 2004, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/gwenstefani/hollabackgirl.html>

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

Imitation light oak walls and desk with some scattered fake plants. Fabric off-cuts draped over couches and chairs and hat stands, with a loosely pinned evening dress on a mannequin in the corner. Still in my reclined position, but now on a pink beanbag, I saw the all too familiar turquoise and pink logo mounted on the wall: Spectra Fashions.

She sat behind the desk like an all-knowing oracle. Dressed in gaudy couture, a halo of glorious backlight illuminated her fiery permed hair.

ME

Sally Spectra?!\*

SALLY SPECTRA

Surprise!

I looked around but we weren't on the set of 'The Bold and the Beautiful'. I had seen this place a thousand times before. The only difference was that Sally Spectra had four arms. She looked in part like the Hindu goddess Durga\*. Majestically positioned on a baroque inspired furry tiger print throne, her bare foot was folded up over her knee and her toe nails were French manicured. Four arms orbited her being and separated the dusk coloured light into flickering beams. In each hand she clenched a different item; a golf club, a framed picture, a storybook with a cassette tape, and this one made me particularly nervous, a sword.

ME

Miss Spectra, a pleasure.

(Sarcastically)

I'm a huuuuge fan. Am I here to help with this season's showstopper?

SALLY SPECTRA

No, I've brought you here to correct your misguided impression that irony is infallible.

ME

Come on Sally. A B-Grade soap opera star telling me about Irony?  
Ha, are you being ironic?

SALLY SPECTRA

No. I'm serious. You need the help. I saw your little dance. Did you think that was ironic?

ME

I thought I was making it obvious but they interpreted it all wrong.

SALLY SPECTRA

'The major players in the ironic game are indeed the interpreter and the Ironist.'<sup>6</sup> You failed to make irony even though that was your intention because your audience, 'the interpreters',<sup>7</sup> are the ones that decide whether something is ironic or not.

---

<sup>6</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Term used by Hutcheon, 1994.

---



ME

So ‘there is no guarantee that the interpreter will ‘get’ the irony in the same way as it was intended?’<sup>8</sup>

SALLY SPECTRA

Exactly, it would seem you took your audience for granted.

Confused, I tried to wrench myself out of the beanbag which was hell-bent on devouring me. It took twenty awkward seconds of heaving and pulling with the crackle of synthetic leather and polystyrene before I was up.

ME

Look, Sally, can I call you that? Irony is basically saying or doing one thing and meaning something else. So, what we have is a broken telephone situation.

SALLY SPECTRA

A childish metaphor, but yes.

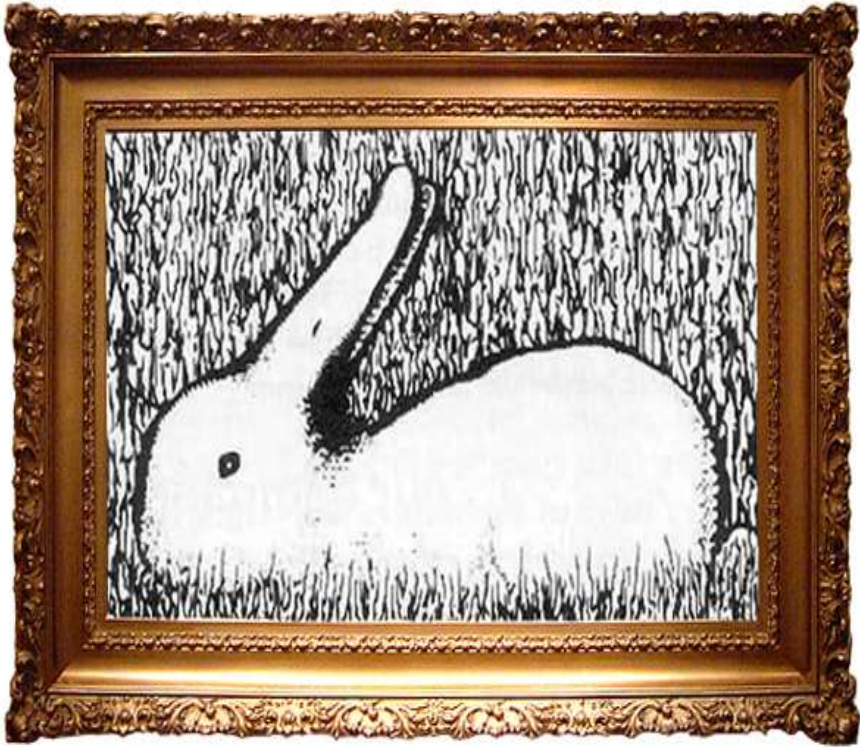
One of her arms came to rest on the table and she skidded the framed picture<sup>9</sup> across the surface.

---

<sup>8</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Picture from, [http://www.makku.com/img/rabbit\\_duck\\_3.jpg](http://www.makku.com/img/rabbit_duck_3.jpg)

Frame from,  
<http://www.hampshireantiques.com/painting/images/mooseframe.jpg>



SALLY SPECTRA

What do you see?

ME

Well it's a rabbit ... or a duck ... either or.

SALLY SPECTRA

Physically we can only see one at a time. I would like to propose that when it comes to making ironic meaning it is as if we can see both the duck and the rabbit simultaneously. Think 'of ironic meaning as relational, as the result of the bringing- even rubbing- together of the said and the unsaid, each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other. Admittedly, this (like most) is not a relation of equals:

the power of the unsaid to challenge the said is the defining semantic condition of irony.’<sup>10</sup>

ME

So when I was in the cage, I intended to be the duck but all they could see was the rabbit.

SALLY SPECTRA

Know this! ‘Those whom you oppose might attribute no irony and simply take you at your word.’<sup>11</sup> Even your two friends, Bella and Josh, they caught your irony this time but in the future they ‘might also attribute no irony and mistake you for advocating what you are in fact criticizing. They may simply see you as a hypocrite or as compromised by your complicity with a discourse and values they thought you opposed.’<sup>12</sup>

ME

Like the time I went to a strip joint. I thought it would be funny. It was... sort of, but every time I dropped the Mafioso I’m-smoking-a-cigar-and-totally-at-ease-with-my-surroundings act, I only felt anxious. I *was* being ironic though. Bella was so pissed off with me. She said that my irony had officially slapped me in the face.

SALLY SPECTRA

Do you agree with strip clubs?

ME

No. They’re seedy dens, the holy places of chauvinism and the objectification of women. They make me ill.

SALLY SPECTRA

Then you shouldn’t have taken part in something so far removed

---

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 16.

from your values. Some would say that ‘irony by its nature seems to have the power to corrupt the ironist ... the ‘habit of irony’ is even seen as a ‘corrosive and paralyzing disease of the spirit’.<sup>13</sup> Don’t give irony the power to subvert your own beliefs.

ME

So then...my irony is basically a private joke, a way of communicating with my close friends. What’s the point? It’s merely an indulgent experience where we can show off how clever and counter-cultural we are. It’s a mere ‘communal achievement’<sup>14</sup> of ‘joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits.’<sup>15</sup> What a bunch of idiots! Down with irony! This whole time I thought I was a revolutionary but I’m just a pretentious-

SALLY SPECTRA

Stop. As with irony there’s more than meets the eye. Do not believe that your irony, which is intrinsically weaved into your way of being, happened by mistake. Irony ‘depends upon social and situational context for its very coming into being.’<sup>16</sup> Your excessive use of irony cannot be separated from your social surrounds. You live in a specific kind of era that demands irony from the counter-culture...If I were to strike this sword at you what would you do?

ME

I’d move.

SALLY SPECTRA

Exactly. As society changes so too does subculture. Your irony is a product of your Postmodern circumstance.

---

<sup>13</sup> Muecke, 1969, p. 242-243, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Booth, 1974, p. 13, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Booth, 1974, p. 28, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, 1989, p. 35-36. Walker, 1988a, p. 25. Barreca, 1988, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 26.

ME

Even so, it doesn't change the fact that it seems to be a useless skill.

SALLY SPECTRA

'Irony has been seen as "serious play", as both "a rhetorical strategy and a political method"',<sup>17</sup> that deconstructs and decenters patriarchal discourses. 'Operating almost as a form of guerrilla warfare, irony is said to work to change how people interpret.'<sup>18</sup> 'The operating premise here is that "single vision produces worse illusions than double vision"',<sup>19</sup>. Your irony is satire that undermines dominant authority.

ME

But essentially my irony cripples me. I'm a hypocrite because I play for both teams. Like your soap opera, 'The Bold and the Beautiful'. I know it's a terribly scripted, melodramatic show that promotes nothing intellectual or morally upright, but I still watch it. Sure there's no sincerity in the act and I take it as more of a comedy, the point is, I still watch it. I'm another viewer for the network regardless of my intentions. I'm a fence-sitter. I'm offered two choices and I choose both.

SALLY SPECTRA

'Which is but another way of saying that you choose neither.'<sup>20</sup>  
'Irony, thus, is always polemical,'<sup>21</sup> 'belonging to the armoury of controversy, and not fitted to any entirely peaceable occasion.'<sup>22</sup>  
Your irony is your 'weapon of contempt,'<sup>23</sup> more powerful than the blade because of its indirection. You and your friends decided to go to 'Vidamatta' for a night of irony. You were as thrilled about this

---

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, 1990, p. 191, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 31-32.

<sup>18</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Haraway, 1990, p. 196, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Chevalier, 1932, p. 79, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup> Thirwall. 1833, p. 483, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Booth, 1974, p. 43, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 41.

prospect as you would be about frequenting a venue that you attend from a place of sincerity because it agrees with your sensibilities.

ME

Okay, yes.

SALLY SPECTRA

If you did everything in earnest, you would hardly cross paths with the masses. Irony ‘allows you to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority.’<sup>24</sup> You are able to engage but simultaneously your irony stands as a distancing mechanism. You are both observer and participant. ‘It is a mode of intellectual detachment,’<sup>25</sup> ‘that engages the intellect rather than the emotions,’<sup>26</sup> and aggravates ‘because it denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity.’<sup>27</sup>

ME

But why?

Behind a steel door on the right hand side of the office I heard the ascending sound of clanging and heavy footsteps. For a split second Sally’s orbiting glow intensified as her pupils dilated, but she didn’t flinch and remained regal and in control. It was her lips that gave her away, twitching and shifting slightly. There was an abrupt thud as she dropped the golf club and spat out her words at a ferocious pace.

SALLY SPECTRA

If anything remember this! ‘The golf IRON can also be a branding device, one that hurts, that marks, that is a means of inflicting power. To resolve these two IRONs into a third, however, you need only think of irony in the symbolic light of the non-domestic and somewhat less violent golf club known as the IRON: it has an oblique head (the greater its number the greater

---

<sup>24</sup> Walker, 1988a, p. 123, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Schoentjies, 1993, p. 153-186, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, 1990, p. 24, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Kundera, 1986, p. 134, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 15.

its obliqueness); it is subtle (compared to the alternatives); it works to distance objects. But, it can also miss.’<sup>28</sup>

ME

Okay okay, the golf club.

I was struggling to focus. Clearly I was in danger. The disjointed steps had increased to a weighted stride. I still had so many questions. Sally edged me toward the door on the opposite end.

SALLY SPECTRA

Go now!

ME

What’s going on!? I still have so much to ask you. How did this happen!?

A figure exploded through the door! Literally through it, like a cartoon character. I couldn’t make out his face, but he was wearing a fancy suit. Screaming like a lunatic he executed a series of forward rolls and back tucks. Finally he came to rest in a kung-fu poise with a machete in either hand. A fearsome glare, he was frothing at the mouth, I’d never seen him like this before. Ridge Forrester\* unhinged. With athletic restraint his arm motioned forward as his machete sliced the air and came to rest pointing directly at me. His eye perfectly in line with the blade as if he was looking down a sniper rifle’s sight. Simultaneously it glistened and his eye twitched.

RIDGE FORRESTER

Tonight you die!

ME

(Trying to be casual)

Come on Ridge, this is unnecessary. I have nothing against you. How about we talk this through?

---

<sup>28</sup> Hutcheon, 1994, p. 36.

SALLY SPECTRA

She's right. Don't be a hater. Let it go, you can't get them all.

RIDGE FORRESTER

There's nothing to talk about! 'The lesson is clear. Employing irony, speaking tongue and cheek, talking wryly or self-mockingly-these smartass intellectual practices give our whole profession a bad name.'<sup>29</sup>

ME

Well how else am I supposed to cope with your terrible acting? You can't possibly take yourself seriously.

RIDGE FORRESTER

I take myself very very seriously! 'Knock it off, and knock it off now. Nobody understands your little ironies but you and your theory-mongering friends...So just wipe that smirk off your face.'<sup>30</sup>

He extended his blade and launched toward me with a defiant war cry. With death inches away all I could think about was how cool it would be to die at the hands of Ridge Forrester. My gravestone would read 'Here lies a soldier, martyred for irony.' I'd have cupcakes at the service and Barry Manilow\* would sing 'Copacabana' jiving like a ninety year old humanoid. As I was imagining the congregation doing a choreographed dance in unison, Sally lunged forward and shielded me with her sword. Their blades clanged together as the battle ensued. Ridge powered up, and his suit tore as his body expanded like The Hulk\* but his skin turned a murky yellow. Sally pivoted on the tip of her big toe and started to spin so fast she became a blur. When she stopped abruptly her hair stood upright and brushed against the ceiling. Her lips had inflated and as she pulled and twitched her mouth her lips bitch-slapped Ridge in a Tekken<sup>31</sup> style sequence. While Ridge was trying to gather himself one of her arms shook me in to action, while another shoved a

---

<sup>29</sup> Berube and Graff, 1993, p. 3, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Berube and Graff, 1993, p. 3, cited in Hutcheon, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> A Classic combat videogame.

---

storybook and cassette tape into my hands. Staving him off with blinding glitter that she dispersed from her hair she yelled at me over her shoulder:

SALLY SPECTRA

Read this when the time is right. You'll have to search far and wide for a cassette walkman they've been discontinued. Now get out of here! Through that door! I'll hold him off! Go!

I shoved the book and tape into my backpack as I heaved myself through the door. Where was I? I heard Sally's warrior scream and the piercing of flesh and organs. I could only hope it was Ridge Forrester who met his end...

## **'BEGINNINGS'**

Continued

FADE IN:

INT/EXT MORROCAN CAFÉ-MORNING

JOSH

(Digging through his backpack)

So what does your little book say about-

(Elaborately revealing a scuffed Skeletor\* figurine)  
this!

SYBIL

That's amazing!

BELLA

I want it.

JOSH

I found it at a flea market.

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

(Puts on a cartoon villain voice)

Soon my collection will be complete!

(Laughs like a villain)

BELLA

Hand it over.

JOSH

I'm willing to do a trade.

BELLA

Name it.

JOSH

I'll only give you Skeletor for your entire My Little Pony\* collection.

BELLA

What!?

SYBIL

(To Josh)

Have you been smoking crack?

JOSH

(Indifferent)

That's my price.

SYBIL

When did you become the Idi Amin\* of nostalgia memorabilia?

BELLA

Well I spit on it. Keep your precious Skeletor.

JOSH

(Wedging the figurine in a standing position between two glasses)

Fine. So what does it say?

SYBIL

What?

JOSH

(He motions toward the book)

SYBIL

Oh,

(Paging through)

Well, it doesn't say anything specifically about our nostalgia obsession but it's probably part of our,

(Puts on a poncey voice)

unified homology. Wait here it is:

(Reading from the book)

This term was originally employed by Levi-Strauss and it encompasses a subculture's representational fit between the values and lifestyles of a group. These chosen objects 'were, either intrinsically or in their adapted forms homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self-image of the subculture. They were "objects in which (the subcultural members) could see their central values held and reflected"' <sup>32</sup>.

BELLA

Like punks and Mohawks?

SYBIL

Yeah:

(Reading from the book)

'For instance, it was the homology between an alternative value system ('Tune in, turn on, drop out'), hallucinogenic drugs and acid rock which made the hippy culture cohere as a 'whole way of life' for individual hippies'<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> Hall et al , 1976, cited in Hebdige, 1979, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> Hebdige, cited in Gelder and Thornton, 1997, p. 137.

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

JOSH

So what's our homology?

BELLA

Amelie, penguins, Sponge Bob Square Pants\*, Kurt Vonnegut\*-

SYBIL

(Laughing)

-Lamas, old people, Tarantino\*, Frida Kahlo\*, Juno\*-

JOSH

-Feeling European, Hunter S. Thompson\*, Snoop Dogg, I heart Huckabees\*-

BELLA

-Bingo, and the way they call out numbers like 'legs eleven'-

SYBIL

-Disdain for Kevin Costner\*-

JOSH

-Vintage-

SYBIL

-Girls of the Playboy Mansion\*-

BELLA

-Tyra Banks\*-

SYBIL

(Gesturing for everyone to stop)

The point is-

BELLA

-I was just getting in to that.

SYBIL

We don't really have a unified homology which is weird. Look at our apartment, it's covered with iconography. And the iconography in my room is different from yours.

JOSH

Well we can't have the same, except for a few crossovers 'cos that would be lame.

SYBIL

Exactly. It says here:

(Reading from the book)

Ironic Hipsters do take part in this society of seduction and imagery, but their difference is located in their choices. They choose to identify with, and be surrounded by, an iconography that pertains to their existential conundrum-

BELLA

-Conundrum, great word-

SYBIL

(Still reading from the book)

-Postmodern iconography and anything that represents a postmodern existence is the Ironic Hipsters' *homology*. This means that the orthodox theory does apply but not in the same sense, 'for it is exactly this homogenous conception of subculture that postmodern subculturalists reject as stereotypical and (by extension) inauthentic'<sup>34</sup>. The Ironic Hipsters' choices are sporadic, unpredictable and steeped with irony according to each individual.

JOSH

my affiliation to pop culture and your affiliation are different-

---

<sup>34</sup> Muggleton, 2000, p. 78.

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

BELLA

-Because we're so obsessed with being original-

JOSH

-But the point is we all affiliate in our own weird way?

SYBIL

Yeah.

(Reading from the book)

Thus, there are no fixed and identifiable objects that can be pinpointed as being homologous to the Ironic Hipster, but rather, it is highly personalized and the homology would be the process and symptoms of existing as a postmodern being.

BELLA

I dig that. It makes us way more individual than punks or any other subculture.

JOSH

But am I still an Ironic Hipster if...

(He starts singing)

'I like big butts and I cannot lie, you other brothers can't deny-

Bella and Sybil join in and the three of them sing the lyrics like they're in an over the top rap video.

JOSH/BELLA/SYBIL

'- that when a girl walks in with an itty bitty waist and round thing in your face, you get sprung-'<sup>35</sup>

ELI, the waiter walks up. A young man in his mid-twenties, Eli is wearing grey suit pants, a fitted T-shirt with a stencilled print of a plug in the socket

---

<sup>35</sup> Lyric for 'Baby Got Back' by Sir Mix-a-Lot, 1992,  
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sirmixalot/babygotback.html>

with the switch turned to ‘off’. A red bow tie and original red, white and black bowling shoes finish of the ensemble. He also has an afro. His arrival cuts short their song and they drop it without embarrassment or awkwardness.

ELI

More tea?

JOSH

I’d like to try that ginger and white chocolate tea.

BELLA

And cupcakes! Lots of cupcakes!

ELI

So, like, forty cupcakes then?

JOSH

Nice bow tie.

ELI

Thanks bro.

BELLA

No, like three will do.

ELI

(Noticing the figurine on the table)

Skeletor, sweet.

JOSH

Thanks bro.

ELI

I got Panthor\* the other day.

JOSH

Cool.

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

ELI

So how many cupcakes was that?

BELLA

Um, three, yeah.

Eli writes in his notebook and leaves.

SYBIL

Oooo, Eli got a sidekick, that's way cooler.

JOSH

Did you see that? I'm so over that guy tryna one up me. Did you see his bow tie? 'Thanks bro', that's what he said. Unbelievable! Like three days ago I told him that I was gonna bring back the bowtie, then he just claims it like that.

BELLA

Eli's so dreamy.

JOSH

And a fraud.

BELLA

I wasn't too obvious was I?

SYBIL

Aside from the drooling and abnormal pitch, nooooo.

BELLA

I'm so pathetic in front of him.

JOSH

We're not tipping him.

BELLA

I'll tip him.

SYBIL

Next time just tell him you're gonna bring back something lame like the yin-yang sign-

BELLA

-Eli's the only one who could make that work.

JOSH

Shut up about Eli! I bet he doesn't even have Panthor. He's probably on 'ebay' right now tryna back up his lie.

SYBIL

Liar liar pants on fire.

BELLA

(Ripping off herself)

Cupcakes! Lots of cupcakes! I can't believe I said that.

SYBIL

I can't believe you don't get this heated about things that actually matter.

JOSH

(Holding his figurine)

Skeletor's way better.

FADE OUT

Thanks to Colwyn Thomas for his illustrations.

## References

Gelder, K. & S. Thornton (eds.) 1997. *The Subcultures Reader*. London: Routledge.

*Hipsterama: An Existential Caper through the World of the Ironic Hipster*

- Hebdige, D. 1979. *Subculture, The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Hughes, T. 1972. *Selected Poems 1957-1967*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hutcheon, L. 1994. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge.
- Muggleton, D. 2000. *Inside Subculture. The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. London: Berg.

Genevieve Akal  
Postgraduate Student  
Media and Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
genevieveakal@gmail.com

# Reality as Fiction: Autoethnography as Postmodern Critique

Jean-Philippe Wade

## Abstract

Postmodern autoethnography is shown to be a radical response to the ‘crisis of representation’ of anthropology from the 1980s, where post-structuralist theory challenged the notion of objective ‘realist tales’ written by an omniscient researcher/ narrator. This enabled reflexive ethnographic genres living in the deconstructed space between ‘science’ and ‘fiction’. Autoethnography breaks with ‘macro’ studies of passive masses in order to recognize individual agency located within cultures. ‘Narrative knowledge’ allows for both the rhythms of lived experience and its conceptualization. The seminal autoethnographies of Carolyn Ellis are seen as allegories of the ethical life for western academics who must respond compassionately to the researched Other. The radicalism of her autoethnographies is compromised by an ‘expressive realism’ which assumes a transcendental subject outside of the constituting play of representation.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, narrative knowledge, reflexive ethnography, evocative and analytic autoethnographies, Carolyn Ellis, fictionality of reality.

