

Fixing the hiatus between the habitus of memory and nostalgia*

KGOMOTSO M. MASEMOLA
University of South Africa
MaseMK@unisa.ac.za

Dennis Walder. 2011. *Postcolonial nostalgias: writing, representation, and memory*. New York and London: Routledge.

Dennis Walder's *Postcolonial nostalgias* (2011) demonstrates coherent scholarship based on a critique of representation. It delves into the twilight zone identified by E.J. Hobsbawm as existing between history and memory in the finale of *The age of Empire* (1989), from which Walder gleans uncertainty, obscurity and fuzziness. Penetrating this uncertainty involves identifying the sources of nostalgia in that hiatus between history and memory. Walder's original contribution lies in the intellectual temperament of "homing in" (no pun intended) on the selective nostalgia involving constructions of home and deconstructions of colonial histories of silences – and hidden losses – in the identity-making scripts of empire. This is one of the hallmarks of Walder's significant contribution to the field of memory studies in literature, if ever there was one, as he explores the nature of longing as a state of mind attending the contemplation of the possibility of a return to a homeland. Only in the self-reflexivity concerning such return "may the sense of the difference between present and past at the heart of nostalgia counteract its undeniably negative tug towards self-indulgence and misperception" (2011: 9).

Whilst many other comparable books that explore memory in the aftermath of empire, such as Marianne Hirsch and Nancy Miller's path-breaking *Rites of return: diaspora poetics and the politics of memory* (2011), include constant demonstration of rigid theoretical underpinnings to explain the complexity of loss, Walder's *Postcolonial nostalgias* does the same with much less theoretical noise. Here we find an elegant simplicity that effortlessly brings together the disparate diasporic record of yearnings for a common identity and homeland. This sophisticated simplicity makes it easier for Walder to elucidate how the anxiety of loss and the attendant duty to recreate or re-imagine homelands has had unintended consequences: the use of memory in the process is akin to an imaginative gestation which results in what Walder calls "memory's stepchild" – nostalgia (2011: 49). This innovation introduces a novel aspect to what Svetlana Boym in *The future of nostalgia* (2001) claims to be the "more positive, creatively reflective side of the past

*To cite this review article: Kgomotso M. Masemola (2012) Fixing the hiatus between the habitus of memory and nostalgia, *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 17:2, 118-122

perfect” that nostalgia strives to realize in the future (2011: 78).

Nostalgia underscores further redefinition of what Walder calls “moments of public crisis” on a global scale. There are two distinct advantages to this. First, there is the book’s prudent refusal to overly psychologize and individualize the symptoms of the crisis of representation in texts beyond Southern African concerns, from V.S. Naipaul to J.G. Ballard, and from Achebe to Adichie. Secondly, Walder’s critical effort is imbued with an ambivalence that recognizes a readership that is both as local as the Masarwa (Bushman) colonial subject it discusses, and as diasporic as Rimbaud’s wanderings. Herein lies Walder’s originality: a reformulation, on the basis of a calculus of duality, of the relationship between memory proper and nostalgia in the reshaping of identity. In one place, Walder discerns a hiatus:

[the] gap between the narrating, fictionalising ‘I’ and the self which its subject in Rousseau may be discerned variously inscribed in all those nineteenth century *Bildungsromane* from *Werther* and *Jane Eyre* to *Great expectations* and *The story of an African farm*, all of which display the progress (or latterly, the decline or degeneration) of the self by means of a double perspective, internal or external, if not literally first person and third person. (2011: 44).

Ironically, Walder himself modulates that habitus throughout his exposition, thus cleverly eschewing the overt choice between politics and aesthetics in both recounting lost histories and reconstructing lost homelands. In Walder’s book the burden of binarism – or rather the tedium of lament over identities imposed externally by political institutions – is lightened by nostalgia, when the nostalgia of settler-framers is allegorized by J.M. Coetzee in his *In the heart of the country* ostensibly to “acknowledge the absent presence of the original inhabitants” and so avoid being permanently trapped in the settler’s psychopathology of a “retreat into pastoral delusion” (2011: 56) as exhibited by Magda, one of Coetzee’s characters. Nostalgia thus extends and distorts the fantasy of the silence and emptiness of Africa into that notoriously complex absent presence.

