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Taking Responsibility for the Pasts

Abstract: One of the most significant connections between power and responsibility occurs in relation to the past. The post-revolutionary political powers of the new nations in the nineteenth century reinterpreted or, less politely formulated, invented their past to fit the process of nation building and only then take responsibility for future development of the nations. And they were not alone: pre-nineteenth century periods and the 20th and 21st centuries abound with examples. In our personal lives, self-empowerment often depends on the capacity to take responsibility for one’s past, including all its happy and traumatic moments. In a court room the forensic evidence of past events alone gives the judges the power to decide the fate of the defendant. In neither of the cases power and responsibility can work together without activating individual and collective memory and without finding a language to express responsibility as a manifestation of political, formal and personal power in a process of political legitimization, legal affirmation of justice and personal identity formation. With literary examples from South Africa this article discusses power and responsibility in their relation to a troubled political, legal and personal past.

Keywords: Apartheid, Jacob Dlamini, memory, Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, past, responsibility, Ryan Malan

1 Memory, Language and Responsibility

The fall of the Apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1990s marked a change of power. With the transition from a white predominantly Boer minority political leadership, which exclusively took responsibility for the white minority, to a black majority administration the sense of responsibility also changed. The first majority government in 1993 under Nelson Mandela tried to create transitory institutions that aimed at forging a responsibility that not only embraced the suppressed population of black people and people of mixed ethnicities but the entire population across ethnicities, languages and cultures after years of persecution and cruelties. One such institution was the Truth and Reconciliation
Commission (TRC), a huge experiment placing the responsibility for a smooth transition in an empty social space between formal law and a culturally determined sense of justice. Spearheaded by the Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu as the ideological and Nelson Mandela as the political leader the goal of this institution was to avoid a blood bath in what might otherwise have been a wave of rage and vengeance which would destroy the new democratic nation before it came into being.

The TRC was attached to the first provisional constitution of South Africa from 1993, as part of a program called “Nation Building and Reconciliation” which consisted of three sub-commissions of which the TRC dealing the Human Rights Violation has been the most well-known due to the public hearings it performed and the way the Commission staged them. It was active from 1996 to 1998 when it published a five-volume report. Another committee, The Amnesty Committee, only finished its work in 2003. The overall goal was to integrate the troubled past into the present legal, social and cultural reality of a democratic South Africa in the making. Here, a black majority with enough atrocities to remember and to revenge blended with a white mainly Afrikaans speaking Boer minority with enough atrocities to forget, a white mainly Anglophone minority with enough silence to be ashamed of, and a multicolored minority of people of Asian and mixed ethnic background with enough years spent as a shadowy and liminal existence to be recompensed. All these groups shared the experience of a past crossed by fractures and frictions for which they had to take responsibility, but not the same past. The easy solution would be to cast the catastrophes experienced in each of these pasts in a self-victimizing form and then transfer the responsibility for the misdeeds to one of the other groups of a skin color, language, belief and social status different from one’s own.

In other words: A fruitful connection between power and responsibility must be rooted in the responsibility for the past, albeit this responsibility may be shaped differently. It may take the form of a radical distancing from the past as it happened after the revolutions in the 19th and 20th centuries, followed by renaming of cities and streets, change of historical curricula and, more seriously, internment and execution of representatives of the old system. Alternatively, responsibility for the past may play out as a commitment to historical continuity, maybe at odds with a changing contemporary reality and based on what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence

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Ranger in their influential edited volume from 1983 called *The Invention of Tradition*. However, as in the case of South Africa, a more complex sense of obligation to integrate the past in the present can be fashioned with a new distribution of power as a negotiated reconciliation that reconstructs a shared past in an ongoing participatory process involving all agents who actually shaped this past and its conflicts and contradictions. Janna Thompson’s account from 2002 of a similar process in New Zealand, albeit with different tools, between the Maori people and the white Anglophone population that holds the parliamentary power, carries the telling title *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Justice*. I have adopted this title as mine, too, though with the one significant modification: this process cannot be built only on one past, but on several pasts.