In recent decades, ‘experimental’ ethnographic methods have disturbed the constitutive opposition between the social sciences and the humanities, particularly in that ‘the dividing line between fact and fiction has broken down’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2005:10). This essay critically explores the liberating potential of this disciplinary transgression for the practice of

cultural studies, which implicitly challenges the pseudo-scientific ‘realist tales’ (van Maanen 1988) of traditional ethnography.

In recent years I supervised two unusual theses – a PhD thesis that consisted almost entirely of short stories, and an MA study of the Hipster subculture in Durban (by Genevieve Akal, an excerpt of which is in this issue of *Alternation*) which appeared as a fictional autoethnography. These Cultural Studies projects produced ‘narrative knowledges’ that deliberately unsettled those oppositions so dear to academic life: theory/narrative; fact/fiction; science/art; description/interpretation; and social sciences/humanities. Arguments presented in the form of narrative do not have to be translated into the language of academic theory to be explained – their explanation, scandalously, is to be found in the sort of arguments that are peculiar to narrative; it is not that on the one side we have narrative, and the other reasoning.

However, these ‘narrative knowledges’ have met with strenuous resistance from more traditional academics, and so in the face of this hostility to postmodern autoethnography, this essay will critically argue for its centrality to any understanding of our time; that, more than ever, we need experimental and provocative ethnographies to come to terms with the exigencies of the present, which no realism, a form borrowed from 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction (again, the disavowed fictionality of realist social science discourse), has the imaginative force to comprehend, including with regard to the fundamentally ‘fictional’ nature of our realities.

The ethnographic enterprise was concisely defined by Clifford Geertz:

The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (1973: 5).

Ethnography is the *interpretation* of cultural ‘webs of significance’ – not the identification of facts, but of the meanings people give to their lives. If we all live by interpreting – giving meaning – to our worlds, then, as Geertz put it, ethnography is an ‘interpretation of interpretations’. Such a view places

renewed conceptual emphasis upon the ethnographer, because to ‘interpret’ other systems of cultural meaning is to put aside any hurried claim to objectivity and instead to draw attention to the *creative* and situated act of the academic interpreter. Similarly, if reality is only available through the ‘web’ of language, and if that web was ‘spun’ by human beings, then language suddenly appears, not as some passive reflection of the world out there, but as a creative, constituting force. As Denzin and Lincoln put it, ‘Objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representation’ (2005: 5). In Denzin and Lincoln’s well-known periodization of ethnographic history, the fourth stage, in the second half of the 1980s, is one marked by the paradigm shifting ‘crisis of representation’ (Marcus & Fischer 1986), marked by the publication of key books including *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer 1986).

The ‘crisis of representation’ essentially challenged what van Maanen (1988) called ethnographic ‘realist tales’, where an omniscient narrator/ethnographer provides an objective account of a whole culture delivered in realist prose. Drawing on the largely post-structuralist literary theory developed by the usual suspects of Barthes, Jameson, Foucault, Derrida, Eagleton, etc., the critical voices drew attention to what that model had repressed, and which nevertheless played central roles in ethnographies: rhetoric, subjectivity, and fiction (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 5). Both the ‘legitimacy and authority’ (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 8) of orthodox ethnographies were called into question: a post-Saussurean theory of language showed that language did not reflect, but constituted reality, including the cultural reality of the ethnographer; the literary device of the detached objective narrator dispensing truth disavowed the reality of the subjective ethnographer situated in and interpreting reality with specific cultural, theoretical and ideological discourses (Foucault: ‘Truth is a thing of this world’ (Rabinow:1991)); and the factuality of ethnographic texts could be deconstructed by pointing to the endless fictional and rhetorical devices used in their writing, including their narrative structures.

What was urgently needed was a new reflexive ethnography which, like post-realist fiction, Brechtian drama, and the cinema of the French New Wave, was highly self-conscious of its formal procedures, undermining its ‘illusory realism’ (Tyler 1986: 130), drawing attention to its own situated partiality, and acknowledging that worlds are created through interpretation

and writing. The inversion of focus was remarkable: if in previous ethnographies the text was invisible and the world visible, now the text became visible and reality became invisible, a huge epistemological question mark hanging over the latter. Ethnography was now understood to be the product of a host of literary, linguistic, academic, cultural and ideological *discourses* which fabricated its object of study. If for Barthes (1977) 'language--the performance of a language system--is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist', since signifier and signified are joined to make solid meanings, then for postmodern ethnography Truth – and this includes the panoply of procedures to ensure validity and reliability in research - was fascist, an authoritarian imposition of univocality upon a rigorously heteroglossic reality. As James Clifford argued (1986: 6) (and bear in mind the traditionalist hostility to fiction in ethnographic studies):

To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of 'something made or fashioned', the principal burden of the word's Latin root, *ingere*. But it is important to reserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real. (*Ingere*, in some of its uses, implied a degree of falsehood).

Following Lyotard, it was argued that all we have are antifoundational 'little narratives' of local and partial experiences that cannot be finally anchored in some transcendental signified (Derrida: 1974). The distinction between the social sciences and the humanities was becoming extremely blurred.

The 'crisis in representation' gave birth to the 'new ethnography' that moved beyond the 'naïve realism' of facts being assembled by an objective researcher and instead celebrated a remarkable blossoming of reflexive ethnographic genres living in the deconstructed space between 'science' and 'fiction'.

The term reflexivity has, of course, been used and abused in many ways in the methodological literature and is sometimes applied in a

rather loose way merely to mean reflective, with connotations of self-awareness that resonate with the autoethnographic genre. However, the full meaning of reflexivity in ethnography refers to the ineluctable fact that the ethnographer is thoroughly implicated in the phenomena that he or she documents, that there can be no disengaged observation of a social scene that exists in a 'state of nature' independent of the observer's presence, that interview accounts are co-constructed with informants, that ethnographic texts have their own conventions of representation. In other words, 'the ethnography' is a product of the interaction between the ethnographer and a social world, and the ethnographer's interpretation of phenomena is always something that is crafted through an ethnographic imagination (Atkinson 2006: 402).

Richardson has dubbed this new unconventional writing as 'Creative Analytic Practices' (CAP) which include:

Autoethnography, fiction, poetry, drama, readers' theatre, writing stories, aphorisms, layered texts, comedy, satire, allegory, visual texts, hypertexts, museum displays, choreographed findings, and performance pieces (2006: 962).

The ethnographic journal, *Anthropology and Humanism* publishes, it tells us on its official Internet site, 'work in a variety of genres, including fiction and creative nonfiction, poetry, drama, and photo essays, as well as more conventional articles and reviews'. Notice how 'more conventional articles', once the sole diet of ethnographic journals, is now something of an afterthought in the list of acceptable publications. Perhaps the most successful of these new genres has been autoethnography, to which we now turn.

Autoethnography, according to Deborah Reed-Danahay,

synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question (1997: 2).

Challenging therefore both realist senses of world and self, this consummately postmodern ethnographic genre was first identified by Hayano (1979/2001), who reserved the term to describe anthropologists who ‘conduct and write ethnographies of their “own people”’ (1979/2001: 75), Hayano having Jomo Kenyatta’s 1938 study of his Kikuyu people in mind. This is not the definition that has survived, although Hayano was spot-on in a footnote (1979/2001: 83) where he referred to the autobiographical ‘self-ethnography’. The contemporary sense of autoethnography (although, as we shall see, it is a highly contested field) is that it is:

research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political...It is the study of a culture of which one is a part, integrated with one’s relational and inward experiences. The author incorporates the ‘I’ into research and writing, yet analyzes self as if studying an ‘other’ (Ellis & Ellingson 2008: 48).

It is therefore different to the traditional autobiography (with which it shares a great deal) because it ‘places the self within a *social context*’ (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9 (my emphasis)), thus justifying the ‘ethno’ part of its title, and thus also pointing to the inaccuracy of those traditionalist academics who accuse it of ‘self-indulgence’. Autoethnography emerges directly out of the critiques of the ‘crisis of representation’ period because (a) suspicion was cast upon western anthropologists whose ‘objective’ discourse about the Other often concealed an imperialist agenda (Said 1978), and who were therefore encouraged to be reflexive about their own discursive positions, and (b) the voices of the Other were encouraged to be heard. The reflexive researcher reflecting upon his or her own cultural making therefore combined with the new interest in hearing the ‘inside voices’ of cultures to produce the autoethnographic account, whose authenticity was seen to be far stronger than ‘outsider’ accounts of cultures. And, as Atkinson points out,

the ethnographic enterprise is always, in some degree, autoethnographic in that the ethnographer’s self is always implicated in the research process. Ethnographers inevitably affect and interact with the settings they document and are themselves changed in the process (2006: 403).

Behar (1996: 174) has described emerging genres such as autoethnography, as efforts ‘to map an intermediate space we can’t quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life’, and indeed Ellis and Ellingson have recently argued that autoethnography is defined precisely – and radically – by its ability to deconstruct the key binary oppositions of the social sciences: researcher/researched; objectivity/subjectivity; process/product; self/others; and personal/political (2008: 450). It is precisely its deconstructive ‘borderland’ space that has turned it into a protean form:

Autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by our history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed *through action, feeling, thought, and language* (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739).

In recent years, autoethnography has become split into two camps (although I feel this division simplifies matters): ‘evocative’ and ‘analytic’ autoethnographies. Evocative autoethnographies take their cue from Stephen A. Tyler’s seminal essay, ‘Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document’ (1986), where he argues in favour of evocation as a postmodern anti-representational writing strategy:

The whole point of ‘evoking’ rather than ‘representing’ is that it frees ethnographic *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails ‘objects’, ‘facts’, ‘descriptions’, ‘inductions’, ‘generalizations’, ‘verifications’, ‘experiment’, ‘truth’, and like concepts... (1986: 129-130).

Evocative autoethnography is highly critical of the ‘alienating effects ...of impersonal, passionless, abstract claims of truth generated by...(enlightenment-derived) research practices and clothed in exclusionary scientific discourse’ (Ellis & Ellingson 2008: 450), and thus, by drawing on

feminist-inspired 'emotional sociology' (which emphasizes the importance of a male-denigrated emotional and embodied knowledge (Franks & McCarthy: 1989; Ellis: 1991; 1997; Clark: 1997; Lakoff & Johnson:1999; Behar: 1996), and the field of 'narrative knowledge' (White 1973; 1986; 1987; Lyotard [1979] 1984; MacIntyre: 1984; Fisher: 1987; Polkinghorne 1988; Taylor 1989; Ricoeur 1990; Bruner 1990; 1991), it produces stories of affective lived experience which, like fiction, invites the reader to experience 'what it must have felt like to live through what happened' (Ellis & Bochner 1992: 80). The ethnographic method to gather data (from the writing self) is referred to by Ellis and Bochner (1992: 80) as 'systematic introspection'.

Sociologist Leon Anderson, in a special edition on autoethnography of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Volume 35 Number 4 August 2006), having suggested the academic weaknesses of evocative autoethnography, argued for an alternative 'analytic' autoethnography much more in line with traditional social science research:

in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (2006: 375).

Anderson's language - wanting autoethnography to generate concepts and theories - is that of traditional realist sociology largely unscathed by the 'postmodern turn', an academic and political conservatism (Denzin: 2001) which Ellis and Bochner (2006) see as an attempt to claw back the 'unruly' radicalism of autoethnography into 'mainstream ethnography': 'We focus on aesthetics and our link to arts and humanities rather than Truth claims and our link to science', state Ellis and Bochner (2006: 434).

The difficulty I have with the effects of this debate is that a worrying binary opposition is in danger of emerging that autoethnography at its best was dismantling, or at the very least was putting into question. Under the headings of Evocative and Analytic autoethnographies we can identify the following sets of oppositions: Evocative/Analytic; Emotional/Rational; Creative/Scientific; Feminine/Masculine; Cultural Studies/Sociology; Humanities/Social Sciences; Self/Society; Romanticism/Enlightenment;

Concrete/Abstract; Descriptive/Theoretical; Narrative/Logic; Experience/Analysis; and Postmodernism/Realism.

What we need to hold on to is that autoethnography is *both* evocative and analytic, but it is a different sort of conceptual analysis, suggested by Ellis's remark that 'There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story' (2003: 194). In other words – and this has been simply assumed in literary studies and historical studies for a very long time, and in human cultures for an even longer time – narratives have their own ways of producing knowledge. It may be different from sociological abstraction, but it is nevertheless an understanding of reality.

For Roland Barthes, 'narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative' (1966/1977). For MacIntyre, 'man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth' (1984: 216). Our consciousness, our very lives, are shaped by the sort of narratives we inhabit and tell each other, and which are continually open to re-writing. We are a *Homo narrans*. For those who oppose narrative to scientific knowledge, Polkinghorne points out I believe fairly that the thinking behind the shaping of a narrative plot is similar to the process of hypothesis development, in that that the plot is 'tested by fitting it over the facts' (1988: 19), although he does recognize that the difference between 'logico-mathematical' reasoning and narrative is that 'narratives *exhibit* an explanation instead of demonstrating it' (1988: 21). Literature 'shows' rather than 'tells' (for a magnificent account of 'narrative rationality' with its roots in classical rhetorical logic see Walter R Fisher's *Human Communication as Narration* (1987)).

Moreover, and I believe this to be vital, narratives do not so much provide us with facts but with *meanings* to our lives. As Polkinghorne argues, narrative is the 'primary form by which human experience is made meaningful' (1988: 1), and narratives achieve this by placing individual events into a larger explanatory whole – the story - which bestows meaning onto the now connected events. Hayden White (1973; 1986; 1987) has shown how the writing of history involves a series of *interpretations* by historians at a range of levels. For example, historical texts could be emplotted in four major aesthetic ways – as Romance, Comedy, Tragedy or Satire – and each will give a very different (fictional) *meaning* to past events. At another level,

the ideological position of the historian will *interpret* the past in specific ways (1986: 51-80). Through metaphor, through allegory, and through a host of figurative strategies, fictional narratives construct meanings to our lived experiences, and they do so in ways that are alien to science. Take for example Kafka's novel *The Castle*. The novel provides us with *knowledge* of the bureaucratic state (how it works, how it alienates people); it provides us with certain *meanings* about it (the meaning nowadays is that the modern state is 'Kafkaesque'!); and it gives us the *affective experience* of what is to live that endless frustration with bureaucracy. Only narrative – and not the concepts generated by a rationalist sociology (which is prohibited from taking imaginative leaps into allegorical interpretations) – can give us this complex experience and understanding, a hermeneutics of human existence. This is also the enormous strength of autoethnography as the telling of stories about culture, and the individual in it.

Anyone who has followed the long history of debates about autoethnography will know that the descriptions 'narcissistic and self-indulgent' are the key signifiers of those old-school academics for whom the postmodern directions of ethnography over the last three decades have been both bewildering and threatening (Mykhalovskiy 1996; and Sparkes 2002 expose the reactionary nature of the criticism of 'self-indulgence'). To begin with, do we condemn Sylvia Plath, William Wordsworth, Roy Campbell, Allen Ginsberg, or Shakespeare for being 'self-indulgent' when writing poems about their deep feelings, say about their loved ones, God, or the rain-forests? We expect poets to be confessional and lyrical and profoundly aware of their affective lives. And then what about, say, Kafka's *The Castle*: surely Kafka is being overly self-indulgent when giving us his experience of state bureaucracies? D.H. Lawrence is of course beyond the pale, filling his novels with his thoughts about the sordidness of industrial civilization and the importance of vitalism. Couldn't he escape his opinions and let someone else speak, however briefly? Was he incapable of seeing the other person's point of view? The trouble with John Lennon is that he spent far too much time singing about his difficult upbringing and its emotionally disruptive effects on his adult life. We also need to berate all those 'minorities' theorists such as Franz Fanon and Judith Butler (and gays, lesbians, racial minorities, etc.) for going self-indulgently on at length about their oppression. Surely Fanon could have devoted a little of his prodigious energy to the problems of folk musicians in Transdanubia? Of course, autobiographies, which as we know

are immensely popular, are so genetically narcissistic that they are beyond the pale. All those books that J.M. Coetzee writes about his life are surely without any redeeming features, as are Augustine's *Confessions* and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, not to mention Wole Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*; we have not even mentioned biographies, which are endlessly 'self-indulgent'. The reality is that we live in a highly individualistic age, and the rich autonomous lives of other individuals are of great interest to us, since we are individuals too, and to write about the self is implicitly to write also about Others (the written self becomes the Other to the reader), since other readers can identify with the humanity or the lesbianism, or the African childhood, of autobiographers.

When traditional academics describe autoethnography as 'narcissistic', they also betray their lack of understanding of significant trends within the contemporary world, what Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash call 'reflexive modernity' (Beck *et al.* 1994). As traditional institutions lose their former powers, people in late modernity are obliged to take responsibility for their own self-formation, a 'self-fashioning' which leads to a heightened self-conscious individualism. Indeed, for Cauldery, (2000), a severe weakness of cultural studies is that it generally ignores the importance of the individual, instead relying upon statements of cultural generalities which miss a great deal about what is happening in late modernity. And, indeed, this developed agentic individualism is part of a contemporary 'structure of feeling' that is the condition of possibility for autoethnography, with its focus on a self that is not merely part of a cultural mass, a fragment of a whole (as in so much traditional ethnography), but a substantial and autonomous self that is *also* a member of a culture. It is for this reason that I believe autoethnography to be *the consummate form for present-day ethnographic research*, because it is in its very form sensitive to postmodern agentic individualism, a profound progression from sociological and anthropological 'modernist' accounts that could only speak of 'the social' and 'populations', and which therefore perpetuated the notion of a passive and conformist mass consciousness entirely determined by (oppressive) structures, and in which there was no room for individual difference or acting upon the world. At the same time, it fully recognizes the structural location of that autoethnographic self in a *culture*, from where that self emerges.

No academic has been more central to the development and promotion of autoethnography than Carolyn Ellis who, in a range of

pioneering books and essays has both theorized autoethnography (1997; 2000; 2001b; 2003; 2008b; Ellis & Bochner 1996; 2000; 2002; 2006; Ellis & Ellingson 2008) and written a great many of her own (1993; 1995a; 1995b; 1996; 1998; 2001; 2002; 2007; 2008a; 2013; Ellis & Bochner 1992), which have proved to be exemplary models for a great many other autoethnographers (see Jago 2005 for a good example of an autoethnography written in the Ellis style). Much of what I have described here as autoethnography is indebted to Ellis's work (and that of her collaborator Arthur Bochner).

Ellis's autoethnographies are deeply influenced by a feminism which, as we have earlier seen, not only foregrounds emotional reflexivity, against what is perceived to be a masculinist rationality, but which also challenges the patriarchal denigration of the female domestic private space of home and relationships and nurturing. Followers of Ellis's work over the years like me know a great deal about her private life, much of which has been explicitly written about in her autoethnographies.

Her many autoethnographies have to a large degree dealt with loss and trauma and disaster on both a human and grand scale: her partner dying of emphysema, her brother killed in an airplane crash, her bedridden elderly mother, one friend dying of pancreatic cancer and another of AIDS, her elderly neighbor's heart succumbing, the death of a cat and a rabbit, the effects of the Katrina hurricane, the events of September 11, lightning striking their summer home, and so on - what Patricia Clough not altogether kindly calls the 'melodrama of catastrophe' (1997:97). Her writing 'highlights emotional experience' (Bochner 2012: 158) by presenting to the reader in narrative mode the lived *affective* experience of suffering and her intensely emotional response to it, but what is interesting about her autoethnographies is that ironically they are not in any straight-forward way 'writing about the personal and its relationship to culture' (Ellis 2003: 37). There is no carefully drawn culture or subculture which is then explored through her personal narrative; rather what we find is the constant performance and articulation of what I call an '*ethical subject*'. Typically, Ellis will focus on an instance of suffering, and then through her own lived caring response to that suffering, offer her narrative as an example to her readers of how to live an ethical life in the everyday world of suffering and kindness: we *become* ethical by learning how to be emotionally (and cognitively) *empathetic* toward Others. As she writes on the Katrina

hurricane disaster: ‘I empathize with the children, the sick and maimed, the poor, those who lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes, their earthly possessions, their jobs, their identities and sense of place, even their addresses’ (2007: 190). And, in response to the events of September 11:

When I feel deeply, I recognize that what is there is not all agony. Existing in juxtaposition to agony, enhanced by fear and vulnerability, is a sense of collective belonging. This belonging calls me to care and love so deeply it hurts, to express it to those close to me, to reach out to help those in need no matter where they call home, to rethink who we are as Americans and who I am and want to be as an individual (2002: 401).

To ‘care and love so deeply it hurts’ means for Ellis constant references in her writing to her ‘cries of agony’ (2007: 200), a quite extraordinary (and, for some, no doubt excessive) emotional exhibitionism (a perhaps unkind commentator would refer to the discourse of an ‘agony aunt’) which is for her ‘therapeutic’ (2013: 43), since ‘it made my senses more sensitive, my heart more open, and helped me to settle my mind and spirit so that I could be more aware and appreciative of life in the present moment and compassionately embrace the suffering of others’ (2013: 43). Ellis relies heavily on feminist affirmations of caring and nurturing, values marginalized by patriarchy, and here these are turned into the very foundations of a humanist ethics.

These exemplary ethical tales, which appear to draw upon (amongst other voices) Buddhism – from the realization that everything is ‘*dukkha*’ (suffering) to the importance of a lived ethic of a compassionate ‘lovingkindness’, where one mediates upon suffering and experiences caring for life’s victims – are perhaps finally *parables*: allegories of the ethical life. No wonder then that Allen Shelton, in a not altogether serious portrait, imagined Carolyn Ellis as the Madonna of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*:

I imagined her to be in her early forties, with longish, slightly disheveled hair, wearing little or no make-up, an older man sprawled across her lap, his arm dangling over her knees to the ground, the other pinned against her waist and his chest, his hand flipped open and curling into a fingery orchid on his stomach. She would be

looking down through him, her own hands unimaginable in my pieta (1995: 85).