Elsewhere, *pace* Michael Chapman, Brian Fulela makes clear the imperative of Coetzee scholarship to meet the complexity of Coetzee’s literary text with an equally complex mode of articulation of postcolonial theory (2012: 2). In its articulation of postcolonialism, Walder’s *Postcolonial nostalgias* carries its ethical interest in its implacable questioning of the *logos* of both home and identity, fantasy and nostalgia through a critical engagement that reprioritizes class in the description of home in the fantasy attending postcolonial nostalgias.

How postcolonial nostalgia coincides with, and holds in counterpoise, fantasy in the writing of belonging is equally complex; yet Walder insists on ambivalence in the histories of empire: we are given to understand that homeland is a place of both nurture and oppression. Walder demonstrates this by obliquely charting, almost by comparison, the histories underscored by Solomon Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930), on the one hand, and the development of post-war Afrikaner nationalist ideology Geoff Cronje’s *’n Tuiste vir die nageslag* (1945: *A home for posterity*), on the other. Walder deftly paints two recognisably different positions of inclusive African nationalism and exclusive Afrikaner nationalism, each with its unique ideas of a homeland in South Africa, with attendant myths that re-emerge in moments of unbelonging and belonging, inside and outside South Africa, culminating in distorted homeland visions.

Through the lens of suspicious ambivalence, Walder brings to view the impossible, if

dissolved, sense of homeland of the Bushmen – between the idealized “Volkstaat” of Orania hinged on nostalgic fantasy, and the discredited and dismantled Bantu homelands. He does so by tracing the memory inscribed in the logic of Thomas Pringle’s *The song of the wild bushman* through to the *Broken string* lament, with a view to elucidating both reflection and consolation in the lost culture represented by the broken string in Bushman culture. For both academic readers and laypersons the point is ineluctably political; for it is not only the mythic qualities of a past erased but also the burden of history on the present that make home for Bushmen a lost place.

The absence from the landscape is managed by the nostalgic feelings for it, which explains both attachment to it and dislocation from it once distant from the homeland. The chapter “Alone in the landscape” is most eloquent on this, as it clarifies how Doris Lessing departs from the imperatives of white writing, epitomized by J.M. Coetzee’s characterization (in his *White writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa*) of a “retrospective gaze” that, not only looks at “dream-fare” mythology, but also invidiously *positions* indigenous peoples “as idle primitives, thereby all the more readily displaced by or made subject to the needs and desires of the incomers” (1988: 4-6, qtd in Walder). For Walder, Doris Lessing’s writing looks at pasts – consisting of lost or impossible homes – in a type of nostalgia that “avoids bad faith and essentialism” about the Southern Rhodesia of her early years. Yet Walder proceeds to show shades of Coetzee’s “white writing” when, somewhere in his Endnote he declares: “For Lessing here nostalgia becomes nihilism, an expression of the deepest anger as well as longing, even a kind of death-wish. (2011: 73)

Contrary to what Walder implies, in my opinion the foregoing shades of white writing resonate more with Gilles Deleuze’s elucidations of the “memory of traces”:

The memory of traces is itself full of hatred. Hatred or revenge is hidden even in the most tender and loving memories. The ruminants of memory disguise this hatred by a subtle operation which consists in reproaching themselves with everything which, in fact, they reproach the being whose memory they pretend to cherish. For this reason we must beware of those who condemn themselves before that which is good or beautiful, claiming not to understand, not to be worthy: their modesty is frightening. (1983: 117)

Lessing’s nihilism should be considered in the light of the memory of traces in nostalgia’s true but inauthentic representation of partial memories. This also rings true for Walder’s own personal reflections as he empathizes with Lessing’s recounting of the memories of the “Green Cape” in her *Mara and Dann*. He especially notes, with great hilarity, that he was brought up in a hotel in the Cape where Rhodesians sojourned as they needed to recuperate from the stresses of managing the natives: “I used to watch the coarse and redfaced farmers and businessmen carousing with their heavily made-up wives and mistresses, while their offspring were taken to the sea they had never seen before by black servants forbidden to join them in the waves” (Walder 2011: 76). Is this observation-cum-empathy part of Walder’s ambivalent suspicion, or is it that he has come to exhibit, even if comically, the memory of traces described by Gilles Deleuze? I think it is *schadenfreude*: laughing at the rather tragic situation of black servants – invariably under the uppity finger pointing at the idle native made useful – forbidden to join in the waves to which they guide the white master’s offspring.