Recognizing that the responsibility for bridging the conflicting pasts needs a foundation of individual decision making, the new black political majority in South Africa, dominated by the most important liberation movement during Apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC), decided to create a particular institution, TRC, to guide the process. It was set up as a parallel to the judicial system and based on a synthesis between the Christian principle of forgiveness and local cultural customs, called *ubuntu* which means something like ‘a spirit of generosity and magnanimity’. Its purpose was to foster an atonement between Apartheid victims and perpetrators based on individual confessions from the latter and forgiveness from the former, in the hope that a sufficient number of people would participate to produce a collective sense of justice across the ethnic divisions in an open confrontation with the radical wrongdoings of the past. In this grey zone of law, the goal of the appeal to assume responsibility for the horrific consequences of abuse of power was to avoid a collective forgetfulness which ultimately might lead to a glossing over of the past; further to spare the new fragile nation for a massive and socially destructive eruption of bloody retaliations from the victims of Apartheid; and finally to acknowledge that the legal system’s cool exacting of punishment in number of years in prison based on forensic evidence would never be able to do justice to the unquantifiable enormity of sufferings during Apartheid. The new political power made an attempt to take responsibility for the future by inviting people from all quarters of society to take responsibility for the unspeakable parts of their different pasts.

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In this context, responsibility as an ethical stance can only materialize if based on two conditions. One is a truthful yet still personalized memory; most often a traumatic and thus painful kind of memory which may be locked up in a mental black box buried under fear, shame, repression where it remains as a hardly accessible horror show, whether the memory concerns abominations that somebody has committed or has been exposed to.\(^4\) In many cases, this recall could only appear in a delicate balance on the edge or beyond the reach of language. The language that has to be found for the memory to emerge is not a discourse able to express a hidden but clearly defined memory but is also a condition for giving it an often broken and stuttering shape that allows it in the first place to be brought out of its silenced hiding places, and then to be communicated to others. Without taking the communicative dimension into account it will be impossible to take collective responsibility for the past, both as a social act and as a visible sign of a self-reliant personal empowerment. This was the basic vision behind the creation of TRC: The personal capacity to find a language through which to confess and to forgive may give rise to a self-empowering responsibility for the complex national past in an act of collective significance. The key concern is not to address those with the power to take responsibility, but to empower ordinary people by giving them the chance to develop responsibility.

In the following I will discuss three texts, fictional, non-fictional and in between, which exemplify forms and limits to the act of taking responsibility for the past and explore different discursive strategies to cope with different pasts: Jacob Dlamini’s memories *Native Nostalgia* (2009), Nadine Gordimer’s novel *The House Gun* (1998) and Rian Malan’s essays *My Traitor’s Heart* (1990). I will not take up TRC’s relation to formal law and justice and the larger issue of international transitional justice;\(^5\) nor will I take up the larger local social and cultural impact of the TRC and the debates on its successes or failures.\(^6\) My concern in this article is to suggest that different pasts within the larger shared amalgamation of histories and past experiences require different approaches and discourses to activate memory and responsibility within the legal limbo between legal formalities and existential necessity.\(^7\)

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2 A Black Past

Already the title of Jacob Dlamini’s autobiographical essays, *Native Nostalgia* from 2009\(^8\) indicates a new take on dealing with past atrocities: In post-Apartheid South Africa he actually longs back to his native black township, Katlehong near Johannesburg, normally seen as an unlivable slum habitation under constant surveillance, persecution and raids by the white police and military. But Dlamini’s focus is a sort of happiness he felt there in his childhood. It is part of his life, and so he must, even there, find an identity that creates his personal resources which gives him the power to go on in life as a black South African. Nostalgia is the most appropriate word he can find for his emotional return to the past and the memories it produces in the present. This is his way to get the power to take responsibility for the past as his past.

He is what he is, not in spite of his background, but because of it. If he thinks he has a resourceful life with a future perspective, although difficult, this resourcefulness also comes from his childhood township even when shaped by Apartheid. Whatever the determining warlike situation was in his neighborhood, this particular type of happiness in spite of Apartheid is what he tries to unearth in order to cast his upbringing in nostalgic terms, something worth longing for. Provocative it is: A black man confessing a longing for certain aspects of the Apartheid. Dlamini’s emotional reaction to his past can be seen as an attempt to go beyond the otherwise paralyzing dichotomized divisions of life in terms of war and ethnic status. In her *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) Martha Nussbaum reminds us that the antique notion of ‘eudaimonia’ refers to a sense of happiness that is defined by its fullness, not by its merriness—its capacity to unite all aspects of one’s life, the up-beat as well as the down-beat moments.\(^9\) This is also the point of gravity in Dlamini’s account, which also reflects a second important point in Nussbaum’s book: Emotions are rational, not necessary in terms of formal logic, but in the sense of being systematic, repeatable and subject to argumentation and reflexive evaluation—in the same way as language, literature and art works are rational. In this sense, the township is a complex emotionally loaded place, releasing emotionally channeled reflections necessary for Dlamini’s self-understanding, given the fact that township-life is a cornerstone in his life, a world of a collective distressing experience, but at the same time a formative part of himself and his present strength.