The ethical ethnographic researcher in his or her dealings with the Other of course travels straight from the ‘crisis of representation’ period, when much emphasis was placed on how the ‘objective’ researcher/narrator nevertheless managed to construct the Other (Clifford & Marcus 1986) through the researcher’s ideological, cultural and epistemological prism. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) for example drew attention to the western racist ideology that for centuries permeated all genres of writing including works of scholarship about the East. The ethnographic solution, as we have seen earlier, was for the researcher to be ‘reflexive’, and to work dialogically with the people being researched. In other words, the demand was for ethnographic researchers to be reflexively *ethical* in their dealings with the researched Other, and this is what Ellis is doing: offering narrative guidelines on how liberal/radical humanist academics can behave responsibly in their work, which as we have seen is to live in empathy with those who suffer. If we wish to locate the ‘ethno’ in her writings – the *context* of her texts - it is perhaps an American world of comfortable middle-class liberal humanist academics profoundly concerned to live ethically in the face of human suffering, sensitive to the many oppressions – of race, gender, class, etc. - that scar contemporary life. – or, to put it another way, concerned to be *recognized* as caring, compassionate subjects, and the proof of that authenticity is in the tears.

Ellis and her (both romantic and academic) partner Bochner see their work as we have seen as an experimental response to the ‘crisis of representation’, which challenged the realism of ethnographic writing from a post-structuralist position: ‘we mean that the world as we ‘know’ it cannot be separated from the language we use to explain, understand, or describe it’ (Ellis & Bochner 1996). The ‘realism’ they are opposing is what literary studies calls ‘classic realism’ (McCabe 1974; Belsey 1980); however Belsey has drawn our attention to another, ubiquitous type of realism, ‘expressive realism’. Expressive realism, Belsey argues, is a ‘fusion’ of classic realism (with its mimetic claims) and the Romantic notion that a text directly expressed the authentic and intense feelings and experiences of the writer (1980: 6). It is a kind of emotional mimesis. Belsey points out that expressive realism was central to the literary critical project of F.R. Leavis who, in *The*

*Great Tradition*, described thus his canon of great novelists: 'They are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity' (quoted in Belsey 1980: 10). These words could also be describing the autoethnographies of Carolyn Ellis, who tells us that she seeks 'to tell stories that show our experiences as lived intimately and deeply' (Ellis 2001b: 87).

The poststructuralist critique of ethnographic realism also extended to Derrida's critique of 'presence', or 'phonocentrism' (Derrida 1974), which Belsey helpfully summarizes as 'the attribution to the human voice of a presence, an immediacy, authenticity and even innocence' (1980:78). The assumption that a text directly reflects the emotional experiences of a subject fatally ignores the mediating play of language, of discourses, in and around the text, and, more specifically, how those social discourses construct the subject (or 'subject-position' – Foucault 1969/2002) of the author/narrator. Ellis's autoethnographies do not contain any reflexive foregrounding of these theoretical insights, and instead she anchors her texts in the authenticity of her 'vulnerable' voice, and thus colludes in the notion of a transcendental subject outside of the constituting play of representation. Although I cannot discuss her work in detail here, the autoethnographies of the sociologist Patricia Ticineto Clough (2010a; 2010b) are very different from Ellis's in that her postmodern pieces not only mix phenomenological description with abstract theory (which then enter into dialogue with each other, questioning the 'truth' of each discourse), but also put into question the status of her represented and representing subjects.

We can only agree with Ellis & Bochner that 'the bulk' of sociology 'is boring and poorly written' (2006: 440), and indeed this is a major reason why many academics are drawn to more adventurous 'writerly' experiments. For Norman Denzin, one of the more aggressive promoters of experimental ethnographic work, the 'discourses of the modern world involve the constant commingling of literary, journalistic, fictional, factual, and ethnographic writing. No form is privileged over another' (2001: 357), and indeed it is now common as we have seen when reading ethnographic academic journals to encounter poems, dramas, photographic essays, short stories, reports on films...we have come a long way from the realist study. However it is much more rare to find properly *fictional* autoethnographies, rather than those which use fictional devices to generate 'narrative truths' (most experimental ethnographers still include real people caught up in real situations). The book

that has proved to be especially influential, including to encourage Akal to take the next step into properly fictional ethnographic writing, is *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire* (Banks, Anna and Banks, Stephen P. (eds) 1998), a book which both theorizes and provides fascinating examples (the short story, poetry, drama) of 'the intersection of fiction and social research, offering a corrective to the traditional polarization of the literary and the scientific' (1998: 7), or indeed deconstructing the opposition of 'fictional' and 'factual' to the point of their mutual undecidability. Robert Krizek chooses 'fiction to present my understanding because this format allows my readers to meet my cultural participants (the people of my 'ethnos') in the voice, emotional textures, and multi-layered immediacy of the participants' own experience' (1998:104). In other words, the narrative form is ideally suited for readers to engage phenomenologically with the people he is studying. Krizek, however, does make a further point that is I believe essential for any ethnographer drawn towards fictional representation, and that is that 'creative writing cannot be employed as a methodological shortcut' (1998: 107). What he means is that it remains essential for the fieldwork of data collection to be properly done, advice which Akal took seriously: she followed the usual ethnographic path of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with people purposively chosen for their intense commitment to the Hipster subculture. This data was then entered into the fictional world of the thesis. A key essay in this collection is Simon Gottschalk's essay (1998: 205-233), where he argues that a properly postmodern ethnography must both '*reveal...conditions of postmodernity and enact...them*' (1998: 207): not only an ethnography *about* postmodernism, but also one that takes fully on board both a postmodern world-view and postmodern techniques. This was a fundamental motivation for Akal's thesis, which was deliberately written in the manner of what Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern 'historiographic metafiction' where the 'most radical boundaries crossed...have been those between fiction and non-fiction' (1988:10).

Gottschalk then outlines five 'methodological moves' necessary for a postmodern ethnography: self-reflexivity of the researcher; the production of modest local truths; the evocation rather than description of culture; multimedia saturation (an awareness of the media-dominated simulated hyperreality of contemporary culture); and a multiplicity of dialogic voices (1998: 208-222). These categories were central to Akal's project, allowing her text to 'evoke' the postmodern in a complex manner.

The central conclusion to extract from books like *Fiction and Social Research* is that terms like ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’ no longer mean what they did; that there is, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, an enormous semiotic traffic between them, disrupting their erstwhile solidities to the point where they are no longer useful as explanatory categories. As Hayden White (1973; 1987) has shown, history writing is riddled with interpretive fictions, while, as Geertz has argued, ethnography is an ‘interpretive’ science, which of course immediately undermines its scientificity. The ‘crisis of representation’ liberated the writing of culture from its naïve facticity, which was reliant on a model of realism borrowed from 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction, and opened it up to the possibilities of that other space where truths and the creative imagination, science and art, are in inventive dialogue. Moreover, postmodern ethnographies written as fictions also contribute to the theoretical investigations of the complexities of the ‘fictional’ and the ‘factual’. In a discussion of psychoanalytic theories of cinema, Žižek concluded:

If our social reality itself is sustained by a symbolic fiction or fantasy, then the ultimate achievement of film art is not to recreate reality within a narrative fiction, to seduce us into mistaking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction (2001: 77).

This seems to me to be the radical promise of post-structuralist theory, to grasp our cultural realities as human inventions, where our truths are precisely our fictions.

## References

- Anderson, L. 2006. Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35,4: 373-395.
- Atkinson, P. 2006. Rescuing Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35,4: 400-404.
- Banks, A. & S.P. Banks (eds.) 1998. *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire*. Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press.
- Barthes, R. [1966] 1977. Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narra-

- tives. Heath, S. (trans.). In *Image Music Text*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Behar, R. 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Belsey, C. 1980. *Critical Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Bochner, A.P. 2012. On first-person Narrative Scholarship. *Narrative Inquiry* 22, 1: 155-164.
- Bruner, J. 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. 1991. The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Critical Inquiry* 18,1: 1-21.
- Cauldery, N. 2000. *Inside Culture: Re-imagining the Method of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage.
- Clark, A. 1997. *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Clifford, J. & G.E. Marcus (eds.) 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clifford, J. 1986. Introduction: Partial Truths. In Clifford, J. & G.E. Marcus (eds.): *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clough, P.T. 1997. Autotelecommunication and Autoethnography: A Reading of Carolyn Ellis's 'Final Negotiations'. *The Sociological Quarterly* 38,1: 95-110.
- Clough, P.T. 2010a. Praying and Playing to the Beat of a Child's Metronome. *Subjectivity* 3,4: 349-365.
- Clough, P.T. 2010b. Scenes of Secrecy/ Scales of Hope. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16,9: 691-696.
- Denzin, N.K. 2001. The Facts and Fictions of Qualitative Inquiry. In Bryman, A. (ed.): *Ethnography: Sage Benchmarks in Social Research Methods*. London: Sage London.
- Denzin, N.K. & Y.S. Lincoln 2005. Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In Denzin, N. & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.): *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. London: Sage.
- Derrida, J. 1974. *Of Grammatology*. Spivak, G. (trans.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ellis, C. 1991. Emotional Sociology. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 12: 123-145.
- Ellis, C. 1993. 'There are survivors': Telling a Story of a Sudden Death. *The*

- Sociological Quarterly* 34: 711-730.
- Ellis, C. 1995a. *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ellis, C. 1995b. Speaking of Dying: An Ethnographic Short Story. *Symbolic Interaction* 18, 1: 73-81.
- Ellis, C. 1996. Maternal Connections. In Ellis, C. & A. Bochner (eds.): *Composing Ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. 1997. Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally about our Lives. In Tierney, W.G. & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.): *Representation and the Text: Re-framing the Narrative Voice*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Ellis, C. 1998. I Hate my Voice: Coming to Terms with Minor Bodily Stigmas. *Sociological Quarterly* 39: 517-37
- Ellis, C. 2000. Creating Criteria: An Ethnographic Short Story. *Qualitative Inquiry* 6: 273-277.
- Ellis, C. 2001a. With Mother/ With Child: A True Story. *Qualitative Inquiry* 7: 598-616.
- Ellis, C. 2001b. Exploring Loss through Autoethnographic Inquiry: Autoethnographic Stories, Co-constructed Narratives, and Interactive Interviews. In Bryman, A. (ed.): *Ethnography: Sage Benchmarks in Research Methods*. Volume 4. London: Sage.
- Ellis, C. 2002. Shattered Lives: Making Sense of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its Aftermath. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31: 375-410.
- Ellis, C. 2003. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. 2007. Katrina and the Cat: Responding to Society's Expendables. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 7, 2: 188-201.
- Ellis, C. 2008a. Do we Need to Know? *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, 7: 1314-1320.
- Ellis, C. 2008b. *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Ellis, C. 2013. Crossing the Rabbit Hole: An Ethnographic Life Review. *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, 35: 35-45.
- Ellis, C. & A. Bochner 1992. Telling and Performing Personal Stories: The Constraints of Choice in Abortion. In Ellis, C. & M.G. Flaherty (eds.): *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*. London: Sage.
- Ellis, C. & A. Bochner (eds.) 1996. *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. & A. Bochner 2000. Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflex-

- ivity: Researcher as Subject. In Denzin, N. & Y. Lincoln (eds.): *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C. & A. Bochner (eds.) 2002. *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. & A. Bochner 2006. Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35,4: 429-449.
- Ellis, C. & L.L. Ellingson 2008. Autoethnography as Constructionist Project. In Holstein, J.A. & G.F. Gubrium (eds.): *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- Fisher, W.R. 1987. *Human Communication as Narration: Towards a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action*. Columbia: University of Carolina Press.
- Foucault, M. [1969] 2002. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Sheridan Smith, A.M. (trans.). London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. [1984] (1990). *The History of Sexuality. Volume 3: The Care of the Self*. London: Penguin.
- Franks, D.D. & E.D. McCarthy (eds.) 1989. *The Sociology of Emotions: Original Essays and Research Papers*. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gottschalk, S. 1998. Postmodern Sensibilities and Ethnographic Possibilities. In Banks, A. & S.P. Banks (eds.): *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire*. Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press.
- Hayano, D.M. [1979] 2001. Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, Problems and Prospects. In Bryman, A. (ed.): *Ethnography: Sage Benchmarks in Research Methods*. Volume 4. London: Sage.
- Hutcheon, L. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Jago, B.J. 2005. The Car Radio: An Autoethnographic Short Story. *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 10: 1-6.
- Krizek, R. 1998. What the Hell are We Teaching the Next Generation Anyway? In Banks, A. & S.P. Banks (eds.): *Fiction and Social Research: By Ice or Fire*. Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press.
- Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh*. Chicago: UCP.

- Lyotard, J.-F. [1979] 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Bennington, G. & B. Massumi (trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- MacIntyre, A. 1984 *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Marcus, G.E. & M.J. Fischer (eds.) 1986. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McCabe, C. 1974. Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses. *Screen* 15, 2: 7-27.
- Mykhalovskiy, E. 1996. Reconsidering Table Talk: Critical Thoughts on the Relationship between Sociology, Autobiography, and Self-indulgence. *Qualitative Sociology* 19: 131-151.
- Polkinghorne, D. 1988. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Rabinow, P. (ed.) 1991. *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. London: Penguin.
- Reed-Danahay, D.E. (ed.) 1997. *Auto/ethnography*. New York: Berg.
- Richardson, L. 2006. Writing: A Method of Inquiry. In Denzin, N. & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.): *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. London: Sage.
- Ricoeur, P. 1990. *Time and Narrative*. Volume 1. McLaughlin, K. & D. Pellauer (trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Viking.
- Shelton, A. 1995. Foucault's Madonna: The Secret Life of Carolyn Ellis. *Symbolic Interaction* 18,1: 83-87.
- Sparkes A.C. 2002. Autoethnography: Self-indulgence or Something More? In Bochner, A.P. & C. Ellis (eds.): *Ethnographically Speaking: Auto-ethnography, Literature and Aesthetics*. Oxford, Altamira Press.
- Taylor, C. 1989. *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tyler, S.A. 1986. Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document. In Clifford, J. & G.E. Marcus (eds.): *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: UCP.
- Van Maanen, J. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

*Reality as Fiction: Autoethnography as Postmodern Critique*

- White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19<sup>th</sup> Ccentury Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. 1986. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. 1987. *The Content of the Form*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Žižek, S. 2001. *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*. London: BFI Publishing.

Jean-Philippe Wade  
Media and Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
wade@ukzn.ac.za

# Playing with Identity: Fan Role Playing on Twitter

Zakia Jeewa

Jean-Philippe Wade

## Abstract

The participatory internet has revolutionized fandoms, making possible de-territorialized virtual fan communities with enormous global memberships. The article draws on Fiske's notion of the autonomous 'cultural economy' produced by ordinary 'active' audiences, Jenkins' notion of an emergent 'participatory culture' spearheaded by popular culture fans, and Huizinga's seminal study of 'play', to analyse two fan communities of *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* on the social media platform, *Twitter*, focusing on fan role-playing, where fans either parodically masquerade as fictional characters while commenting on usually topical events, or interact in dramatic dialogues in the guise of fictional characters. The role-playing can be seen as a ludic *playing with identity* that foregrounds subaltern agency.

**Keywords:** Fandom, role-play, identity, fan communities, online communities, Twitter, Harry Potter, The Vampire Diaries.

With the rise of social media, fans of popular culture texts such as films and TV series have taken to new media platforms, particularly *Twitter*, to socialize and interact with each other. These fandoms manifest themselves with 'fan-talk', fan art and photography, fan fiction, fan videos, and, importantly, fan role-playing, all of which work to sustain grassroots fan virtual communities on the Internet. Fans use the characters and plots of their admired texts as springboards for creative and original improvisations. This essay will focus on our 2011-2013 ethnographic study of fan role-playing on

the enormous *Twitter* fandoms of *Harry Potter* (novels and films) and *The Vampire Diaries* (novels and TV series), which have received scant attention. In the popular (and often academic) imagination, consumers of media texts are traditionally divided into a passive mass of easily manipulated ‘dupes’, and a minority of hyper-active fan/atics whose zealotry casts doubt upon their sanity (Jenkins 2006b). This essay, by making analytic sense of the various types of fan online role-playing, will break with both these extreme accounts in order to locate the contemporary popular culture fan within an autonomous cultural economy (Fiske 1989; 1992) involving a series of practices and assumptions that reveal major shifts in our understanding of authorship, of contemporary (postmodern) culture, of identity, and indeed of the very nature of reality itself, whose constitutive fictionality suddenly rises into provocative visibility.

### **Qualitative Netnography**

The research was modelled on a cultural studies qualitative ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2002). Participant observation (Brewer 2000: 59) was pursued for over two years (often at all times of the day and night to accommodate the time differences of its 24-hour per day global environment) of the ‘natural setting’ of two virtual communities on *Twitter* of the *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* fandoms. User profiles (particularly those involving role-playing), fan conversations (in real time), the user accounts of media professionals such as actors, producers and writers connected with the above texts, role-playing texts, fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, blogs, and various other related online content which were either uploaded to *Twitter* or which fans provided links to other sites to access (such as *Facebook* (Social network), *Instagram* (Image sharing), *Tumblr* (Blog), *YouTube* (Video hosting)), were systematically captured, mostly from screen-capping. Six role-players were selected for major semi-structured interviews (Brenner 2006: 357) through purposive sampling (Oliver 2006), three from each of the two fandoms.

### **Fandom Theory**

The rise of the Internet has taken fandom from what was once a more

‘underground’ cultural practice amongst small grassroots groups (local clubs, conventions, small magazines distributed by post) to a mainstream practice on a worldwide scale, accessible to everyone at the click of a button (Marchione 2009: 12). The user-friendly nature of the Internet makes possible the existence of a great many 24-hour per day gigantic de-territorialized transnational fan communities, what Anderson calls non-geographical ‘cultural tribes of interest’ (2006: 63), most notably on *Twitter*, the ‘user-generated content’ micro-blog site that enables short messages to be published online in the public domain from user accounts.

Fans can be defined as a ‘collective of people organized socially around their shared appreciation of a pop culture object or objects’ (Baym 2007: 14). Fandom studies is however further interested in fans as highly active and interactive audiences who creatively generate a host of aesthetic texts inspired by the texts they admire, as well as the making ‘from below’ of virtual and autonomous fan communities, with their voluntary and decentralized sociality, ‘that lie outside that of the cultural industries yet share features with them’ (Fiske 1992: 30).

Controversially, for Fiske (1989; 1992), arguing against the political economy approach to the media (where economic control leads to ideological domination), popular culture is created by ordinary people within a ‘cultural economy’ *autonomous* of elite interests and control, and is done so through active audiences who treat the products of the mass media and commodities as ‘raw materials’ with which creatively to construct meanings and identities that exceed the interests of the elite. Media texts are ‘re-signified’ to articulate meanings and identities of value to ordinary people which are often rebelliously distinct from hegemonic values. Fans were seen in this light as particularly active audiences.

For Jenkins (1992; 2006a; 2006b; 2009), the elaborate, especially Internet-based, creative performances of fans – fan fiction of various kinds, fan art, fan videos, fan conventions, fan talk, cosplay (dressing up as your favourite fictional pop culture character at public events), role playing, and so on – speaks of an emergent democracy-enhancing *participatory culture* which, in breaking down the oppositions of professional and amateur and producer and consumer, alerts us to the contemporary broad demands of ordinary fans to play a much larger part not only in the consumption of culture, but in its very making (hence the term ‘prosumers’). Fans are no longer content to accept a cultural landscape structured according to an elitist

logic where cultural production is almost entirely in the hands of large media, and where ordinary people are almost wholly the passive receivers of that cultural production, defined therefore as cultural ‘consumers’ (Miller 2011: 87). Instead, fans in their millions are treating media texts they admire as cultural resources from which endless new imaginative textures are woven and which speak more directly of the everyday experiences of ordinary people.

With the emergence of the ‘new media’, particularly of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) and the Internet/World Wide Web, this notion of the ‘active audience’ shifted another gear, since what was clearly happening – and this was even more apparent with Web 2.0 software structured to make possible ‘user generated content’ – was that audiences were not only responding actively to the messages or texts of the media industry, but were actually *manufacturing texts* themselves. Audiences were now described as interactive: ‘interactivity implies some sort of transformative relationship between the user of the media and the media form itself. Encoded into new media is the capacity to transform the actual flow and presentation of the material itself’ (Marshall 2004: 13). With regard to fans, who in pre-Internet days were already actively writing fan fiction although in much smaller numbers, the essentially interactive nature of digital media combined with the essentially active nature of fandom to generate an avalanche of fan creativity and the blossoming of global fan communities on the Internet, such as those to be found on *Twitter*.

## **Identity Theory**

A defining characteristic of the post-modern is the notion that, rather than having subjectivities simply imposed by social institutions, individuals actively construct their (multiple and temporary – Shields 1992: 33) identities (Giddens 1984; 1991), more often than not through the intentional (and sometimes ‘aberrant’) usage of commodities and media texts (Fiske 1989; Bocock 1993). The Internet has greatly enhanced this ability, and Turkle has famously argued that in disembodied cyberspace we have the unprecedented freedom to ‘self-fashion’ identities, leading to online subjectivities characterized by ‘difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation’ (1995:185). This ‘laboratory for the construction and reconstruction of the

self’ seems to provide a means for people to explore aspects of their identity which are impossible, or at the least not easy, to construct off-line (1995: 17), including assuming the character of say a vampire or sorcerer.

The performative theories of identity of Goffman and Butler are helpful specifically to understand online role playing. Goffman has alerted us to the ways in which identity is inherently dramaturgical: individuals actively perform various identity-roles in different social contexts (1956); in our case that context is the *Internet*. Butler argued that gender is not natural or innate, but something that emerges from gender identities being acted out – *performed* – with these identities then becoming naturalized through the repetition of these performances (1990). These performances are however for Butler largely the enacting of scripts written by dominant discursive regimes. Online fan role playing as we shall see is precisely the performance of identity, on the stage of *Twitter*. However, the difference to Butler’s account is that (a) the role play identities are freely chosen within the autonomous space of the fandom; and (b) working in the opposite direction to Butler’s analysis, identity-making is here de-naturalized and exposed as artifice (its inherent theatricality is foregrounded).

## Online Role Play

The focus of this essay is both to articulate in helpful detail the ludic activity of role-playing on the Internet, and to draw larger conclusions from this on the emergent nature of contemporary culture and identity formation.