As a critic, Walder is subtle in his laughter. His attitude corresponds with the comic moments in Lessing’s *Mara and Dann*. Yet, in

a much more sophisticated way, he seriously endorses not only the lost past: he shares in Lessing's nostalgia *for the future* (2011: 78) or "an attempt to go beyond fixtures of the past" (2011: 93). This is an ethical responsibility rarely seen. On account of such rarity, Walder proceeds to show the connection between memory and morality in W.G. Sebald's work by foregrounding how guilt and bad faith are not limited to memories of the Nazi Third Reich project. Memories that connect Auschwitz to Namibia and wartime Poland through histories of genocide are anticipated, according to Walder's analysis, in the *Heart of darkness* intertext, when Kurtz's order "Exterminate all the brutes" was a reflection of bad faith expressed in fantasy as direct implication of Belgian policy in the Congo basin. The triumph of Sebald's work is in its historical awareness in his *Austerlitz* and *The rings of Saturn*. The merit of such an historical awareness lies in its breaking the silence on the Holocaust and, more importantly, acknowledging complicities in the record of melancholy and trauma.

In many ways Walder's aforementioned point on silence resonates with what Walder finds in V.S. Naipaul's notorious claim that the Caribbean has no history, particularly as there is always the inability to accurately describe or remember the traumatic events that led to lost histories and homelands. To manage in writing that absence and presence described earlier on as a problematic of nostalgic remembering is to acknowledge the unimaginable and, at the same time, to lend credence to V.S. Naipaul's assertion that "the history of the Caribbean can never be satisfactorily told" (qtd in Walder 2011: 45). Apart from the impossibility of telling the trauma of the un-making of Trinidad, through the resources of nostalgia Naipaul is able to choose which history of India will construct his identity on the multi-ethnic Caribbean island. There is active distillation of memories. Naipaul refuses to touch or be touched by the India that is, as the title of one of his books suggests, an area of darkness. That simultaneous distillation and choice, in Walder's logic, is a very difficult one as he has to sever parts of a whole history in order to attain the identity he yearns for. The absence and staged lack reflect the hiatus attending the postcolonial habitus.

In conclusion, such genius as Walder's is rare, and the chapters compiled here attest to insightful scholarship that at some point had the benefit of rigorous review as articles placed in highly rated journals such as *Postcolonial studies: changing perceptions*, *textual practice*, *Third world quarterly*, and *Journal of Commonwealth studies*. They are brought together here to further problematize the representation of what Walder frames as memory and its step-child, nostalgia, in postcolonial writing. Walder's book, unlike other related titles coming out at the same time, provides the reader with a double-focus lens: nostalgia is a function of memory tied to past histories and re-imagined futures, and to managed absences and mythologized presences, all of which demand that a critical reader should fix the hiatus between the habitus of memory and nostalgia. As Walder lucidly demonstrates through suspicious ambivalence, the length of nostalgia – that very distance of its horizon – is never the same as the shadow of history in memory.

Works cited

- Boym, S. 2001. *The future of nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
 Coetzee, J.M. 1988. *White writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1983. *Nietzsche and philosophy*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson. London: Athlone Press.

Fulela, Brian. 2012. Of hauntings, impasses and lacunae: the South African debate on postcolonial theory. *Journal of literary studies* 28(3):1-16.

Hirsch, M. & Miller, N. 2011. *Rites of return: diaspora poetics and the politics of memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hobsbawm, F.J. 1989. *The age of empire*. New York: Vintage books.