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Dlamini’s reflection on the past begins in the township Thandukukhanya 300 km south of Jo’burg. In 2009 right after the election of Jacob Zuma as president of South Africa, protesters had vehemently opposed the local municipality governed by a black ANC majority which were guilty of both casualties and destruction of public property. He revives the past through a conversation with the 84-year-old militant Mrs. Nkabinde, a school teacher and local activist decades ago during Apartheid. She is definitely not sentimental. Today she misses some of the internal discipline and mutual respect for people and things in the midst of Apartheid, but “To be fair to her, Mrs. Nkabinde did not say she missed Apartheid. But she did miss something of the past”.10

Then he goes through the tough formative years of his life through a set of themes like money, friendship, family, honor, school, alcoholism, rivalries, social misery etc. This is not happiness in any banal sense, but a real life which is his. His use of the term nostalgia is based on Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001).11 He subscribes to Boym’s distinction between two types of nostalgia: on the one hand restorative nostalgia, emphasizing the root word nostos, home, and on the other reflective nostalgia, underlining the root word algia, pain. The first use of the term sentimentalizes the past, the second exploits the undigested but real dimensions of the past as a necessary starting point for a critical reflection on the present and for a formation of one’s life and identity. Dlamini’s goal is to avoid black self-victimization and to “rescue the South African history and the telling of it from […] the distorting master narrative of black dispossession that dominates the historiography of the struggle”.12

Black dispossession was not experienced the same way everywhere. It was simply not a unified and homogeneous fact, an idea that would turn around and thus only reduplicate and indirectly support the restorative nostalgia of the whites about a time when all blacks, as an undifferentiated mass, were kept in their place and when any black person exemplified all black persons. There are regional differences between townships as well as class oppositions, gender problems, age and internal ethnic differences and conflicts that contributed to a differentiated picture of Apartheid seen in the black perspective. This flexible view also includes the township as a place appealing to all one’s senses—sight, smell etc.—which is the topic of several chapters. “The master narrative [of white or black homogeneity] blinds us to a richness, a complexity of life among black South Africans, that not even colonialism and Apartheid at their worst could destroy”.13

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The goal of the book is to give townships a permanent and complex place in history, not just place them as an exception produced by white suppression and now best turned into oblivion or used as a phenomenon with a fixed negative meaning in the grand reconciliation project. Towns are also places for social competence in dealing with conflicts and diversities, as well as places for imagination of a better future and of concrete sensual life. Dlamini explores his township as a location that strengthens the ability to survive. He wants to avoid identifying black identity exclusively with either hatred to the whites or the capacity to forgive them. His reflective nostalgia is an attempt to come to terms with the complexity of black life itself and to find a focus point and an aesthetic form that make the Apartheid life of the townships understandable based on its ambiguous, but rich sensual and emotional content, here narrated in a series of autobiographical essays. Forgiveness in the vision of TRC never enters the picture as a necessary way to get on in life, only the complex individual nostalgic reflection that brings him beyond the point where forgiveness is the most pressing issue. In one sense, he marks that reconciliation is completed as far as it can go; in another sense he protests against the unifying project it entails. If diversity there is in South Africa, then it is the history of this diversity that has to be dug up, not the black and white dichotomy turned into unity.