With both Goffman and Butler in mind, role play is essentially theatrical: as in a play, the actor/role player inhabits a (usually fictional) character and performs actions within the personality traits of that character. The word ‘play’, when shifting from a noun to a verb, also captures the sense of non-reality (I am playing at being a fire-fighter) also associated with the playing of games. As with children playing games (as opposed to adults working), ‘playing’ also carries with it ludic suggestions of the imagination being let loose, of creativity and fictional worlds somewhat apart from the ‘real world’ of responsibility and struggle.

When we academically approach role play we are not merely indulging our enthusiasm for light escapism; instead we follow Huizinga’s seminal and still remarkable study, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play*

*Element in Culture* (1949), which made a powerful argument, as the title of his book makes clear, for nothing less than the constitutive role of ‘play’ (and indeed ‘fun’) in the formation of human culture and civilization: ‘a certain play-factor (is) extremely active all through the cultural process and...it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life’ (1949:173). Huizinga (1949: 8-14) isolated these key characteristics of play:

We might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (1949: 13).

These are all useful to sharpen our understanding of online fandom role play, including the cultural consequences of these ‘fun’ activities. For Huizinga, playing was ‘freedom’ for two reasons: it was entered into ‘voluntarily’ (it was not a ‘task’ or ‘moral duty’), and because it produced meaningful and intensely felt experiences of liberation from the ‘real’ world. Do we find here causality for online role playing, that it is a creative response to the alienations and necessities of ordinary life? If ‘it is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it’, then online role playing can be seen to be deliberately ‘standing outside’ the dominant values of modern societies, which reduce everything to a means towards a profitable end. Instead it is seen – like art generally - as a ‘purposeless’ delight in playing for its own sake that discovers a realm of human behaviour at odds with contemporary life (of course, none of the voluminous fan fiction, art, videos, role playing, etc. is done for payment).

Huizinga’s ‘freedom’ also brings to light the voluntarily assembled communities of online fandoms, that these are not activities imposed from above by elites, but worlds entirely created and sustained by ordinary fans themselves, again stressing the implicit resistance to the ‘real’ world in fan role-playing. For Huizinga, the ‘proper boundaries of time and space’ of play – a tennis court, a theatre, a ‘magic circle’, the world of *Twitter* fandom –

were centrally important, because they demonstrably separated play from ordinary life into an autonomous place (recall Fiske's autonomous fan 'cultural economy') with its own autonomous rules, and indeed play would not be play without these manoeuvres. The 'secrecy' and 'disguise' and masks of play are of course central to online fan role playing, where fans take on the temporary identities of their favourite fictional characters, now helpfully also seen by Huizinga as yet another strategy for play to distance itself from the 'real' world. This is not unlike Bakhtin's (1993) temporary autonomous spaces of carnival, including their encouragement of different temporary identities (the inversion of everyday identities: men dress as women, peasants become kings, etc. Huizinga recognised the connection of play and festivals), where the very autonomy enables a critique of the 'real' world – of its hierarchies, its restraining ideologies, its social identities – to the point where the artifice of the dominant reality becomes liberatingly apparent. Playing, like carnival, can therefore have something of the utopian about it.

With regard to contemporary popular culture, role play can be divided into (1) physical and (2) online virtual role play. Physical role play refers to Live Action Role Play (LARP), which is usually when a group of fans who share similar interests on a certain topic, meet and together re-enact scenes within books or movies (Falk & Davenport 2004: 131). It is common in the U.S where teenagers dress up as their favourite characters and then interact with other 'characters', and is usually associated with 'cosplay' (costume play: getting dressed up in the style of your favourite popular culture fictional character).

*Online* virtual role play can in turn be divided into (1) video game role play (well-known as Role-Playing Games or RPGs), where a participant plays video games which visually recreate locations in a virtual world so that they feel they are actually in a specific real world environment containing a set of rules that restrict and control their actions; and (2) literary or text-based role play on social media Internet sites such as *Twitter*, where communication is dependent almost entirely on writing, and where participants set up an online profile of a (usually) fictional character derived from popular culture, which is what this essay is interested in.

Online literary role-play fits broadly into two categories: (1) where a fan's Twitter account is in the name of a fictional fandom character, such as Dumbledore from *Harry Potter*. The role-player will typically remain in

character when tweeting on *Twitter*, even when commenting on topical events; and (2) where fans take on the identity of a fandom fictional character and interact verbally with other similar role-players, creating as it were a dramatic dialogue between two actors that can go on for hours or even weeks at a time, where they have conversations with one another as though their characters were speaking to one another, as well as role playing scenes together that haven't been seen on a TV show or film before. The first type of role play will be discussed with regard to the *Harry Potter* fandom, and the second, far more complicated, type will be discussed later with regard to *The Vampire Diaries* fandom.

### **Harry Potter: Role play**

There is in online role-playing of the first type often a light-hearted (and even respectful) *parody* of fictional characters, where fans enjoy the often comic remarks made by role-players, the humour coming from the interaction between the fictional character as known by the fans, and the particular contemporary interpretation of that character by the role-player that can be seen on *Twitter*. What is also important is that these characters take on a life beyond the original texts, and often take on a carnivalesque aspect, as Bakhtin (1993) describes, where the seriousness of their original depictions by J.K. Rowling (or in the films) is over-turned in favour of a comedic persona who gently mocks not only the world, but also the character he or she is portraying. Fandom, we need here to say, is therefore not all a mere fawning before the admired text. It also contains a healthy populist carnivalized element of ribald laughter at the original characters, as they move from the culture industries into the domain of popular culture. In character roleplaying this *parody* is precisely the strategy used by players to establish what Fiske as we have seen identifies as subaltern *autonomy*, so that the player/fan is both inside the dominant culture and separate from it.

Role-players show high levels of knowledge about and dedication to the *Harry Potter* series, including the books, films as well as actors and cast information. They do not merely quote sayings of their characters in the series, but personalise their role-play through incorporating an individual character style, mainly sarcasm, and they usually play to the fictitious characters' most dominant personality traits seen within the books and films. Below are a few selected profiles of parody *Harry Potter* accounts.



In embracing the title of the ‘Dark Lord’, Lord Voldemort - both the *Twitter* character and the fictional character from the *Harry Potter* novels and films - does not ‘follow’ anyone. Instead, he has a large following online (notice he has over 1.8 million followers on *Twitter*). This Voldemort is a satirical and mocking character not found in the books/films and usually speaks about day-to-day topics and anything newsworthy on *Twitter*.



This user who role-plays the old and wise Hogwarts Principal, Professor Dumbledore, gives the character an evil twist through the amended name as well as by reinforcing his ‘evil’ through following exactly 666 people. Professor Dumbledore is also ‘re-signified’ as crass, foul-mouthed and a drug-user (the reference to his marijuana habit is through the use of ‘Huffle-

Puffin’, a reference to Hufflepuff.<sup>1</sup>). These very typical acts of re-signification by Fiske’s ‘active audiences’ speak of fan manoeuvres that at once both ‘defer’ to the host text and ‘differ’ from it, in the process making that text relevant and meaningful for popular cultures of ordinary people.



This *Twitter* user who role-plays the character Hermione Granger has taken one of the character’s most notable qualities – her intelligence- and exaggerated it online to arrogant and parodic levels. To describe Hermione as ‘Hermione Fucking Granger’ is of course to take a sweet and innocent girl in a direction quite at odds with her depiction in the novels and films.

## **The Vampire Diaries Role Playing**

The research on the second type of online literary role playing – dramatic dialogic interaction between fans in the guise of fictional characters – was focused on *The Vampire Diaries* fandom on *Twitter*, and works within our theoretical development of Huizinga’s model of play to include the assumption that this centrally involves a *playing with identity*. The (fictional) identities at play on *Twitter* can thus be seen via Huizinga as an experience of ‘freedom’ in both of his senses – as freely chosen identities, and also free of ‘real’ life strictures, where by contrast identities are far more policed and

---

<sup>1</sup> Hufflepuff is the name of one of the four founding wizards of Hogwarts School.

determined, just as this identity play is made possible by the play's 'magic circle' autonomy from 'real' life.

That autonomy is in part made possible because of the 'mask' of disembodiment that the Internet enables. Our identity in everyday life is heavily dependent on physical attributes and displayed personality traits when individuals interact on a regular basis. It is an aspect which we are not able to hide or change as it is presented and exposed for people to see. By contrast, multiple aspects of one's identity – or multiple identities – can be displayed online, depending on what aspect users *choose* to show of themselves. This ludic sense of online identity as being open to playful improvisation (including 'blending') away from the more solidified identities of everyday life was understood by the fans I interviewed:

VampFairy23: 'Role-players choose to role-play either characters or the idea of the series because they love it. It is also a good way to escape from your normal identity. It's a way to have fun'.

DDQ: 'I met a guy who role played on my personal account, and he 'lured' me into the world of role playing...☺ I didn't want to start a role play account at first, but after we were Role playing in DM's<sup>2</sup> I thought it best cause we started blending TVD role play with real life ... So I created an account with an Original Character (OC<sup>3</sup>) to his TVD character'.

It is estimated that there are around 9000 TVD role playing accounts (in 2013) on *Twitter*. While some role players try to be as accurate as possible with a fictional character, many role players choose to create new content based on existing information from the *TVD* fandom. Role players are able to bring the characters to life just as much as they are brought to life by the TV show. They have the ability (and freedom) to portray a character in whatever light they choose and can push characters to their limits, engaging with traits in original scenarios rarely or not at all explored in the TV series. Role players that were interviewed derived a sense of gratification during the process, feeling much closer to the character thereafter. This 'customization'

---

<sup>2</sup> A DM is a Direct Message, or an Inbox message.

<sup>3</sup> An OC – Original Character is a character that a person creates themselves and has them immersed into a specific fandom.

---

of fictional TV characters is not unlike how car customizers only truly take ownership of a car – which is to say, place their personality upon it – once they have modified it to their personal desires, whether this be the race, gender or sexual preference of the character.

## **Choosing a Character**

It was discovered that many females were role playing behind male accounts, something that was a little surprising at first, but completely made sense when we realize that the majority of *The Vampire Diaries* fandom consists of females, many of which are teenagers and young adults, and also unsurprising because as we have seen ‘freely’ playing with identities is the essence of role playing. Of course, this also brings to light the persistence of patriarchy: no doubt one of the reasons women gravitate towards male TV roles is the feeling that these afford more freedom to role-players. The research discovered that many role players often start role playing characters that they personally have a strong identification with or interest in, because in order to role play a certain character, one needs to have a deep understanding of his or her personality and how the character would react with other characters in certain situations. This intimate knowledge of individual characters also makes possible the imaginative character improvisations which are central to role playing. Many role players choose characters that are undeveloped or marginal in the TV series, and these mere outlines are then elaborately developed in role play, so that it is often the case that minor or sporadically-appearing characters in the TV series have far more complex and starring lives on *Twitter*. Fans also role play a particular character because they actually disagree with the way the character is portrayed in the TV series, and so the role is re-interpreted from a different fan perspective. As one fan put it in an interview:

DDQ: ‘My then favourite character, Damon Salvatore – vampire – was already taken by my best friend in role play, and I wanted to be able to role play with her, so I chose Klaus, because I liked him too and there was so much to learn about him. And because we didn’t know much about him it was easy to role play him in an AU (Alternate Universe) to start with. And yes, I say ‘Then Favourite

Character’ about Damon – because since role playing Klaus, I’ve come to love him even more than I love Damon. But that has a lot to do with the fact that I think Damon’s character has been ruined on the show’.

The minor *TVD* character, the witch Bonnie Bennett, for example, was seen by the role player (see figure below) as a fascinating underdog figure with a strong moral centre whose character potential remained largely unrealized in *TVD*, and which was explored at length in her role playing. What we therefore find is an endless series of creative interpretations. In the earlier novels, ‘Bonnie’ is a 17-year old girl of white Irish descent with psychic abilities who goes by the name of Bonnie McCullough. In the TV series she transforms into Bonnie Bennett, a 19-year old African-American witch. And she is then interpreted again by this role-player.



For Huizinga, all play involved specific rules (think of games), which contributed to setting the play apart from everyday life. There are of course no rules written down for role playing, but all players definitely learn what is and what is not acceptable through the experience of playing itself, with other role players quick to point out infringements. Many experienced role players are quite outspoken if they do not like the way a certain role player behaves

on the site, and they will comment, criticize, and if they are offended by what they see, will sometimes block or report the person. People are also advised to not role play or share sensitive content with minors or have clear intent to deceive or confuse other users.

Role play can be a simple conversation between characters about a certain issue – which is usually between 30 minutes to an hour, since it is happening in real time and there is a back and forth stream of replies. Or it can be a fully blown story line that unfolds over a long period of time. Story lines can last months, as role players come online and write replies to one another, even if the person who they are role playing with is not online at the time. The role player simply picks up the story as they come online since their replies can be seen on one another's profiles. Story lines are often thought out and discussed before they are role played, as the role players usually liaise with one another beforehand, conversing in Direct Messages in order to get a clear idea of what they'd like to role play. Role playing with others heavily depends on their presence online – if the person is not online, or if they are busy and take long to respond to a message, this affects how long a role play session can be.

### **‘In Character’ Role Playing (IC)**

‘In character’ (or ‘Staying In Character’) refers to the role-player interacting in a way that the chosen fictional character would usually behave. As a role player, it is quite hard to maintain an ‘in character’ identity; since the original character is obviously not you as an individual, and no role-player can ever be entirely authentic. Role players can only draw aspects from the characters and add their own twists on it. However, in order to be recognised as a good role player, one has to show the ability to portray the character as IC (In Character) as possible, and by role playing as much as possible:

DDQ: ‘I try to stay as much in character as I can. My role playing varies from [the character of] Klaus in certain ways and I’ve chosen to see him as someone who is capable of love and emotions, and made him more likeable than what he is on screen, I guess. I have decided to see past his exterior and look to see –why– he’s acting the way he does [on the show and to] give him depth.

As a TVD RPer, I found that staying as accurate as possible to my character got praise from other well-known and more popular role players...There are different kinds of RPer. RPer who are faithful to their characters 100 percent. RPer who adopt the main aspects of the characters but put their own unique twist to them, so as to make them more dimensional, especially since the show does a bad job of giving a well-rounded picture to each character. Many characters are simply used for certain purposes and are then not seen until much later on the show when they are needed again.

DDQ shows a common perception amongst role players – that the TV series is more like an incomplete text, which encourages role players to give the TV characters more complex and sustained identities (kept alive by being incessantly role played). Indeed, role players that were interviewed also pointed out that some of the plots and traits of their characters were taken from (the enormous resources of) fan fiction rather than the TV series, which also shows how important fan-created content has become.

A role player may change the sexual orientation of his or her character. A character's looks can even be changed through using a different 'face claim' (FC: the physical description of a character) of any person of one's choosing. The majority of role players however use the actor or actress' face that they are role playing. Role players may choose to portray their characters as an antagonist or a hero, and since it is a supernatural series, vampire characters have the ability to choose whether they want their character to be utterly vampiric or with 'their humanity switch turned on' – a phrase used to describe a vampire who chooses to feel emotions like fear, loss, love and sadness. Vampires within the series are also very old, so role players can choose to role play their characters when they were human before they became vampires, or any period that they fancy, up until the present and even the future. Many of the characters on the show have been shown in flashbacks to the late 1800s, 1920s and so on. A certain group of characters are around 1000 years old, thus offering the role player the chance to explore wide ranging time frames. All of these aspects of role playing emphasise the depth of the creative improvisations that role players indulge in.

A solo is a piece of writing from the character's perspective and written by only one person; it is a good way for role players to show their ability and creativity without really interacting with anybody. Many new role

play accounts post a solo in order to share their stories and display their role play talent in order to get followers. Other role players usually follow a person based on this. A solo could be a diary entry, or even a monologue. This is an excerpt from a solo:

Someone was behind me. I should have anticipated it. I'd felt that strange shiver which shot up my spine and coiled in my neck but before I even had a chance to turn around and look, he'd gripped me. 'What the hell are you doing out here?' The glare from the headlights shone across Damon's face, his jaw, sharp and stern as he questioned me with piercing eyes. I squirmed out of Damon's grip, gingerly rubbing my shoulder as I scowled up at him, the spell to obliterate his brain cells being called off in a split of a second. 'I should be asking you that question' I snapped back accusingly.

### **'Out of Character' Role Playing (OOC)**

Many accounts make a clear distinction when they're tweeting IC or OOC ('Out of Character') by indicating through certain symbols ('#OOC' or '//') and the general tone of the tweet. When a person tweets about their real life (RL) and what they are doing, whether it is providing an opinion, or talking about what film they have watched or any other topics that do not concern their online character, they are speaking out of character (and ironically in their own character). In the figure below, we can see how a role player announces he is no longer writing/speaking in character by the use of '#OOC'.



The following example of being OOC is quite curious. PBK makes the out-of-character distinction (/), but isn't talking to another user. She instead talks to her character in her own voice. Essentially, she is talking to herself, but the conversation flows with individual tweets as though her character is present on the site. This interestingly draws our attention to Turkle's (1995) view that the Internet makes possible the performances of multiple identities online. Here a fan actually makes visible both her off-line identity and her separate on-line identity (who do not appear to be getting on that well) while showing us an example of role playing:

*//Damon, this is your PM<sup>4</sup>.*

*Fuck off, bitch.*

*//I will turn you into a rabbit and feed you to your brother if you don't come to bed right now.*

*FINE. Evil bitch PM says it's bedtime, it's bedtime. #offline*

## Storylines

Storylines (or SL's for short) are quite popular when it comes to planned role playing. Role players create their own story lines, whether continuing aspects from the show which were not explained in detail, simply expanding on what has been shown by incorporating their own twists and turns, or inventing altogether different plots. The latter is often referred to as an 'alternate universe' (AU), where one pictures what certain characters would be like outside of their regular scenarios. Role players also often create romances (or 'shipping' (from 'relationship')) - most usually of two characters that are not romantically involved in the TV series).

It is important to realize that role players (and non-role playing fans) are also constantly watching other role players performing, so that fans are not only watching the TV series, but also the supplementary fan-created content (not to mention reading fan fiction, watching fan videos, etc.), so that one has to imagine *The Vampire Diaries* as actually an intricate and dense tapestry of creative texts, some professional, and some amateur, and all available to the fan.

---

<sup>4</sup> PM stands for Private Messenger and refers to the human behind the character.

---

PBK: 'I follow about 100 role players from my Damon account, which is my main one. I'm followed by about 400 and I don't mind RPing with people I don't follow, as long as I enjoy them. I also have a lot of RPer's who follow my personal and I semi-RP with them at times from there'.

## Role Player Profiles

Role Player profiles on *Twitter* are central to the fandom because these identify active role players and other important aspects of the projected character. The example below is the profile of Damon Salvatore, a vampire from *TVD* (played by 'PBK', a woman who was interviewed).



A link to a blog is provided: [mr-damonic.tumblr.com](http://mr-damonic.tumblr.com), where much more of the character is explored and discussed. 'Bi' (bisexual) refers to the character's sexual orientation as decided by the role player (Damon Salvatore is portrayed as a heterosexual vampire on the TV show); '21+' means role play and content is only suitable for users over 21. 'Taken' refers to the fictional character being off the market in terms of dating. 'Tied to Alaric's Bed frame' is the character's location.

## Online/Offline Identities

For most role players, keeping their offline and online identities separate is important; besides security issues, it is also because the entire point is to be someone else, and not as it were to reveal the person behind the mask, as if that person is the reality, and the fictional character mere artifice. Furthermore – and this goes to the heart of role playing – one’s invented online identity, because it is entirely chosen, because it can do and say things one’s offline identity could find much more difficult to do, is *usually far more authentically oneself*: PBK explains the reasoning for being cautious and separating her online identity from her offline one:

First, I am working on building a writing career of my own and don’t know if a history of fan fiction is something I would want to open with, and second, my job is demanding, and fairly public, and I would not be hard to find online. I want the identities separate. Writing a lot of gay porn isn’t something I would put in an academic CV.

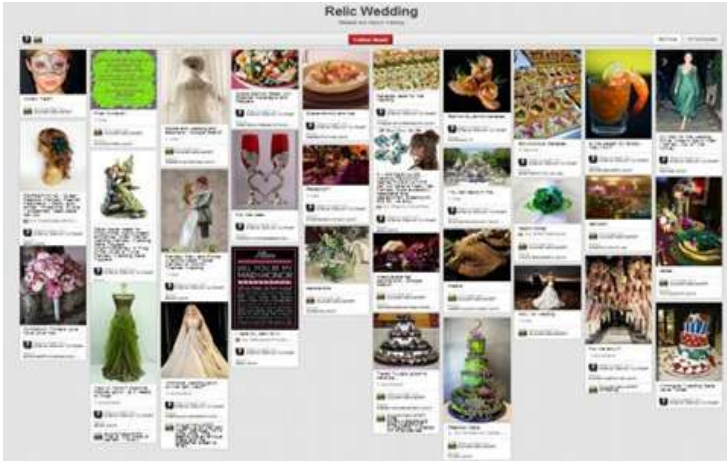
Here online identities appear as more liberated than off-line identities: writing gay porn is acceptable online but not offline in the real world dominated by oppressive ideologies.

## A Wedding in Cyberspace

One of the stronger motivations behind role playing is to place characters from the TV series in romantic relationships (‘shipping’) that have not happened in the TV series, which often leads to online dating by two role-played characters (this is a fictional relationship between fictional characters confined to *Twitter*, and not offline dating by ‘real’ people). For example the witch Bonnie Bennett has not had a decent love interest on the TV show, despite being enormously popular with fans, and this situation is resolved by role playing fans who ‘ship’ her with other male characters such as Klaus or Damon. Online dating between role playing avatars can even lead to marriage, with a full-blown wedding held on *Twitter*.

In a remarkable instance, the role player who RPs the character of Rebekah Mikaelson sent out invitations to her wedding through multiple tweets, inviting her followers and explaining the time and the dress code – it

was a masquerade wedding, therefore attendants were to change their avatars to a picture of their character wearing a mask (not unsurprisingly!). Images of the planned wedding – the cake, the wedding dress, etc. – were placed on the life-style image-sharing site, *Pinterest* (see below).



The wedding (actually?) took place on the *Twitter* site and with the use of the hash tag #RelicWedding, followers and friends were able to keep tabs on the progress of the wedding which had a priest (the role players asked a friend to role play as the priest), and both the bride and groom said their vows. Through the use of pictures which were attached to tweets, the role players were able to provide imagery on what they wanted to display to their followers. The extent of this romantic online interaction is purely fictional; however, the detail and the amount of time spent in creating such an event are given a similar amount of attention in comparison to a real wedding (except this is much cheaper and less stressful). This was a wedding made, not in heaven, but on the Internet, within the densely fictional space of role playing fandom, where what we remember as reality might very well be bad fiction compared to the alluring and liberating reality of the Web.

## **Conclusion**

Fan creativity is now so pervasive that media texts now extend way beyond

the borders of the authors and production companies that first made them, and demand that we radically revise our contemporary perceptions of media texts. Thus *Harry Potter* must now be understood as including the novels by J.K. Rowling and the Hollywood films based on her books, but alongside this 'official culture' must also be included what we can call a *subaltern culture* (with echoes too of sub-cultures) – the hundreds of thousands of fan stories (dispersed across a huge range of genres), the tens of thousands of fan-made *Harry Potter* videos, the fan drawings and photography, the bands who play music inspired by the novels, the dramatizing role players who improvise scenes between characters not found in the novels or films, the virtual fan communities themselves, and so on. These fans become *co-authors* of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, both 'deferring to' the original texts and 'differing from' them, as fan texts beget other fan texts in dizzying performances of a prodigious intertextuality in which fans make these texts their own, and which obliges us to revise our understanding of the contemporary popular culture text to also include all these 'unofficial' texts alongside the 'official' texts of the Culture Industries. If this is to demonstrate one's love for a particular TV show, film, or novel, then it is also not a 'passive' type of adulation, but a demand actively to be a part of the fictional universe itself, as if the admired (set of) texts provide a structured framework (Fiske's 'raw material') within which fans *improvise* meanings and values and attitudes which begin to speak, not only of the original texts, but of the values and meanings and pleasures of the fans themselves. If for the Culture Industries the value of the *Harry Potter* novels and films lies in their 'exchange value', then for the post-consumer (or 'prosumer') fans by contrast it is their 'use value' that is central - their usefulness to make possible the enormous pleasures, the endless creative improvisations, and the context for a voluntary and deeply-felt contemporary sociality that gathers on sites like *Twitter*. This is not some utopian zone of freedom. Fans continue to live within the structures of a globalized capitalism (*Twitter*, after all, exists to make a profit through advertising), and it is after all the Culture Industries that produce the content (books, TV shows) that the fans engage with, but what is important to note is that within these larger structures of domination fans undoubtedly negotiate an autonomous space of creativity, expression and identity-making.

If for Jenkins, ordinary people are no longer content simply to accept culture 'from above' and are instead demanding to make it themselves, then it

seems that ordinary people (including fans) are also interested in the *making* of their identities, rather than leaving that to institutions ‘from above’. We speak now of identities as caught up with agency, of being negotiated, of spaces opening up in late modernity for the self-making of non-ascribed identities from the bits and pieces of discourses and media texts with which we are surrounded. Fans are people who find they can speak about themselves most successfully, can freely identify themselves, choose who they want to be, through the symbolic objects of their fandom. The Internet, with its capacity for virtual sociality, radically enhances this playing with identity, because the Internet is amongst other things a de-centralized and liberated space awash with a multitude of differing and largely unpoliced voices. Helped by the fact that one is not physically present on the Internet, fans (and of course others) can imagine themselves in ways unapproved by their dominant offline world, and because these are chosen and not imposed, they take on a richness and emotional value that speaks of the very passions of the passionate fan. Thus in role play fans inhabit the fictional identities of witches and vampires to actually live out identities which they are clearly more at home with than those offline identities imposed ‘from above’. In the virtual space of *Twitter*, the fundamental *virtuality* of all identity – its non-essentialist mutability, that it is never complete - is liberatingly revealed, and enjoyed by fans.

It is relevant to draw attention to the curious deconstruction of the reality/fiction opposition by fandoms. Perhaps this unsettling of the previously rigid divisions between these two ontological categories has something to do with the emergence of postmodernism which, as Jameson (1991) so powerfully argued, is characterised by the disintegration of the boundary between the economic (traditionally the site of the ‘material’ or, for our purposes, ‘reality’), and the cultural (the space of the imagination, of creativity, of the fictional). It is not only that capitalism colonises the terrain of culture in its relentless search for profitability, but also that culture is no longer contained, but instead spills out over all aspects of the social formation, so that what we buy is not a material motor vehicle, but cultural meanings of status and sexiness; the world of objects turns out to be encrusted with a semiotic density. The scandal of the postmodern is that it reveals that *everything* is culture, that even something as indomitably material as the economy is not only structured by discourse, but also sells cultural meanings, rather than material things (du Gay 1997). And to say this

is also to say, since it is what we invent and project into the world, that culture is *fictional*. We talk about 'black' and 'white' people. These are fictions which we generate to signify reality, and as a result we live within fictional systems called 'language' and 'culture' and 'reality'.

This deconstruction is continually lived by fans – it is the very essence of their fandom. *Star Trek* fans have for decades got dressed up in *Star Trek* costumes to attend monthly local branch meetings where, for example, plans are made to attend the next *Star Trek* convention where the actor who played the captain of the Starship Enterprise will be a keynote speaker on the subject of the TV show's philosophy about life. Reality and fiction are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them into distinct ontological categories.

We may say this: with fandom, *the fictional becomes real, and reality becomes fictional*. *Star Trek* is lived as real, with the result that the reality of the fan is largely made up of fictional experiences. With regard to the *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* fandoms on *Twitter*, role playing takes on a special significance, because fans take on in reality the identity of fictional characters, and even re-design them to make them more expressive of the fans' specific interests. When I role play a witch from *The Vampire Diaries* I inhabit a fictional character, and at a certain point my identity is itself modified by this fictionalizing, so that fiction becomes reality. The very *fictionality of identity-making* walks onto centre-stage, because if self-fashioning is what people typically do, then fan identities and role-playing, re-invented as they are from fictional characters, make us aware of how identities are creative inventions. This only becomes visible when people are no longer mesmerized into passivity by vast dominating institutions and structures, to the point where all meanings have been dangerously naturalized as 'reality'. But when people, such as these online fans – caught up in Huizinga's 'play' – slip effortlessly between 'reality' and 'fiction', and, most importantly, fabricate and re-fabricate reality and identities through fictional textual worlds, then the irreducible fictionality of all reality – its fabricated, invented, human-made projection of fantasies, its protean ability to be constantly re-made rather than only suffered – swims into glaring view, reminding us – radically – that reality is there to be re-made, as are our very subjectivities.

## References

- Anderson, C. 2006. *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*. New York: Hyperion.
- Bakhtin, M.M. 1993. *Rabelais and His World*. Iswolsky, H. (trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Baym, N. 2007. The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom. *First Monday* 12, 8. Available at: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1978/1853>.
- Bocock, R. 1993. *Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Brenner, M.E. 2006. Interviewing in Educational Research. In Green, J.L., G. Camilli & P.B. Elmore (eds.): *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association..
- Brewer, J.D. 2000. *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- du Gay, P. (ed.) 1997. *Production of Culture/ Cultures of Production*. London: Sage.
- Falk, J. & G. Davenport 2004. Live Role-playing Games: Implications for Pervasive Gaming. *Proceedings of the ICEC 2004*. Available at: <http://springerlink.metapress.com>. (Accessed on 26 September 2013.)
- Fiske, J. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Fiske, J. 1992. The Cultural Economy of Fandom. In Lewis, L.W. (ed.): *The Adoring Audience*. New York: Routledge.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge : Polity .
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goffman, E. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh.
- Huizinga, J. [1938] 1949. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Jenkins, H. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge.

- Jenkins, H. 2006a. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York City: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. 2006b. *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York City: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., R. Purushotma, K. Clinton, M. Weigel & A.J. Robison 2009. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Kozinets, R.V. 2002. 'The Field Behind the Screen': Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing Research* 39, February: 61-72.
- Marchione, R.C. 2009. Participatory Culture and Commodification in the age of the 'Digital Revolution.' Available at: <http://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/553018>. (Accessed on 1 October 2012.)
- Marshall, P.D. 2004. *New Media Cultures*. London: Hodder.
- Miller, V. 2011. *Understanding Digital Culture. Convergence and the Contemporary Media Experience*. London: Sage.
- Oliver, P. 2006. In Jupp, V. (ed.): *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Shields, R. 1992. The Individual, Consumption Cultures and the Fate of Community. In Shields, R. (ed.): *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Turkle, S. 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. London: Phoenix.

Zakia Jeewa  
Postgraduate student  
Media & Cultural Studies

Jean-Philippe Wade  
Media and Cultural Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
wade@ukzn.ac.za

# Meat as well as Books

Shane Moran

## Review Article

*The Courage of //kabbo. Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Publication of Specimens of Bushman Folklore*

Edited by Janette Deacon & Pippa Skotnes

Cape Town. UCT Press, 2014, ix + 456pp.

ISBN-13: 978-1919895468

It was typical of the plight of the Bleekmen, this conclusion to their trek. (Philip K. Dick, *Martian Time-Slip*, 24)

*The Courage of //kabbo. Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Publication of Specimens of Bushman Folklore* originated in the conference organised to celebrate W.H.I. Bleek and Lucy Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911). This was the fourth in a series of meetings dating from 1991 organised to celebrate the work of Bleek, his sister-in-law Lloyd, and Bleek's daughter Dorothea. The first meeting resulted in *Voices from the Past* (1996), edited by Janette Deacon and Thomas Dowsen. A second conference was held in Germany in 1994. Most significant was the 1996 *Miscast* exhibition that sparked the ongoing participation of those identifying themselves as San and Khoe descendants and appeared as *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Skotnes 1996). The present volume embraces the textual apparatus of Pippa Skotnes' lavishly illustrated *Claim to the country: the archive of Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek* (2007) utilising graphic design to provide exquisite scanned images of various artifacts. Although primarily of interest to historians of linguistics and anthropologists, the Bleek and Lloyd archive has inspired visual artists, museum curators, sculptors, and poets. The work of the African philologists has become part of the décor of modernity.

Looking to the future the hope of editors Janette Deacon and Pippa Skotnes is that *The Courage of //kabbo* ‘not only celebrates both the achievements and the sacrifices that characterise the Bleek and Lloyd Archive, but that it continues to inspire faithful work’. In this spirit Skotnes reports the discovery in early 2011 of ‘a lock of Lucy Lloyd’s fine blond hair’ which ‘called to mind the hair of ||kabbo which I had seen in 1995’ (12)<sup>1</sup>. The final words of Isabel Hofmeyr’s concluding essay pay ‘A Tribute to the Courage of //Kabbo’, meaning both ||kabbo’s courage as survivor (of colonialism, prison, intellectual enquiry, friendship, etc.) and ‘[t]he “Courage of //Kabbo” conference at the University of Cape Town’ (Hofmeyr 434), the event. The 2011 centenary at Cape Town, and its proceedings, ‘forms but one of the many ongoing trajectories’ (434) of ||kabbo’s words, a link in the commemorative chain initiated by Bleek and Lloyd. The refrain ‘TO ALL FAITHFUL WORKERS’, the dedication from Bleek and Lloyd’s *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, has become a motto that unites a community of scholars bound together by debt to the founders and responsibility to the future (see Skotnes 11).

*The Courage of //kabbo* retells once more the origin of recent concern with the |xam textual remains, recounting the pioneering contribution of Pippa Skotnes and others to the recovery of the textual remains. The substance of Robert Thornton’s ground-breaking 1987 essay on Wilhelm Bleek is repeated. The inflation of the Bleek and Lloyd archive is signalled by Thornton’s move from his earlier argument the Bleek discovered Southern African literatures to make the more expansive claim that Bleek’s dedication ‘ultimately became the foundation of African studies’ (Thornton 117). The earlier circumspect claim that ‘Wilhelm Bleek’s thesis was the sort of linguistic potpourri that only the nineteenth seems to have produced’ (Thornton 1987: 137) becomes: ‘Wilhelm Bleek’s thesis was the sort of linguistic masterwork that the nineteenth century seems to have produced’ (Thornton 109; and see Thornton 1983a & 1983b). Other repetitions include Hermann Wittenberg on Bleek’s *Reynard the Fox in South Africa: or, Hottentot Fables and Tales*, reissuing an earlier publication (see Wittenberg

---

<sup>1</sup> References with author name and/or page number only refer to essays collected in *The Courage of //kabbo. Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Publication of Specimens of Bushman Folklore*.

---

2012), and Andrew Lamprecht's partial regurgitation of the story of Bleek's *Origin of Language* (1867).

*The Courage of //kabbo* is littered with testimonials to the tireless efforts of those who have provided a foundation for subsequent researchers, conduits and participants in the co-operative enterprise of interpretation and remembrance of a vanished people and their transcribers. If this mutual self-promotion and doctrinaire reciprocity hints at a certain defensiveness regarding the historical privilege of mainly white scholars who have studied the Bleek family texts, the contribution of Megan Bieseles offers to salve the wounded impulse to self-justification. Bieseles's inventory of twenty-five language and cultural projects, where language recording and revitalization often precedes mother-tongue education and the self-documentation of heritage, shows the role of academics in channelling funding and expertise. But bridging the gap between academia and communities is difficult. As a Botswanan MA student =ui|xi (Tshisimogo Lesley Leepang) writes to Bieseles, 'we [must] teach people about the importance of their languages and make demonstrations. This is what I am interested in doing: the problem is there is no funding' (in Bieseles 413). Ideally impoverished communities benefit from research into the Khoesan. And humanity benefits from the recording and inscription of endangered languages, feeding the archive, as well as the rejuvenation of cultural diversity: '||Kabbo and the |Xam people have truly inspired an enormous number of people to carry on their legacy' (=ui|xi in Bieseles 414).

Major achievements include the digitisation of the Bleek and Lloyd collection under the supervision of Skotnes, and the interest of UNESCO's Memory of the World project and the South African government's inclusion of the |xam and ≠Khomani San lands in the Tentative List for World Heritage nomination. Research aims at making a difference in the everyday lives of people, particularly those continually marginalised in society. Deacon and Skotnes relay a telling quip about the similarity between the Bleek and Lloyd archive and another artifact: 'like the true cross[...] fragments of the archive have turned up in several other places in South Africa, Europe and the USA' (Deacon and Skotnes 1). Globalisation facilitates the inspirational unity of post-colonial scholars reclaiming artifacts bearing witness to the sacrifices wrought by that process. As usual with indigeneity studies *The Courage of //kabbo* reveals more about the function of intellectuals than it does about its ostensible subject.

Consider Lawyer Roger Chennels' reflection on 'San cultural treasure' (Chennels, 418) and traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights that ends with a plea that consideration be given to finding ways of sharing some of the cultural riches of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection with the modern San. For Chennels the problem is dissemination rather than preservation: 'What a pleasure it would be if all of us could shake off our Western reserve and allow some of our personal thoughts and feelings to come through and disinfect the formality of academic protocol' (418). Chennels seems unaware that the academic protocol of comprehensiveness might account for the inclusion of his own slight contribution punting the dedicated work of the South African San Institute. However, cynicism is curtailed by Botswanan Jobe Shautani Gabototwe's testimony to the uplifting consequences of advocacy and academic entrepreneurship. He concludes:

On the subject of commerce, I firmly believe community members should enhance business training significantly and think seriously about income opportunities[....] Two years ago we established a trust which was able successfully to apply for funds. In the not too distant future the trust will offer employment to the youth, who will gain income and be able to support their families, while serving the broader public. So in my view, a combination of steadiness, unity, education, creativity, critical thinking, healthy living, and business is the answer (Gabototwe 426-7).

No imaginary solutions to real contradictions here for the rural and community development outcomes are palpable and necessary. In this virtuous circle of commitment and gratitude the knowledge gained from research into the dynamics of cultural heritage tourism is seen as vital for heritage preservation and sustainable tourism in those destinations. Mining the Bleek and Lloyd archive has become a sub-discipline of human rights discourse: intellectual property rights, cultural rights, economic rights, constitutional rights, and ultimately human rights<sup>2</sup>. An emergent humanitarian humanism defines the unexplored horizon. Indeed *The Courage*

---

<sup>2</sup> See in this connection Lawrence Hamilton's (2015) pointed critique of Saul Dubow's *South Africa's Struggle for Human Rights* (2012).

of *//kabbo* and the charged impulses Bleek's legacy attracts testify to the interweaving of indigeneity and the discourse of human rights *vis à vis* the nation state that shapes work on the Bleek and Lloyd archive<sup>3</sup>.

Young scholar Shanade Barnabas bluntly states the rationale of the philanthropic instinct and its derivatives: 'myth-making may be economically beneficial to those communities with strong financial dependence on cultural tourism', and what is rarely considered by critics of this fabrication 'is the impact that rejection of the romantic Bushman myth will have on those communities reliant on this myth for their livelihood' (Barnabas 379). First comes the grub, then you can moralise, as Brecht put it. Life-style alternatives and spiritual attunement are authentic purchases, part of the bouquet of re-enchantment. The question that remains is not so much about the part academics play in such mystification, which is clear from the epistemological and pecuniary relationship<sup>4</sup>. Nor is the matter settled by puritanical objection to the compromises and trade-offs dictated by less than ideal circumstances, not least because moral spectatorship and cloistral seclusion from the inhospitable world of real political and economic choices is itself part of the processes in question that we can and should judge. Rather the question that now arises concerns the academic protocol of critical self-reflection. In other words, what are the components of academic self-mystification at work here? What are we to make of the simultaneous urges

---

<sup>3</sup> The intertwining of ethnicity and citizenship, freedom and economic subjection indicative of the new South Africa (see Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 26) has a central marginal place for the Bushmen/San/Khoisan/Khoesan.

<sup>4</sup> See Barnabas on the !Xun heritage site near Platfontein, Northern Cape, where, with an unemployment rate of 80%, artists serve up to tourists the type of authentic art they demand. More generally: 'Countless media products have contributed to the dominant picture of the pristine hunter-gatherer. This image is ceaselessly re-established in the mind of the viewer. The Bushmen are well aware of this representation and groups such as the ≠Khomani craftspeople understand what tourists want and diligently proffer this' (Barnabas 2009: 45; and see Barnabas nd). This most venerable accommodation was advanced by Plato: what is intrinsically untrue can also be subjectively good and true (see Adorno 1975: 17).

to stay loyal to the dead and form new ties with the living amid the redistributive capitalisation of the colonial legacy?

Let us note some markers to guide enquiry into the affinity between academe and folkways in terms of production and consumption, and the division of labour. At the most general level Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* distinguishes between productive and unproductive labour, lumping together in the latter category churchmen, lawyers, physicians, musicians and men of letters –none of whom add to the increase of capital (see Smith 1976: 352). Rather they live off the value of the labour produced by others, competing for the money that circulates from the augmentation of capital elsewhere. In *Theories of Surplus Value* Marx notes that Smith's brutal division, although correct, is indicative of the ascendancy of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, and it softens somewhat in time: 'when the spiritual labours themselves are more and more performed in its [i.e., the bourgeoisie's] service and enter into the service of capitalist production – then things take a new turn, and the bourgeoisie tries to justify "economically", from its own standpoint, what at an earlier stage it had criticized and fought against' (Marx & Engels 1976: 198). Marx modifies Smith's definition of unproductive labour as personal services consumed while being performed (all labours which satisfy and imaginary or real need of the individual), and includes in vendible things 'all material and intellectual wealth – meat as well as books – that exist in the form of things' (28). From the point of view of capital academic production and cultural production are the same for both are parasitic on real production. But nonetheless the spiritual labours are commodified. Today of course prudent academics do not need reminding that incentivisation is the ultimatum of measurable outcomes.

With this in mind it is notable that commodification of the pre-modern indicative of idigeneity studies repeats one of the central tropes of modernity, inventing tradition and milking nostalgia for origin and autochthony in the midst of a deracinated and alienating world for the ends of reconstitution and betterment. Ancillary to new age consumerism, integration into the market economy wears the badge of counter-modernity: the future is archaic!. The synthesis of an eco-spiritual handicraft alternative to techno-industrial alienation grounded in non-exploitative education and mutual self-benefit recasts the footprint of the beneficiating academic-as-coloniser. Meanwhile the marginalised and dispossessed engaged in the micro-process of craft labour are liberated into the harmony of interests of the 'free' relation

between buyer and seller, harking back to handicraft vendibles as opposed to mass production. Political freedom plus economic freedom equates to participation in capital's constant expansion by way of entrepreneurial activity in the pores of the market and the aura of authenticity manufactured in artisanal enclaves is reproducible and marketable. Rather than indigenous culture, both terms of which require interminable definition and qualification, do we not have here concern with mode of production?<sup>5</sup> In this network of analogies, correlations and connections, conjoined with the reparative endeavour of current government policy, the relationship between the state and the contemporary dedicated ethnographic workers echoes the ambiguities of Bleek's own service.

In reaction to the regrettable courage of Bleek's racial convictions the essays of Hermann Wittenberg and Jill Weintraub try to prise Lucy Lloyd and Dorothea Bleek free from the theoretical and mythological (read: colonial) ideology of Bleek himself. Empirical, practical observation, data gathering, and testing – that is the way to avoid complicity with Bleek's ethno-linguistics, we are told. Yet this proffered exit from the Law of the Father is also problematic. Not only because the claim for linguistics as objective science faithfully describing facts about the world ignores that theoretical paradigms influence what is seen as a fact (see Kuhn 1962: 127ff). In addition dealing with dead languages renders problematic the ideal of 'linguistics [as] empirical, rather than speculative or intuitive; it operates with publically verifiable data obtained by means of observation or experiment' (Lyons 1981: 38). According to Menán du Plessis, linguistic research always presupposes theoretical description (Du Plessis, 277-7 note 7). Du Plessis holds out little hope that the hundred years of neglect of Khoesan studies by linguists will end in the near future<sup>6</sup>. Similarly Robyn Loughnane, Mark

---

<sup>5</sup> See Jairus Banaji's (2010) discussion of pre-capitalist forms, at once inside and outside the world economy of capitalism, caught up in the process of dissolution and reconstitution. Autonomous producing organisations are the food of capitalist development.