3 A White Past

Nadine Gordimer is not remarkable because she writes brilliantly about the societal issues of Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa. Many writers do so. She is also not remarkable because she refers to known names, places and event in contemporary South African history. Many writers do so. But she is extraordinary in the way she describes the all-pervasiveness of the role of law and sense of justice. In scale, she moves from the official institutional life of South Africa to the intimate individual psychology in the grip of the public norms—invaded, pervaded, perverted by the claustrophobic social frame. And with regards to action, she moves from the perspective of the characters’ often futile attempts to influence and change this overall normative structure and its self-defeating unfolding. The power to engage in an emancipatory break-away, a recurring theme in Gordimer, requires more than courage and decisiveness. It requires an event which is life-shattering from the perspective of the characters. From this perspective the most important feature of her art is the narrative and broader

14 Dlamini, Native Nostalgia, 163.
aesthetic strategy that follows from her elaboration of this interaction between the public and the private through a life-changing event.\textsuperscript{15}

First, her plots and storylines are often quite simple, even trite, but not very clearly laid out. We often have to guess what is going to happen and only when we jump to a new phase do we find out, in retrospective, if we made a correct inference. But we often have not. We will also have to imagine ourselves crucial past events that transform people’s lives and thoughts; we meet the effects—in reflections, decision making, consequential actions, doubts etc. “Something terrible happened” is the simple and yet enigmatic opening line of Gordimer’s post-Apartheid novel \textit{The House Gun} (1998). We are in an indirectly represented social universe which, at the same time, has very clear historical, spatial and temporal coordinates and concrete personal embodiments. This is in fact a translation of the South African reality: nebulous causalities, past experiences and motivations on the individual level, but clear in its abstract structure and spatial layout.

Second, the narrative technique has to do with her development of point of view and construction of a narrator. The all-pervasiveness of the normative conditions, from law to sense of justice, or just to disgust or despair, is felt by each individual, but is not particular for each individual. Like language: when practiced, then it is spoken by individuals, but according to some shared rules for grammar, communication, understanding etc. This means that we have a mix of direct speech, indirect speech, stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse where the individual subjective positions shift almost a-grammatically within the same paragraph; at times one of the positions will be that of an anonymous narrator, but it might just as well belong to a character. The effect is that the whole discourse is both individualized and shared at the same time, both my thoughts, and those of others as well. Responsibility for the past takes place in this claire-obscure of individual consciousness that impedes precisely taking responsibility and being empowered by it.

In \textit{The House Gun} this predicament is stated explicitly, and aggravated by the fact that the characters are faced with the undeniable forensic evidence of a crime as it is presented in court. Duncan, the son of solid white middle class Claudia and Harald Lingard, staying neutral during Apartheid, has committed a murder, and the novel is about the trial. Incredible, world-shattering for them: “Other people! Other people! These awful things happened to other people. It does not matter whose thoughts these were, Harald’s or Claudia’s.”\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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This feeling of powerlessness is both personal, yet also located, probably by the narrator, in a fleeting pre-linguistic mental space with no particular individual anchoring. Another short paragraph from the beginning of the novel shows these half-unconscious everyday actions and reactions, related in a broken, staccato syntax with a blurred individual motivation and, hence, also no sense of responsibility. While Harald and Claudia are watching the news Julian—a friend of Duncan’s unknown to the parents—is calling at the door to tell about the murder Duncan is accused of. I have inserted italics to show the doubt about whose words and whose thoughts we are reading about:

He, she – twitch of a smile [who’s smile?], he got himself up with languor directed at her and went to lift the receiver [narrator? Claudia?]. Who [Harald? echo in Claudia?], she half heard him say, half-listening to the commentary following the images [narrator?], Who [Harald? echo in Claudia?]. It could be somebody wanting to convert to some religious sect, or the delivery of a summons for parking offence, casual worker, casual workers did this, moonlighting [Claudia? Harald?]. He said something else she didn’t catch but she heard the purr of the electronic release button [narrator?].

What he said then was [narrator? Claudia?], Do you know who a Julian-somebody might be [Harald]? Friend of Duncan [Claudia? Harald?]?17

In a sense, one might say that the space of indecisiveness opens between public and private corresponds to the space occupied by the TRC: The Commission addressed the individual victims and perpetrators as well as the nation; it built on individual confessions but in a public and mediatized arena; its foundational ideology spanned the universally human and the historically specific human behavior, and the official five-volume report on the TRC hearings presents the general conclusion as well as the individual transcripts. However, first of all, TRC attempted to redefine the balance between the individually embodied sense of justice and the formal law when faced with a discomforting past, disturbed by Apartheid’s legitimized crimes against humanity, in order to open a space in which people could now operate on their own. Most of her novels involve lawyers, court cases, prisons, arguments about justice and injustice, the contradictions of justice etc., bound to actions that from one point of view are crimes, not from another, or from both, and crimes that exceed any normative measure.