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere Du Plessis (2011) has objected to the ancillary status of academic work and 'the university's almost palpable lack of respect for my field [African Languages], which is inevitably associated with aspects of African heritage and culture'. Under the cover of the realisation of value the culture industry ingests critical inquiry.

McGranaghan and Tom Gülderman in their contribution also note the lack of a comprehensive modern linguistic analysis of |xam, without which translation is at best an approximate précis. Indeed, I would suggest, it is precisely this textual instability that renders the Bleek family archive enigmatic and allows the range of ideological investment in the |xam archive, an investment with a history that keeps repeating itself. Linguistic indeterminacy engenders meanings and attempts to contain the destabilizing effects of undecidability, and the discernable pattern of meanings that are privileged point to a process of selection that is not reducible to the individual taste of various interpreters. The literariness of the Bleek and Lloyd texts resides in their resistance to totalizations undertaken in the name of unity and meaning.

*The Courage of //kabbo* is framed by an economy of emotion yearning for what Fredric Jameson (2005: 383) has termed ‘the alternate dreamtime of another History and another present’, tinged with melancholia for the transience of life. Nostalgia for the present embalms the vivid communality of full meaning summoned up beyond modern technology; a purity that has for its prerequisite the technology that is the amber that makes possible the reproducibility and dissemination of the archive. So the aesthetic signifies the outlook of a people, *ethnos*, rather than an individual perspective which is pre-emptively subsumed into a prefabricated immemorial tradition. The essential part played by aestheticizing in ethnographic encoding is forgotten. With authenticity an effect of the performance rather than its cause, discipline is required to argue both that Bleek’s ethno-philological project is a part of colonial history and yet at the same time is an uncompleted project subject to transvaluation in a post-apartheid historical context. When the basis of this transfiguration is taken to be the diminished (official) racism of the present a sense of *déjà vu* is inescapable. That such a presumption echoes Bleek’s own faith in progress – the blind-spots of which are so clear to us today – apparently in no way disturbs the complacency of the well-intentioned. Canalization of the claim to indigeneity away from those whom Bleek named the *Bântu* majority to a marginal, unthreatening population group is not without continuing ideological force.

Not only does the futile attempt to make a lost self present by recapturing past time uncritically enlist the category of the aesthetic<sup>7</sup>. A crucial departure from the Proustian reverie of undamaged experience produced only in memory is signalled by the attested good intentions of those commemorating the textual remains of the absent. I do not mean here to discourage the usefulness of nostalgia. At its best, nostalgia for the present transforms the readers' present into a historical period subject to critical analysis. At its worst critical nostalgia is displaced by a paralysing self-serving nostalgia and aesthetic ideology (see Jameson 1991: 285; and Boym 2001: 41-45). It is not merely that celebrating the living vestiges of foundational human experience recuperated from folkloric traces capable of communicating auratic experience has a history; 'a pity towards the dead, however obscure, and a solicitude for the unborn, however remote' (Eliot 1948: 44). Promoting authenticity as a supreme value as well as a regulatory principle balances precariously between the therapeutic and the dogmatic<sup>8</sup>.

The appeal 'TO ALL FAITHFUL WORKERS' begs the question: Faithful to what or to whom? Presumably faithful to the preservative endeavour of the original founders who studied vanishing languages. However, it seems to me, the linguistic enterprise has been superseded by the nostalgia for lost cultures, which is closer to the ethnological perspective of Bleek *père*. Tanya Barben's rigorous attempt to puncture the filial intersubjective matrix does not appear to have penetrated the pathos surrounding 'the dead language (/Xam) of what has rather simplistically and incorrectly been considered a dying culture of a people' (Barben 121). The elaborate catalogue presentation of *The Courage of //kabbo* flags the brand

---

<sup>7</sup> 'But art, if it means awareness of our own life, means also awareness of the life of other people[...] Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on in the moon.' (Proust 1983: 931-2)

<sup>8</sup> Consider the parallels with reactions to modernity in interwar Japan: 'This move entailed finding a refuge from what many believed to be an inauthentic social life (based on inauthentic knowledge) in which the process of capitalist modernization was integrating people into larger impersonal units of organization and enforcing greater dependence on them' (Harootunian 202: 32).

management function of academic research into the Bleek and Lloyd archive. Accreditation is at issue both in the sense of academic publication subvention and certification of originality and authenticity essential to the ethno-tourism facilitating community upliftment. Academic production ought to mark its distinction from cultural commodification by reflecting on and interrogating its place within the field of production and consumption. Without this self-criticism subaltern academics are the latest recruits to the culture industry whose compliance lacks the alibi of the destitute and the oppressed. As honest brokers between the state and capital and the poor the academics become state-subsidised entrepreneurs faithful to Bleek's ethno-linguistic salvage mission. The parading of approbative intentions signals an appeal to ethics, the terminology of last resort and precursor to solicitations of loyalty.

More is at stake than the currency of good conscience for representations of the Khoesan are part of the fabric of a modernity that shapes our intellectual categories. Can we have a concept of history without such an originary figure, or such a figure without our particular conception of history? *The Courage of //kabbo's* framing narrative of a re-animating amuletic living Khoesan culture based on descent – immersed in the ramifications of consanguinity and biological phenotype – attempts to distil an antidote to race thinking from the connective tissue of racism. Caught in the crosshatches of the metaphorical thematization of a predicament not of their making, today the Khoesan are advised: Enjoy your allegorization! While this may be practical and realistic, and politically correct, counsel it is also the latest instalment in a process of *fait accompli* that can be made visible. At the very least reckoning with the colonial past involves overhauling our intellectual categories to register their complicity with the materiality of history. That is why in addition to linguistic, aesthetic and philosophical enquiry the terms of socio-economic processes that include contemporary attempts at upliftment need to be examined for reticulated techniques of erasure.

If these concerns seem academic or even esoteric it is well to note that the influence of the Bleek and Lloyd archive extends beyond South Africa in the form of the exemplary colonial subject. For example, Philip K. Dick's 1964 science-fiction novel *Martian Time-Slip*, set in 1994, explores colonialism and racism in the context of the destruction of the small businessman by corporate capitalism. Colonists on Mars consumed with property speculation on the arid Red Planet employ indigenous Martians as

house-servants. Connected to the land and telepathic, the indigenes are called 'Bleekmen' and still wander over the desolate landscape they call home, occasionally firing poisoned arrows in self-defence (a capital offense) at the prospectors. Gifted with presentiment of the future pollution (development) of their planet by the mega-corporation *AM-WEB*, a group of Bleekmen retreat ahead of the impending socio-economic wasteland into the desert. They are joined by a psychotic boy, Manfred, who, like the indigenes, has seen the future: he 'did not understand the words [of the Bleekmen], but he got their thoughts: cautious and friendly, with no undertones of hate. He sensed inside them no desire to hurt him, and that was pleasant' (Dick 2005: 225).

Manfred and the Bleekmen see that in the future the vast dormitory to be built for immigrants to Mars in the F.D.R. Mountain Range will become a home for the aged, the infirm, and the poor who cannot return to earth. That the colony will become a dumping ground for those no longer economically productive is revealed in a series of repetitive flash-backs, or rather flash-forwards. The Bleekmen curse on the land the settlers took from them sows a bitter harvest that confronts the dedicated work of the 'business-like and competent and patient' (Dick 2005: 231) colonists. In Dick's novel no one had conspired to exterminate the Bleekmen; it had not been necessary. History as economic competitiveness rendered the usual outcome. The Bleek and Lloyd remains are part of a wider colonial problematic.

Under the back-to-the-future narrative structure of the time-slip Dick's exploration of the compulsion to repeat as a manifestation of anxiety locates both a defensive reaction and a warning of approaching catastrophe (see Freud 1989; 2005) at the heart of settler society. At the end of the novel Manfred reappears from the future, a paralysed old man kept alive by machinery, in the company of his Bleekmen friends. He has come to say an overdue (for him) goodbye to his mother. She covers her eyes and cannot bear to look on what has become of her child – his and the Bleekmen's survival provides no solace. Fredric Jameson (2005: 383) reads this ending as cautiously utopian, holding up the value of 'the collective, the primitive community of the aboriginals', the Bleekmen, in the face of voracious capitalism. Salvation can be reached if one can escape the American Web and 'get in touch with the defeated, the marginalized people[...] the Preterite' (Rossi 2011: 104). While such a reading minimises the novel's nostalgia for small business capitalism and disengages its concern with colonial guilt, it

does foreground a dominant trait crystalised out of the Bleek family archive; the power of romantic primitivism to displace analysis. An omen of the past that is both a warning and a reassurance, the Bleekmen signal both the foundations of culture in the matrix of descent and authenticity that secretes racism, and the elegiac residue of any alternative to triumphal corporate capitalism. To bring the two world's together imagine Dick's Manfred as the aging executive of an eco-friendly merchandising company retailing Bleekmen memorabilia, returning with a signed copy of *The Courage of //kabbo* in his hand.

Writing from a triumphant settler colony, the USA, Dick's Bleekmen appear as the commemorated and displaced victims of modernity. Colonialism is acknowledged and redeemed, and its beneficiaries recast as melancholic, unwitting victims. *The Courage of //kabbo* echoes this ideological footwork in the context of celebrating the new South Africa made possible by colonial modernity with its attendant anxieties and inhibitions. If the comparison of USA colonialism and South Africa seems far-fetched recall that Mahmood Mamdani (2015) has recently recalled that when white South Africa became independent from Britain in 1910 the new settler government sent a delegation to North America to study how to set up tribal homelands which had been first been created in North America half a century before. Mamdani concludes that the American Indian reservation became the South African native reserve.

Dick's presentiment of 1994 in which the Khoesan would play a part in the redemptive symbolism of post-apartheid South Africa suggests the need to orientate the Bleek and Lloyd family textual crypt within the broadest interpretive horizon. *The Courage of //kabbo* brings home the need for a comparative approach that would constellate the range of ethnographic and folk researches (and researchers) from around the world. At once historical and philosophical such a project would not only critically reflect on Bleek's own global-colonial perspective but would also map the political and ideological forces at work in indigeneity studies. As integral coordinate in the spider's web of development, indigenes hold a special place in the relation between the economic thought of a given period and its ethico-political and disciplinary thought. In a world of ubiquitous *déjà vu* it is vital to retain 'the ability to distinguish reality from the projections of [our] own unconscious' (Dick 2005: 145).

## References

- Adorno, T.W. [1963] 1975. Culture Industry Reconsidered. Rabinbach, A.G. (trans.). *New German Critique* 6,Fall: 12-19.
- Banaji, J. 2010. *Theory as History. Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Barnabas, S. n.d. Painting from Dreams: Contemporary !Xun Art and Spiritual Continuity. Available at: <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/barnabasspirpaper.pdf>.
- Barnabas, S. 2009. *I Paint Therefore I Am? An Exploration of Contemporary Bushman Art in South Africa and Its Development Potential*. MA Mini-Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Boym, S. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Comaroff, J.L. & J. Comaroff 2009. *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dick, P.K. [1964] 2005. *Martian Time-Slip*. In *Five Novels of the 1960s and 70s*. New York: The Library of America.
- Du Plessis, M. 2011. Comment. *Mail & Guardian*, March 25. Available at: <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-03-25-superschool-will-not-do-justice-to-african-languages>.
- Eliot, T.S. 1948. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Freud, S. [1926] 1989. *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. Strachey, A. (trans., revised and edited.). New York: W.W. Norton & CO.
- Hamilton, L. 2015. Controversy, Conflict and Struggle in South Africa. *Journal of South African Studies* 41, 2: 419-423.
- Illbruck, H. 2012. *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease*. USA: Northwestern University Press.
- Jameson, F. 1991. Nostalgia for the Present. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. USA: Duke University Press.
- Jameson, F. 2005. History as Salvation in Philip K. Dick. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso.
- Lyons, J. 1981. *Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kuhn, T.S. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: UCP.

- Mamdani, M. 2015. Settler Colonialism: Then and Now. *Critical Inquiry* 41,3, Spring: 596-614.
- Marx, K. & F. Engels 1976. *Collected Works. Volume 31. Marx: 1861-1863*. U.S.: International Publishers Inc.
- Proust, M. 1983. *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume Three*. Moncrieff, C.K., T. Kilmartin & A. Mayor (trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Rossi, U. 2011. *The Twisted Worlds of Philip K. Dick*. North Carolina: McFarland and Co.
- Skotnes, P. 1996. *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Smith, A. 1976. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Cannan, E. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thornton, R. 1983a. Narrative Ethnography in Africa, 1850-1920: The Creation and Capture of an Appropriate Domain for Anthropology. *Man New Series*, 18, 3, September: 502-520.
- Thornton, R.J. 1983b. 'This Dying Out Race'. W.H.I. Bleek's Approach to the Languages of Southern Africa. *Social Dynamics* 9, 2: 1 -10.
- Thornton, R.J. 1987. William Hendrick [sic] Bleek's Discovery of Southern African Literature, 1845-1854. Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town. *African Seminar: Collected Papers* 127-156.
- Wittenberg, H. 2012. Wilhelm Bleek and the Khoisan Imagination: A Study of Censorship. Genocide and Colonial Science. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 3: 667-679.

Shane Moran  
Department of English Literature  
University of Fort Hare  
smoran@ufh.ac.za

# Speaking Out: In Conversation with Niq Mhlongo

**Olivier Moreillon<sup>1</sup>**

**Lindy Stiebel**

Niq Mhlongo was born in Soweto in 1973 as the eighth of ten children. His mother is from the northeast Limpopo province. His father, who was a sweeper in a post office, died when he was a teenager. After his father's death, Mhlongo's older brothers supported the family. He lived in Soweto as a child but was sent to Limpopo for his primary and secondary education by his parents, who wanted to safeguard him from the rising tensions in Soweto. After his matric, which he failed at the first attempt partly due to the political unrests in 1990 and the subsequent closure of the schools, Mhlongo started his studies at Wits University. In 1996, he graduated with a degree in Political Studies and African Literature. The following year, he started a postgraduate degree in law at the same university. He transferred to the University of Cape Town in 1998, but dropped out of UCT in his final year, deciding instead to become a writer. He currently works for the Film and Publication Board.

---

<sup>1</sup> Olivier Moreillon is a PhD student at the University of Basel, Switzerland. His dissertation project 'Cities in Flux: Capetonian and Durbanite Literary Topographies' – supervised by Prof. Therese Steffen (University of Basel), Prof. Lindy Stiebel (University of KwaZulu-Natal) and Prof. Ina Habermann (University of Basel) – analyses the representation of urban space(s) in the works of selected authors in post-apartheid South African literature since 2000. He is doing extensive research in South Africa through the Swiss South African Joint Research Programme and the Swiss National Science Foundation.

He is the author of three novels – *Dog Eat Dog* (2003), *After Tears* (2007), and *Way Back Home* (2013) – and a collection of short stories – *Affluenza* (2015)<sup>2</sup>. *Dog Eat Dog*, his first novel, has been translated into Italian and Spanish. The Spanish translation won the Mar de Letras Internacional Prize in 2006. *After Tears*, his second novel, was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 2008 and has been translated into French. The German translation of *Way Back Home* by Verlag Das Wunderhorn is due out in the second half of 2015.

This interview was conducted in Durban on 22 March 2014. Mhlongo was in Durban as part of the Time of the Writer Festival hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) where he featured on a panel entitled ‘Chronicling the Contemporary South African Story’ together with Kgebetli Moele.<sup>3</sup> His finger-on-the-pulse reports of South Africa’s post-apartheid social complexities and challenges have rightly established him as part of a young generation of black South African writers. While his earlier writing is characterised by its frank style and humorous dialogues, *Way Back Home*, which sternly criticises the corruption among South Africa’s elite, shows a more earnest and post-modern side of the author. It will be interesting to see where Mhlongo’s future projects take him. In the following interview, Mhlongo talks about the extent to which South Africa’s past permeates the present, the importance of ‘home’ and tradition in his writing as well as the contribution of *Way Back Home* to the ongoing political discourse.

---

<sup>2</sup> The collection, schedule to appear in April 2015, covers a wide range of significant socio-political topics of the first two decades of South Africa’s democracy such as the 1994-euphoria, the HIV/Aids pandemic, xenophobia, the Marikana massacre, and the Zuma presidency. While many of the stories have been published to critical acclaim both in Europe as well as in the US, they are mostly unknown amongst the South African reading public.

<sup>3</sup> Kgebetli Moele is another award-winning South African author who belongs to the cohort of the country’s established young black writers. His debut novel *Room 207* (2006) won the 2007 Herman Charles Bosman Debut Novel Award and the University of Johannesburg Debut Novel Award. His second novel *The Book of the Dead* (2009) was awarded the 2010 South African Literary Award. *Untitled* (2014) is his latest novel.

**Could you briefly tell us what your third novel, *Way Back Home*, is about?**

*Way Back Home* is set both in 2010 post-apartheid South Africa and in Angola during the height of apartheid around 1987. Angola was one of the places where the anti-apartheid movement sent people to be trained as guerrilla or freedom fighters. From there they would infiltrate South Africa and fight for freedom. But while South Africans are told that everything was smooth in these camps<sup>4</sup> and that everybody in these camps wanted to fight for freedom, lots of horrible things actually happened there. My book says that not everybody left South Africa because they wanted to fight for freedom. Some of them were real thugs. They were thieves, rapists, and murderers who went into exile to escape prosecution and only pretended to be freedom fighters.

*Way Back Home* tells the story of Kimathi, the son of a disreputable high-ranking freedom fighter, who is born in exile and joins the Movement as a student. In one of the camps, Kimathi falls in love with a female comrade of his. However, she refuses him, a refusal that has far-reaching consequences. After the fall of apartheid, Kimathi goes to South Africa and becomes a successful businessman, when suddenly the past catches up with him. So *Way Back Home* is about the implications of the past on the present.

---

<sup>4</sup> The ANC established the first training camps for its armed wing in Angola in 1976 and had established various further camps by 1978. Particularly the camp at Quatro, which was used as a detention centre, was notorious for its beatings and torture in order to obtain coerced confessions of alleged traitors of the anti-apartheid movement. The camp received its name Quatro, the Portuguese word for ‘four’, with reference to Johannesburg’s infamous political prison known as ‘Number Four’ (for further information see e.g. Cleveland 2005, Trewhela 2009 or Cherry 2012). In research, the ANC’s armed struggle has long been tabooed due to moral reasons and the anti-apartheid movement has instead usually been described as an act of mass mobilization and civil rights struggle (see e.g. Seidman 2001 for an overview of the problem). The ANC’s reaction to several testimonies of abuses at Quatro during the TRC hearings was equally noncommittal with their dismissal as beyond the scope of the hearings (see Cleveland 2005 for a more detailed discussion).

But the novel also talks about the process of healing. If someone passes away, the process of healing and mourning doesn't end with burying the person. There are certain rituals that have to be performed. We slaughter an animal to appease our ancestors and to celebrate the deceased's life and his or her transition into the land of the spirits. This healing process involves many different things to different people, but the most important thing is to collect the deceased person's body. If I died today, somebody would have to come and collect my spirit here in Durban, before they could bury me in Johannesburg. They couldn't bury me without getting my spirit first. So *Way Back Home* is also about tradition and in that sense it is also a book about oppositions. It is about connecting the traditional and the modern, the rich and the poor, the African and the Western.

**What different aspects of home and/or coming home does the novel deal with?**

One aspect of home the book talks about is linked to African tradition. Home is where a spirit rests forever. Home is where your ancestors are buried. So the book deals with home in that sense. But the novel also talks about the fact that many South Africans don't have a sense of belonging at the moment. There's a sense of displacement. Many black South Africans have lost their ancestral home. That's where we bury our dead. According to African tradition, I have to be buried where all other Mhlongos are buried. But because of the land distribution problems in South Africa, people have been displaced from the land which they owned, including what is called the ancestral place. So home is where land is. Home is where the ancestors come from. We don't point up when we talk about our ancestors. Our ancestors are down here. That's why we have to brew traditional *umqombothi* beer and pour it down on the ground, so that the ancestors get merry and then do us favours. That's why we slaughter animals to appease our ancestors before asking them for a favour.

**Would you say then that *Way Back Home* is about coming home and dealing with having lost what once used to be your home?**

Yes, exactly. And losing part of tradition. What I was trying to say is that this

is also a problem of colonialism. Many Africans lost their home because their land was given to colonialists. To them, land meant a lot in terms of agriculture. To us, however, land was and is more than agriculture. Land is who we are.

### **How important is place in *Way Back Home*?**

It is very important, actually. The novel talks quite a lot about displacement. Many people don't understand how rooted African culture is. I've realized that within the Indian tradition, for instance – well maybe I'm just making a superfluous kind of comparison – people also live a very communal life. When people marry, they don't go far away from where they come from. Like I live in Jo'burg and my mother comes from Limpopo, which is in the north-eastern part of South Africa. Every time she calls me – I've never stayed in that place – she'll ask me when I'm coming home. And the most important thing that makes a place home is that your ancestors are buried there.

Colonialism didn't care about this. Families were divided. Ancestral places were divided. I was in Mozambique at some point where I went to the Samora Machel<sup>5</sup> Museum. Samora Machel died in a plane crash in Mbuzini – that's on the border between Mozambique, Swaziland, and South Africa – in 1986. People thought the wrath of the ancestors was the reason for the plane crash. They believed that the ancestors were worried that Samora Machel was never going to do anything about what had happened in the past, that he was not going to use the power he had been given to right the wrongs of colonialism, i.e. the separation of people from the same tribe to three different countries. We have to have one place, because ancestors don't want to be divided according to the areas of colonial interest. That's what people thought. That's what people believe in. But it really tells you how important land is within African tradition.

---

<sup>5</sup> Military commander, revolutionary leader and first president of Mozambique, Samora Machel was a popular figure in South Africa in general as much as a thorn in the flesh of South Africa's apartheid state. Because of his sympathies towards the ANC's armed wing, he was the target of several assassination attempts (see e.g. Christie 1989 or Funada-Classen 2013).

**The novel opens with a betrayal. To what degree is *Way Back Home* a novel about betrayal and what kind of betrayal(s) does it portray?**

Yeah, *Way Back Home* is about betrayal. The book talks both about how the ANC government has betrayed the people in post-apartheid South Africa, but also about betrayal within the anti-apartheid movement during the height of the apartheid regime.

The ANC government has promised people things that it never fulfilled, not because it didn't have the capacity, but because many politicians are corrupt and want to enrich themselves. The new government has created a big gap between the rich and the poor and this gap is growing even wider apart. In 1994, people voted for the ANC in large numbers because they thought they would get housing. They thought they would get land. They thought they would get better education. They thought they would get a job. They thought it would be the end of inequality. You know, all those kind of things that people were worried about. But only few are benefitting from the revolution, mainly people from the ruling party itself. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There is too much inequality. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There are still too many poor people. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There is too much unemployment. That's a betrayal of the struggle. There isn't enough housing. That's a betrayal of the struggle. And HIV is a serious problem in South Africa. That's a betrayal of the struggle. We have to prevent HIV by educating people and by providing the necessary medical measures. The previous government under Mbeki said AIDS didn't exist. And how many people have died since? ANC policies. Zuma? He doesn't give a damn about what's happening in the country anyway. He built himself a massive house at Nkandla, a house whose costs could have provided thousands of RDP houses. That's a betrayal of the struggle.

However, the book also talks about betrayal within the anti-apartheid movement. Kimathi, the novel's main character, wants to have sex with that beautiful female comrade of his. She refuses, gets accused of being a spy, and is killed for supposedly having betrayed the Movement. That's a betrayal of the Movement's principles. It's an allegory for what is happening in the present. The ruling party is betraying what we fought for because it is corrupt.

**So there is a kind of legacy of betrayal in South African history?**

Yes. What is happening now is the recurrence of what happened before. There was a lot of betrayal during the height of apartheid and there is a lot of betrayal now in post-apartheid, the layers of betrayal are just different. What I mean is that during the era of apartheid, people could be easily labelled as *impimpi* (informer of the apartheid government/spy) and then you could face mob justice (what we called necklacing in the township). So, as long as you are labelled an informer, the mob could just put a car tyre around your neck and burn you alive. There was no need to prove that you were an informer. Someone who was jealous of you could just out of the blue label you as an informer. So in *Way Back Home* you have a lady that is accused of being an apartheid spy and she is wrongly imprisoned and killed. There is no doubt today that the ruling party has done a lot to alleviate the issues of poverty. South Africa is a developing country. We have one of the best constitutions in the world with the rights of people protected. But people still feel betrayed by the issue of landlessness. In *Way Back Home* there is a scene where one of the characters' land is taken away from him. That is the serious issue in South Africa today. The land has not been returned and most people are blaming the ruling party of compromising on this issue.

**Both female main characters, Senami and Anele, are portrayed as strong women and throughout the novel there are no corrupt women. What function do the female characters have in *Way Back Home*?**

Normally, the struggle and literature against apartheid is portrayed as a male affair. Women are backgrounded and not foregrounded like their male counterparts. In *Way Back Home* I wanted to acknowledge the roles played by the women towards the liberation of this country. I wanted to show their sacrifices, selflessness, and that the road to our liberation can never be complete without the women. Women played the same role as men. They were also great thinkers. Whatever Senami is portrayed to be doing in the book is motivated by the real life events.

## **To what extent is the book a contribution to the ongoing political discourse?**

The book is definitely a contribution to the ongoing political discourse. It talks about so many things that happened in the past and are still happening now. It is an attempt at understanding the origins of current happenings. The origins of our politicians' corrupt behaviour root way back in the height of the apartheid regime. They have been corrupt since they went into exile to be so-called freedom fighters. People who went into exile are people who think they fought for freedom in South Africa. However, it was the people that were within the country who lead to the demise of apartheid. No political party can claim to have dismantled apartheid from outside the country. It is the people on the ground, it is the youth of 1976, it is the people of Sharpeville that bent things. They were all here.

What has led to the fall of apartheid is exactly what will lead to the fall of the ANC. Mandela once said: 'If the ANC does what the apartheid government did to you, you must do to it what you did to apartheid'. Fortunately, this war against the ANC will never be a war of guns. It will be a war of votes. It will be a war of politically-minded people having a choice to decide against what's happening in the government. It will be a war for which we use our constitution to fight the injustices. So there is a recurrence there. The people on the ground led to the demise of apartheid. It will also be the people on the ground that will lead to the demise of the ruling party, which is enjoying its power so much. Trade unions are moving away from the ANC more and more. That really shows how big the disillusionment within the country is. People are fed up with what is happening within the government.

## **So the book is trying to build on that awareness that is starting to build up at the moment?**

Yeah, definitely. When I was writing the book, I was closely following current affairs in South Africa. I was watching the people on the ground. The book is pointing a finger at the way tenders are assigned. Many deals are sealed under the counter and it is the new elite that profits from them. The deals I'm talking about in the book is what is happening in Gauteng. I have a feeling at this point that the ANC will not win Gauteng. Even if they win

Gauteng, they will only have a small lead, just over fifty per cent of the votes, meaning that in the coming years they might not even win it. So it is the disillusionment of the people on the ground that I'm talking about. I never thought that the ANC would be able to disillusion people to such an extent. The ruling elite is enriching itself. And we are at the height of it at this present moment.

**Oral tradition plays an important role in the novel. 'Vera the ghost', for example, is one of the popular stories you use.**

**What were your reasons to use oral tradition?**

In African tradition we don't tell a story just to entertain. It's both education and entertainment. It's edutainment, actually. If we don't want you to go out at night, for instance, we'll tell you a story about a lion that lurks under the trees in the dark. Or we'll tell you a ghost story, so you will be afraid to go out at night. 'Vera the ghost' is a traditional urban story that is well-known to most Sowetans.

'Vera the ghost' is the story about a beautiful girl who was killed in the 1950's. There are different views on how she died. Some say that she was killed in a car accident. Others say she was raped and killed. The important thing is that she came back as a ghost to terrorise the Soweto community and avenge her death. Rumour has it that she used to target and seduce male hunks at parties. The next thing those males would be found naked and dead at the Avalon Cemetery.

So 'Vera the Ghost' deterred us from doing something that we would have regretted later on. But it also emphasises the concept of death within the African tradition. As I have told you earlier, death does not end with the burial of the dead. In most African traditions, a ritual has to be performed to complete death so that the dead person's spirit is formally introduced to the ancestors. Our ancestors are the ones that are watching over the living and if the rituals are not observed, it brings bad luck to the living. This is our belief. So Vera came back to terrorise the township because her death was not complete. Some rituals should have been performed where her death took place. In *Way Back Home*, Senami comes back to terrorise her killer.

My telling of 'Vera the ghost' is to tell people – and I'm not offering any solutions – to look at what is happening in our country at the moment.

We have voted for this government to come into power. We were the ones who have basically made it possible for these people to accumulate vast amounts of wealth and we are the only ones who are able to take them off the political radar again. So do we want to continue the way things are at the moment or do we want to change something? We have to become politically aware. When I voted for the first democratic South Africa in 1994, I just wanted to see a black face. I didn't care about what the new government was going to do. I wanted to see Mandela rule. I was just fed up with the minority rule. I didn't use my brain. I didn't even look into the ANC's manifesto. But now, because now I'm politically mature, I'm asking myself if it was the right thing to do and if it is the right thing to continue voting for the ANC. The answer is no. We have to become more critical and have to stop following people blindly.

### **Very often tradition is associated with conservative thinking.**

#### **Do you see tradition as necessarily conservative?**

Not really. I think the danger is to take tradition as an aesthetic thing. Tradition is not aesthetic. Tradition is moving with times. It takes into consideration things that are happening. It is adaptable. I'll give you an example. Polygamy used to be and still is practiced – President Zuma, for example, has more than one wife – as part of African tradition. A man's wives and children, who would look after the fields, meant financial provision. But at the moment, there is no land for black people to practice this tradition. We live in a complex, industrialised world in which polygamy is not practical.

Other traditional aspects such as *ubuntu*<sup>6</sup> – that means humanity – still work. If a child's parents die, for example, it can easily be raised by

---

<sup>6</sup> It can be argued that *ubuntu* was one of the underlying principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (for an extensive discussion of the term and its (ambivalent) meaning within the context of the TRC see Hanneke 2010). The TRC operated from 1996 to 1998 and consisted of three committees: the Human Rights Violation Committee, the Amnesty Committee, and the Reparation Committee. Based on the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (19 July 1995), the TRC had the task

somebody in the family and call them mother or father. Actually, anyone of your mother's or your father's age could fill in for them. You don't call adults by their first name. If a person has for example my brother's age I call him brother. If the person has my sister's age I call her sister. If the person has my mother's age I call her mother. And so on. That's tradition. That's respect. Or you wouldn't turn down somebody from the community who comes to your house and asks for food. That's *ubuntu*. It really shows how communal life is within African culture. The family concept is much more fluid. You'll find that in most cases everyone within a community is related and you wouldn't let anything bad happen to your relatives.

The problem is that, presently, we are lacking *ubuntu*. People are no longer living as communally as before. In the past, for example, you could visit a relative without telling them you're visiting. In fact I could go visit my grandmother or aunt without having to call them before my visit and I would be welcomed. Now you cannot do that anymore. It is almost not practical, maybe due to the fact that things have changed. Also the economic logistics have shifted.

Besides, Africans are pushing Western culture at the expense of African traditions. That's the trend at the moment. It's an abuse of the principle of African culture to prevent your children from speaking your own language, for example. Instead, people brag with their children's intelligence, which is measured by how fluent they are in English. Intelligence becomes a matter of assimilation and knowledge of a foreign language rather than about the question how well you understand things and how well you can juggle them around. People are confusing intelligence with the knowledge of and the

---

(1) to provide an overview of severe violations of human rights for the period from March 1960 to 10 March 1994, (2) to grant amnesty to perpetrators who provided full disclosure of their politically motivated crimes, (3) to investigate the fate or whereabouts of victims and restore their dignity in hearings or through repartitions, and (4) to write a report including recommendations to prevent future violations of human rights (for further information see e.g. <http://sabctrc.saha.org.za> which commemorates the tenth anniversary of the TRC Final Report and contains all episodes of SABC's weekly TRC Special Report series that aired from 21 April 1996 to 29 March 1998 as well as numerous official TRC transcripts and the TRC Final Report; Nuttall and Coetzee (eds.) 1998; Wilmot and van de Vijver (eds.) 2008).

---

ability to speak a particular language. This is an aspect that we should definitely look into. We should ask ourselves if we are heading into the right direction. The point is not to generally reject African culture, but to look into our own culture and uphold those traditions which are worth preserving.

**In one of the panels at the English Studies Department of UKZN during the Time of the Writer Festival<sup>7</sup> you mentioned that the story of your third book had been in your head for a long time before you actually wrote it. What were the reasons for waiting this long? Why the other two novels before?**

I am one of the people, and I have realised that I am not the only one, who writes several books at a time. They take shape simultaneously and then suddenly one of the stories gains the upper hand. The story for *Way Back Home* had been in my head for quite some time because I grew up with ‘Vera the ghost’. The story was told to me as a child. It’s a story I constantly told other people later on. It’s a story everybody knew. It was always at the back of my head, even when I was busy writing my first novel, *Dog Eat Dog*. Actually, some of the chapters in *Dog Eat Dog* allude to ‘Vera the ghost’. There was originally a big chapter on ‘Vera the ghost’. But it was cut out of the novel when I sat down with my editor around 2004. I remember I was so angry when he cut the ‘Vera the ghost’ story. So I decided to use it somewhere else. But when I started working on it, *After Tears* took over all of a sudden. But ‘Vera the ghost’ was still in my mind, you know, like a disease of some sort. And you know how to heal that disease, but you have to wait for the right time. So I finished *After Tears* that had surfaced, before I could turn to ‘Vera the ghost’.

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘Writers Speak Out: Niq Mhlongo and Prajwal Parajuly’, 19 March 2014, English Studies Department, Howard College Campus, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

---

**While your first two novels had a first person narrator, you wrote your third novel from a third person perspective. Why this shift?**

You know, the shift was just a choice. My first and second books were mostly based on things I had experienced. Not that I have done all those things. I had people telling me things and I observed people experiencing such things. So I fused other people's experiences with my own experiences and dreams. It was easier for those stories to be told in the first person. The story in *Way Back Home* is more removed from me. The story has a political resonance. It's more political than ever. It talks about things that I haven't experienced personally. That's part of the reason for this choice. Furthermore, I thought that I had written quite a lot in the first person and that I had to experiment with other narrative perspectives.

**As a reader, I went on an emotional roller coaster with regard to my opinion towards Kimathi. How do you, as the author, perceive Kimathi and what did you expect to achieve with him as a character?**

Kimathi is the true reflection of South Africa today where most people's wealth is gained through questionable means – either through a government tender by the back door or struggle credentials because they have been into exile or know someone who was in exile. So, Kimathi is the epitome, all the social ills that have come to characterise our country today. He is corrupt to the bone and he is in denial of the evil things that he has done in the past. He thinks he is more deserving than most South Africans because he feels he has suffered the most under apartheid while he was in exile. He doesn't think that people who remained inside the country to fight apartheid actually suffered like those that went into exile. That is why he and his comrades mention words like 'I didn't join the struggle to be poor'. To him, it is like the people that went into exile deserve more than those that remained behind.

**Most torture and murder scenes in the book, at least at the beginning and towards the end, are represented as dream sequences. Could you comment on this choice?**

The book has two settings: apartheid and post-apartheid. The large chunk of the book is set in the post-apartheid South Africa. The dream sequence represents the things that happened in the past, during apartheid. Lots of what happened during apartheid informs what is happening today. All the killings that happened in the past are haunting the main character Kimathi. In a nutshell, a lot that happened during apartheid is haunting post-apartheid South Africa. Issues like the arbitrary land evictions, racism, unemployment, inequality, and so forth. So the dream sequence symbolises the past, and the future challenges.

**What are you doing next?**

I'm working on a novel. It is in a far advanced stage. The book is set in the rural area and is about a person who commutes between the rural and the urban area. But it is set during the apartheid. One of the major themes of the book is displacement, i.e. how people were moved from their homes to make way for the white farmers. So they were forcefully removed from their rightful land by the apartheid government. My interest is to look into the things that happened on the farms, to look at how the workers were treated. The book also talks about education. Some people were studying under trees in those times and that is still continuing under the present government. They are not building enough schools. So it talks about the present in a subtle way. Our ANC government is not interested in changing these things.

**References**

- Cherry, J. 2012. *Spear of the Nation (Umkhonto weSizwe): South Africa's Liberation Army, 1960s-1990s*. (Ohio Short Histories of Africa.) Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Christie, I. 1989. *Samora Machel: A Biography*. London: Panaf.
- Cleveland, T. 2005. 'We still want the truth': The ANC's Angolan Detention Camps and Post-apartheid Memory. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, 1: 63-78.

- Funada-Classen, S. 2013. *The Origins of War in Mozambique: A History of Unity and Division*. Osada, M. (trans.). Somerset West: African Minds.
- Hanneke, S. 2010. Ubuntu, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and South African National Identity. *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race* 20, 1: 83-101.
- Mhlongo, N. 2004. *Dog Eat Dog*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Mhlongo, N. 2007. *After Tears*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Mhlongo, N. 2013. *Way Back Home*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Mhlongo, N. 2015. *Affluenza*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Moele, K. 2006. *Room 207*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Moele, K. 2009. *The Book of the Dead*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Moele, K. 2013. *Untitled*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Moon, C. 2008. *Narrating Political Reconciliation: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Nuttall, S. & C. Coetzee (eds.) 1998. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Seidman, G. 2001. Guerrillas in their Midst: Armed Struggle in the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement. *Mobilization: The International Journal of Research and Theory about Social Movements, Protest, and Contentious Politics* 6, 2: 111-127.
- South African History Archive and South African Broadcasting Company. 2013. *Truth Commission Special Report*. Available at: <http://sabctrc.saha.org.za>. (Accessed on 22 August 2014.)
- Trewhela, P. 2009. *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the Exile History of the ANC and SWAPO*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Wilmot, J. & L. van de Vijver (eds.) 2000. *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Olivier Moreillon  
Department of English  
University of Basel  
[olivier.moreillon@unibas.ch](mailto:olivier.moreillon@unibas.ch)

Lindy Stiebel  
English Studies  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
[Stiebell@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Stiebell@ukzn.ac.za)

# Contributors

## Memory Studies

**Philippe Denis** holds a PhD in History from the University of Liège (Belgium) and is a Professor of History of Christianity at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He established and currently serves as Research Director the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, a research and community development centre which aims at enhancing resilience in vulnerable and traumatised people and communities through oral history and memory work. Contact details: [denis@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:denis@ukzn.ac.za)

**Philani Dlamini** is a History of Christianity doctoral student in the School of Religion Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He is a research assistant to Professor Philippe Denis at the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa while receiving training for ministry in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa at the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary. Philani's interest is oral history and memory studies. Contact details: [dlphi14@smmsstudent.ac.za](mailto:dlphi14@smmsstudent.ac.za)

**Dhana Sagree Govender** has varied research interests in curriculum and assessment studies; teacher identity; mentoring; diaspora studies; discipline and corporal punishment; human behaviour and self-mastery skills. She is a published author and has held positions as lecturer and post-doctoral researcher at UKZN. She is currently a personal development consultant using cutting edge personal transformation methodologies to enhance and maximise human potential. Contact details: [Sagree@the-alchemist.co.za](mailto:Sagree@the-alchemist.co.za)

**Sabine Marschall** holds a PhD from the Eberhardt-Karls-University in Tübingen (Germany) and is currently employed as Associate Professor in Cultural and Heritage Tourism at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban. She has published widely in the fields of cultural heritage, heritage

tourism, commemoration, and memorialization in South Africa. Her recent research interest focusses on the role of memory in tourism. Contact details: marschallm@ukzn.ac.za

**Michael Samuel** is a Professor in the School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal. He has served as a curriculum designer of innovative masters and collaborative doctoral cohort programmes locally and internationally. He has also been a member of the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education assisting the development of national teacher education policy in South Africa. He has served as former Deputy Dean: Initial Teacher Education and Dean (Faculty of Education, UKZN). His research interest focuses on teacher professional development, higher education, life history and narrative inquiry. His book, *Life history research: epistemology, methodology and representation* has inspired several studies of professional development in education and the health sciences. He is the recipient of the Turquoise Harmony Institute's National Ubuntu Award for Contribution to Education. Contact detail: Samuelm@ukzn.ac.za

**Alain Tschudin** works with ICON and the Peacebuilding Programme at the Durban University of Technology. With doctorates in Psychology and in Ethics, he was Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at UKZN where he oversaw the Conflict Transformation and Peace Studies Programme. He is passionate about social justice and humanitarian causes, and has worked with various local and NGOs, notably as lead consultant for Save the Children on research into child migration in southern Africa. Most recently, he served as UNICEF inter-agency child protection assessment coordinator for northern Syria. He is the director of an NGO initiative concerned with good governance in Africa. Contact details: amadumbi@gmail.com.

## Media & Cultural Studies

**Genevieve Akal** completed her Master of Arts degree in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, her thesis being titled *Postmodern Identity and the Hipster Subculture*. She went on to study film directing and completed another Master's degree in screenplay editing and story structure. She currently writes and directs her own films and she script

## *Contributors*

edits feature films for the National Film and Video Foundation. Contact details: genevieveakal@gmail.com

**Marco Bozza** is currently a Masters student in the Media and Cultural Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where he is also a teaching assistant. His research interests include the development of online communities and subcultures of consumption, especially those to do with technological cultural artefacts. He is also a technical journalist for an online website, EGMR.net. Contact details: mbozza1@gmail.com

**Zakia Jeewa** is currently a Media Studies lecturer at the Durban University of Technology. She holds a Master's degree from UKZN in Media and Cultural Studies, her thesis focusing on the *Harry Potter* and *The Vampire Diaries* fan communities active on the social network Internet site *Twitter*. She has a keen interest in Fandom, Film and New Media studies. Contact details: zakiaj@dut.ac.za

**Adam Meikle** obtained a Master of Arts in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. His MA thesis was titled *A New Approach to Subculture: Gaming as a Substantial Subculture of Consumption*. He has worked extensively within the South African video gaming scene as an editor and journalist. He works in Johannesburg as a Copywriter and Content Strategist for Clockwork Media, and is an editor for one of the largest local video gaming websites MyGaming. Contact details: Adam.Meikle@gmail.com

**Jean-Philippe Wade** is Associate Professor in and the Academic Leader of the Department of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where he teaches Cultural Studies. He has published extensively on cultural and literary theory, and has strong interests in subcultural theories and creative research methodologies. Contact details: wade@ukzn.ac.za



# Editorial Associates



(1994 – 2015)

Kofi Acheampong (Walter Sisulu)

Catherine Addison (UZ)

Fathima Ahmed (UKZN)

Oduntan Alabi (UKZN)

Andrea Alcock (DUT)

P.M. Alexander (UP)

Dick Allwright (Lancaster)

Carina America (Stellenbosch)

Nyna Amin (UKZN)

Peter Anderson (UCT)

Anastasia Apostolides (Unisa)

Kathy Arbuckle (UKZN)

Thomas Assan (North-West)

Arlene Archer (UCT)

Udo Averweg (UKZN)

Judy Backhouse (WITS)

Richard Bailey (UKZN)

Cok Bakker (Utrecht, Netherlands)

Daryl Balia (FSUT)

Anna Banks (Idaho)

Sarah Bansilall (UKZN)

Ismail Banoo (CSIR)

Lawrie Barnes (UNISA)

Krish Baruthram (UKZN)

Ahmed Bawa (DUT)

Nigel Bell (UZ)

Jaco Beyers (UP)

Kantilal Bhowan (UKZN)

S. Bhulungu (Wits)

Stephen Bigger (U. Worcester)

Sr. N. Gloria Irenata Biyela (SF)

Mathew Blatchford (UFH)

Craig Blewett (UKZN)

Urmilla Bob (UKZN)

Brian Bocking (UC Cork, Ireland)

Shamim Bodhanya (UKZN)

Patrick Bond (UKZN)

H.M. Bopape (UNISA)

David Boud (Sydney UT)

Victor Borden (Indiana)

Carole Boyce-Davies (Florida Int.)

Irwin Brown (UCT)

Molly Brown (Pretoria)

Denis Brutus (Pittsburgh) †

Gina Buijs (Walter Sisulu)

Renato Bulcao (Sao Paulo)

Thabisile M. Buthelezi (UKZN)

Nontobeko Buthelezi (UKZN)

Jenni Case (UCT)

Teresa Carmichael (WITS)

Bertram Carol (UKZN)

Elias Cebekhulu (UKZN)

Nicholas Chandler (Budapest)

Noel Chellan (UKZN)

Anthony Chennells (Pretoria)

Anneline Chetty (eThekwin Mun.)

Denzil Chetty (Unisa)

Irvin Chetty (Fort Hare)

## *Editorial Associates*

Rajendra Chetty (CAPUT)  
Vitalis Chikoko (UKZN)  
Simon Chili (DUT)  
Rajabu Chipila (UKZN)  
Reuben Chirambo (UCT)  
Regis Chireshe (Walter Sisulu)  
Michel Clasquin (Unisa)  
Hamish Coates (Melbourne)  
Ampie Coetzee (UWC)  
Joy Coleman (UNW)  
Martin Combrinck (UKZN)  
Richard Cookson (Col Chr. U.)  
David Cooper (UCT)  
Pamela Cooper (UNorth Carolina)  
Gareth Cornwall (Rhodes)  
Jose Cossa (Mozambique)  
Judith Lütge Coullie (UKZN)  
Scot Couper (Inanda Sem)  
Laura Czerniewicz (UCT)

Yusuf Dadoo (Unisa)  
L. Dalvit (RU)  
Gordon Dames (Unisa)  
Suleman Dangor (UKZN)  
Bette Davidowitz (UCT)  
Nuraan Davids (SU)  
Roger Deacon (UKZN)  
Joseph de Beer(UJ)  
Marianne de Jong (Unisa)  
Elizabeth de Kadt (UJ)  
Susan de la Porte (UKZN)  
Ashwin Desai (CSoc Research, UJ)  
M.R. (Ruth) de Villiers (Unisa)  
Bongani Diako (S.A. Banking Risk Info.)  
Mduduzi Dlamini (Poet)  
Petro du Preez (NWU)  
Malcolm Draper (UKZN)

Musa W. Dube (U. Botswana)  
Elijah Dube (Unisa)  
Yvonne du Plessis (UP)  
Simon During (Melbourne)

Kai Easton (SOAS)  
Theresa Edlman (UNISA)  
Karen Elize (UFS)  
Charlotte Engelbrecht (UKZN)  
Farid Esack (UJ)  
Mark Espin (UWC)  
Sabiha Essack (UKZN)  
Geoff Erwin (CAPUT)  
D.S. Farrar (Guam)  
René Ferguson (Wits)  
Roger Field (UWC)  
Sean Field (UCT)  
Irina Filatova (UKZN)  
Miki Flockeman (UWC)  
Khanare Fumane (UKZN)

Annie Gagiano (US)  
Grace-Edward Galabuzi (Ryerson)  
Claire Gaillard (UKZN)  
Damian Garside (NWU)  
Harry Garuba (UCT)  
Danie Goosen (Unisa)  
Nadaraj Govender (UKZN)  
Suria Govender (UKZN)  
Gerald Gaylard (Wits)  
Jeanne Gazel (Michigan State)  
Cecile Gerwel (UKZN)  
Paul Gifford (SOAS)  
Mandy Goedhals (UKZN)  
K. Govender (UKZN)  
Khaya Gqibitole (UZ)  
Betty Govinden (UKZN)

Jagathesan Govender (UKZN)  
Anton Grobler (Unisa)  
Louise Green (US)  
Phephani Gumbi (UFS)  
Dorian Haarhoff (Namibia)  
Sabry Hafez (SOAS)  
G.H. Haffajee (UN)  
K.J. Halland (Unisa)  
Geoffrey Haresnape (UWC)  
Kay Harman (UNE)  
Godfrey Harold (CTBS)  
G. Hart (Berkeley University)  
Chris Hattingh (CAPUT, W)  
Crispin Hemson (ICN)  
Wayne Hugo (UKZN)  
Kalpana Hiralal (UKZN)  
Mondli Hlatshwayo (CERT, UJ)  
Tholani Hlongwa (UKZN)  
Gugu Hlongwane (Saint Mary's U)  
Nina Hoel (UCT)  
Isabel Hofmeyr (Wits)  
Myrtle Hooper (UZ)  
Trevor Hopper (Sussex)  
Ruth Hoskins (UKZN)  
Nancy Hornberger (Pennsylvania)  
Dirk Human (UP)  
Eva Hunter (UWC)  
Anne Hutchings (UZ)  
  
Dan Izebaye (Ibadan)  
  
RK Jain (Jawaharlal Nehru)  
Angela James (UKZN) Janet Jarvis  
(UKZN)  
Jeff Jawitz (UCT)  
Jung Jisun (Hong Kong)

Deborah Johnson (Al Faisal Univ.)  
David Johnson (Open Univ.)  
Alison Jones (UKZN)  
Megan Jones (Stellenbosch)  
Andisiwe Jukuda (UKZN)  
Cyril Julie (UWC)  
L.M. Kaino (UNISA)  
Rosemary Kalenga (UKZN)  
Gregory Kamwendo (UKZN)  
Russell H. Kaschula (Rhodes)  
H.O. Kaya (UKZN)  
Abraham H. Khan (Toronto)  
Sultan Khan (UKZN)  
Langa Khumalo (UKZN)  
Douglas Killam (Guelph)  
Rembrandt Klopper (UZ)  
Kirstin Krauss (UP)  
Robbert Kriger (NRF)  
Kobus Kruger (Unisa)  
Pratap Kumar (UKZN)  
Andrew Lamprecht (UCT)  
Christina Landman (UNISA)  
Ralph Lawrence (UKZN)  
Susan Leclerc-Madlala (USAID)  
Stephen Leech (UKZN)  
Andre Lefevere (Austin)  
Elmar Lehmann (Essen)  
Brenda Leibowitz (US)  
Lesley le Grange (Stellenbosch)  
Chris le Roux (Unisa)  
David Lewis-Williams (Wits)  
Bernth Lindfors (Austin)  
Caroline Long (UP)  
Evert Louw (UNW)  
Pat Louw (UZ)  
Sam Lubbe (UNW)

## *Editorial Associates*

- Rozeena Maart (IKZN)  
Craig MacKenzie (UJ)  
Mbulugeni Madiba (UCT)  
T.E. Madiba (UKZN)  
Ajiv Maharaj (PhD Grad. UKZN)  
Brij Maharaj (UKZN)  
Manoj Maharaj (UKZN)  
Lokesh Maharaj (UKZN)  
Elijah Mahlangu (UP)  
Sechaba Mahlomaholo (UNW)  
Lindelwa Mahonga (UNISA)  
Suriamurthi Maistry (UKZN)  
Langelihle Malimela (UKZN)  
Sadhana Manik (UKZN)  
Dianne Manning (Wits)  
Desiree Manicom (UKZN)  
Simon M. Mapadimeng (UKZN)  
Mandla Maphumulo (UKZN)  
France Maphosa (Botswana)  
Marshall Tamuka Maposa (UKZN)  
V.M. Sisi Maqagi (UF)  
David Maralack (UCT)  
Claude Mararike (Zimbabwe)  
Maduray Marimuthu (UKZN)  
Ashley Marimuthu (UKZN)  
Julia Martin (UWC)  
Pamela Maseko (RU)  
Nontokozo Mashiya (UKZN)  
Mogomme Masoga (U. North)  
Garth Mason (Unisa)  
Travis V. Mason (Dalhousie U.)  
Nhlanhla N. Mathonsi (UKZN)  
Isaac Mathumba (Unisa)  
Bernard Matolino (UKZN)  
Sozinho Matsinhe (AAL)  
Langtone Maunganidze (UKZN)  
Phindile Mayaba (UKZN)  
A.H. Mavhundu-Mudzusi (Unisa)  
Christopher May (UT – Vaal Tri)  
Gugulethu Mazibuko (UKZN)  
Thabile Mbatha (UKZN)  
Sam A. Mchombo (Berkeley)  
Mxolisi Mchunu (UCT)  
Halini Mehta (Chandigarh)  
Elsa Meihuizen (UZ)  
Nicholas Meihuizen (UZ)  
Godfrey Meintjes (Rhodes)  
Itumeleng Mekoa (NMMU)  
Fatima Mendonca (Eduardo Mondl)  
Peter Merrington (UWC)  
Gary Mersham (NZ Open Polytech)  
Jan Meyer (NWU)  
Thenjiwe Meyiwa (HSRC)  
Emmanuel M. Mqgqashu (UKZN)  
Bonakele Mhlongo (UKZN)  
Omari (Billy) Miller (Elsah, Ill.)  
Lazarus Miti (Centre for ASAS)  
Gabisile Mkhize (UKZN)  
Nhlanhla Mkhize (UKZN)  
Tommaso Milani (Wits)  
Claudia Mitchell (McGill Univ)  
Carol Mitchell (UKZN)  
Jabulani Mkhize (UFH)  
Peter Mkhize (UNISA)  
Vusi Mncube (Unisa)  
Sikhumbuzo Mngadi (UJ)  
Thoko Mnisi (UKZN)  
Albert Modi (UKZN)  
Mostafa Mohamed (CUT)  
Dianna Moodley (UKZN)

Vadi Moodley (UKZN)  
Shane Moran (UKZN)  
Mabogo P. More (UKZN)  
Themba Moyo (UZ)  
Louis Molamu (Botswana)  
Mahlomi Moleleki (UFS)  
Lebo Moletsane (UKZN)  
Pravi Moodley (UKZN)  
Fiona Moola (UWC)  
Koliswa Moropa (UNISA)  
Sethunya Motsime (Botswana)  
Maud Mthembu (UKZN)  
Ncamisile Mthiyane (UKZN)  
Siphiwe Mthiyane (UKZN)  
Khondlo Mtshali (UKZN)  
Sazile Mtshali (UZ)  
Vimolan Mudaly (UKZN)  
Simon Mukwembi (UKZN)  
Katwiwa Mule (Pennsylvania)  
Joanne Mulligan (Macquarie)  
Nicholas Munro (UKZN)  
Munyaradzi Murove (UKZN)  
Stephen Mutula (UKZN)  
Christine Mushibwe (U of Africa)  
Agnes Musyoki (Venda)  
Onnie Mutanga (UKZN)  
Aldin Mutembei (Dar es Salaam)  
Janet Muthuki (UKZN)  
Stephen Muthula (UKZN)  
Given Mutinta (UKZN)  
Irene Muzvidziva (UKZN)  
Victor Muzvidziwa (UKZN)  
FS Mwesigwa (Chr. College, Malawi)  
  
Lubna Nadvi (UKZN)  
Inbanathan Naicker (UKZN)  
Kevin Naidoo (UZ)

Marilyn Naidoo (Unisa)  
Sershen Naidoo (UKZN)  
Maheshvari Naidu (UKZN)  
Loes Nas (UCT)  
Priya Narismulu (UKZN)  
C.M.B. Naude (Unisa)  
Hloniphani Ndebele (UKZN)  
Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa (UKZN)  
Catherine Ndinda (HSRC)  
Mdu Ndlovu (SU)  
Andreas Neergard (Copenhagen)  
Johan Nel (Indep. Inf. Systems)  
Etienne Nel (Rhodes)  
Sanele Nene (UKZN)  
Mtholeni N. Ngcobo (Unisa)  
Sandiso Ngcobo (Mangosuthu)  
Kholekile Ngqila (Walter Sisulu)  
Sihawukele Ngubane (UKZN)  
Thengani Ngwenya (DUT)  
Greg Nixon (UNB Columbia)  
Dion Nkomo (Rhodes)  
Zinhle Nkosi (UKZN)  
Fru Nkwenti (UKZN)  
Vanessa Noble (UKZN)  
Vuyokazi Nomlomo (Unisa)  
Zawedde Nsibirwa (UKZN)  
Leslie S. Nthoi (Univ. Zim)  
Radikobo Ntsimane (UKZN)  
Pitika Ntuli (UKZN)  
Sibusiso Ntuli (UKZN)  
Augustine Nwoye (UKZN)  
  
Frances O'Brien (UKZN)  
Vivian Besem Ojong (UKZN)  
Isidore Okpewho (Binghamton)  
Andries Oliphant (Unisa)  
Bert Olivier (NMMU)

## *Editorial Associates*

Dan Ojwang (Wits)  
Charles O'Neill (UKZN)  
G.C. Oosthuizen (UZ) †  
Jeff Opland (Charterhouse)  
Karen Ortlepp (UKZN)  
Monica Otu (UKZN)  
OA Oyowe (UKZN)

Indira Padayachee (UKZN)  
Rubeena Partab (UKZN)  
Andrew Paterson (HSRC)  
Shaun Pather (CAPUT)  
Rob Pattman (UKZN)  
Moragh Paxton (UCT)  
Graham Pechey (Hertfordshire)  
Yogi Penceliah (UKZN)  
Edwin Perry (Res. Consultant, Dbn)  
Sadhasivan Perumal (UKZN)  
Stephen Pete (UKZN)  
Dale Peters (UKZN)  
Sunette Pienaar (Unisa)  
Vreda Pieterse (U. Pretoria)  
Daisy Pillay (UKZN)  
Kris Pillay (Unisa)  
Mershen Pillay (Stellenbosch)  
Seeni Pillay (UKZN)  
Gordon Pirie (UCT)  
Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan (UKZN)  
Jan Platvoet (AASR)  
Peter Plüddeman (UCT)  
Jon Pocock (UKZN)  
Moorosi, Pontso (Warwick)  
Julia Preece (UKZN)  
Laurette Pretorius (UP)  
Julie Pridmore (Unisa)  
Paul Prinsloo (Unisa)

Serban Proches (UKZN)  
Martin Prozesky (UFS)  
  
Nceba Qgaleni (UKZN)  
Rose Quilling (UKZN)  
  
Thalo Raditlhalo (NMMU)  
Auweis Rafudeen (Unisa)  
Susan Rakoczy (St Joseph's)  
Aneel Ramcharan (Ind. Academic)  
Jugathambal Ramdhani (UKZN)  
Labby Ramrathan (UKZN)  
Gaobolelelwe Ramorogo (Botsw.)  
Prevanand Ramrathan (UKZN)  
Malini Ramsay-Brijball (UKZN)  
Tanusha Raniga (UKZN)  
Sanjay Ranjeeth (UKZN)Junia  
Ranko-Ramaili (Unisa)  
Risto Rasku (Jyvaskyla University)  
Erhard Reckwitz (Essen)  
P.S. Reddy (UKZN)  
Sarasvathie Reddy (UKZN)  
Dan Remenyi (Int Conf & Unisa)  
Fanie Riekert (UFS)  
Mark Rieker (UKZN)  
Pamela Roy (Michigan State)  
Hemduth Rugbeer (UZ)  
Yasmin Rugbeer (UZ)  
Denis Rugege (UKZN)  
Watch Ruparanganda (Zimbabwe)  
Dino Ruta (Bocconi University)  
Rory Ryan (UJ)  
  
Toufique Samaai (Env. Aff & T)  
Duncan Samson (Rhodes)  
Michael Samuel (UKZN)

Corinne Sandwith (UKZN)  
Peter Sandy (Unisa)  
R. Sathipersad (UKZN)  
Mark Schofield (Edge Hill U.)  
Cecil Seethal (UFH)  
Anton Senekal (UJ)  
Thomas Sengani (Unisa)  
Federico Settler (UKZN)  
Maje Serudu (Unisa)  
Anusha Sewchurran (UKZN)  
Yael Shalem (Wits)  
Ayub Sheik (UKZN)  
Usha Devi Shukla (UKZN)  
Almon Shumba (Central UT)  
Nakanjani Sibiya (UKZN)  
Marilet Sienaert (UCT)  
Anand Singh (UKZN)  
Anesh Singh (UKZN)  
Shakila Singh (UKZN)  
Ari Sitas (UCT)  
Mpilo Pearl Sithole (UKZN)  
Tahir Sitoto (UKZN)  
Lilian Siwila (UKZN)  
Sibawu Siyepu (CAPUT)  
Chris Skinner (Inst Publ Rel SA)  
Michael Skolnik (Toronto)  
Johannes A. Smit (UKZN)  
Clive Smith (UJ)  
Reshma Sookrajh (UKZN)  
Rollo Sookraj (UKZN)  
Dorothy Spiller (Waikato)  
Marie Spruyt (UZ)  
Ploutz Snyder (NASA)  
Ted Sommerville (UKZN)  
Dhiru Soni (UKZN)  
Reshma Sookrajh (UKZN)  
Lungi Sosibo (CAPUT)

David Spurrett (UKZN)  
Lesley Stainbank (UKZN)  
Michelle Stears (UKZN)  
Louw-Haardt Stears (UKZN)  
Maris Stevens (NELM, Rhodes)  
Graham Stewart (DUT)  
Chrissie Steyn (Unisa)  
Renier Steyn (Unisa)  
Maniraj Sukdaven (Free State U.)  
Lindy Stiebel (UKZN)  
Helene Strauss (UFS)  
Johan Strijdom (Unisa)  
Barry Strydom (UKZN)  
Mogie Subban (UKZN)  
Sonia Swanepoel (NWU)  
Kamilla Swart (CAPUT)  
Razvan Tatu (Unisa)  
Marinda Swart (UKZN)

Nisbert Taringa (Zimbabwe)  
Etienne Terblanche (NWU)  
Collin Thakur (DUT)  
Johan Templehoff (NWU)  
Alistair Thomson (Monash)  
Liz Thompson (UZ)  
Alan Thorold (Deakin)  
Cleopas Thosago (UNIN)  
Keyan Tomaselli (UKZN)  
Thabo Tsehloane (UJ)  
Doug Turco (Drexel University)

Wilfred Ukpere (UJ)  
Shawn Utsey (Virginia  
Commonwealth)

Goolam Vahed (UKZN)  
Hennie van der Mescht (Rhodes)

## *Editorial Associates*

André van der Poll (Unisa)  
Huibrecht van der Poll (Unisa)  
Kees van der Waal (SU)  
Saloshna Vandeyar (UP)  
Johan van Loggerenberg (UP)  
Annemarié van Niekerk (Vista)  
Mari Jansen van Rensburg (UNISA)  
Helize van Vuuren (NMMU)  
Johan van Wyk (UKZN)  
Stewart van Wyk (UWC)  
Jacqueline van Wyk (UKZN)  
Hildegard van Zweel (Unisa)  
Beverly Vencatsamy (UKZN)  
Grietjie Verhoef (UJ)  
Debbie Vigar-Ellis (UKZN)  
Shaun Viljoen (SU)  
Florian Viseu (CIEEd- do Minho)  
Renuka Vithal (UKZN)  
Tony Voss (UKZN)  
Robert Vosloo (US)

Edwina Ward (UKZN)  
Jean-Philippe Wade (UKZN)  
Dale Wallace (UKZN)  
Victor N. Webb (UFS)  
Paul Webb (NMMU)  
Volker Wedekind (UKZN)

Lise Westway (Rhodes)  
B. White (UKZN)  
Jocelyn Wishart (Bristol)  
Andrew Williams (U. Penn.)  
Gina Wisker (Brighton)  
Hermann Wittenberg (UWC)  
Rosemary Wildsmith (UKZN)  
Charl Wolhuter (North West U)  
Nicholas Wood (UKZN)  
Wendy Woodward (UWC)  
Dan Wylie (Rhodes)

Lee Young (Ohio State)

Johan Zaaïman (U. North)  
Harry Zarenda (WITS)  
Johan Zaaïman (U. North)  
Harry Zarenda (WITS)  
Huajun Zhang (Beijing Normal)  
Nompumelelo Zondi (Zululand)  
Nogwaja Zulu (UKZN)  
Sylvia Zulu (DUT)  
Boni Zungu (Wits)  
Phyllis Zungu (UKZN)

# *Alternation*

## Guidelines for Contributors

*Manuscripts* must be submitted in English (UK). If quotations from other languages appear in the manuscript, place the original in a footnote and a dynamic-equivalent translation in the body of the text or both in the text.

Contributors must submit *one computer-generated and three double-spaced printed copies* of the manuscript. Up to 10 original off-print copies of the article will be returned to the author after publication.

Manuscripts should range between 5000-8000 and book reviews between 500-1000 words. However, longer articles may be considered for publication.

Attach a cover page to one manuscript containing the following information: Author's full name, address, e-mail address, position, department, university/ institution, telephone/ fax numbers as well as a list of previous publications. Authors must also submit a brief academic biographical sketch of about sixty words, indicating institutional affiliation, main scholarly focus, books published, significant articles, and/ or academic journals regularly contributing too.

*Maps, diagrams and posters* must be presented in print-ready form. Clear black and white photos (postcard size) may also be submitted.

Use footnotes sparingly. In order to enhance the value of the interaction between notes and text, we use footnotes and not endnotes.

Authors may use their own numbering systems in the manuscript.

Except for bibliographical references, abbreviations must include fullstops. The abbreviations (e.a.) = 'emphasis added'; (e.i.o.) = 'emphasis in original'; (i.a.) or [...] = 'insertion added' may be used.

The full bibliographical details of sources are provided only once at the end of the manuscript under References. References in the body of the manuscript should follow the following convention: Dlodlo (1994:14) argues .... or at the end of a reference/ quotation: ... (Dlodlo 1994:14).

The full name or initials of authors as it appears in the source must be used in the References section.

Review articles and book reviews must include a title as well as the following information concerning the book reviewed: title, author, place of publication, publisher, date of publication, number of pages and the ISBN number.

The format for the references section is as follows:

Head, Bessie 1974. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

Mhlophe, Gina 1990. Nokulunga's Wedding. In Van Niekerk, Annemarie (ed): *Raising the Blinds. A Century of South African Women's Stories*. Parklands: Ad Donker.

Mngadi, Sikumbuzo 1994. 'Popular Memory' and Social Change in South African Historical Drama of the Seventies in English: The Case of Credo Mutwa's *Unosimela*. *Alternation* 1,1:37-41.

Fanon, Franz 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann, Charles Lam (trans). London: Pluto Press.