In her novels from before Apartheid, Gordimer sees an unstable balance as defined by the influence of Apartheid on everybody’s lives—those involved in the struggle for freedom, those trying to stay out, white liberals, white oppressors, black collaborators. You name it. Burger’s Daughter from 1979 is a striking

example. Published in 1998, *The House Gun* is from the early period of the new South Africa and captures how a new discourse now also becomes all-pervasive and still requires a fight for freedom, but a different one which is no longer invested with an open racial ideology. Yet, a dominating ideological power structure still seeps into the individual minds, permeating people’s mindset and, indeed, the sense of justice and responsibility, also in the Lingard household. Claudia is a humanist, Harald is religious. Together they represent the two dimensions that Tutu tries to unite in a new totalizing discourse of reconciliation.

As always, Gordimer investigates the dangers of totalizing discourses and their power to disturb the difference between public expectations and the possibility for private decision and responsibility. In Claudia’s case in particular, this problem evolves, on the one hand, around the notion of the unforgivable, the murder she has to accept was actually committed by her son without a motivation she can grasp. On the other hand, Claudia is haunted by the incapacity to accept a legal verdict that may be a death sentence, the only verdict she knows that can match the murder. Whatever happens, she will not be able to cope with the result without the collapse of the ethical foundation of her life and profession. She is a medical doctor, unconditionally committed to saving lives and doing voluntary work for poor blacks. The free indirect discourse moving in and out of her consciousness is penetrated by a sense of justice related to respect for individual lives; the universality of shared humanity, also with black people like the lawyer of their son; the obligation not to inflict pain on anybody, in short a human rights discourse wrapped in Enlightenment ideas, but also mixed with an uneasy recognition of the repressed remnants of Apartheid-like automatic evaluations of people in terms of race and sexual orientation. If Apartheid penetrated private lives with oppression of consciousness, the post-Apartheid society produces a shared confusion.

Claudia goes back to her own badly remembered past in the family trying to find the killer motivation in Duncan from his upbringing, “where misunderstandings used to be explained away”. In order to take responsibility of the past, she needs to get a rational explanation, even it if implies a painful new understanding of her own way of being a parent. But she cannot, and she does not get any clue from her son, who receives her with an indifferent quietude in prison after having avoided a death sentence. Instead, she begins to notice features in his bodily appearance she had previously not observed. Having lost the memory of a well-defined past, good or bad, to be responsible for, the three members of the family become alienated from each other. Duncan’s mindset is closed to

both readers and parents who walk on, powerlessly, through life. The past revealed in court does not help. It is not their past: just a terrible something that happened.

4 A Black and White Past

Rian Malan’s provocative autobiography *My Traitor’s Heart* (1991) is about the consequences of Apartheid at the time when it is coming to an end and is transformed into a past in which white and black divisions were not clear. By recognizing its complexity, will he then be able to take responsibility for the past as both individual and collective? Being a white man, will he lose the resilience to go on living in South Africa like the Lingards? Or will he get empowered by it like Dlamini? He describes the dilemma:

For some whites, the myth of white supremacy, and for others, the myth of brave and noble Africans in heroic struggle against unspeakable evil. If you were white, you had to embrace one of those two myths, and let it guide your way. If you believed in neither, the paradox fractured your skull and buried its poisonous claws in your brain.\(^\text{20}\)

The Malan family is not any white family. Being a member Rian is equipped with a Boer pedigree dating back to the early days of colonization, which elevates him to the white Boer nobility of the Apartheid society. The Malans conceived the very idea of Apartheid in the early twentieth century and were part of the inner power circles of government, hardliners in the matter of Apartheid’s law and order. However, Rian becomes the first Malan ever to stand out as a kafferboetie, a nigger lover, with a constant “yearning to atone for the sins of their fathers”.\(^\text{21}\) This “yearning” is reinforced by the steadily growing violence in the black community, inevitable under the oppression from the white society, but also destroying the community’s capacity to adopt an open and democratic view of society. The more the Malans gain power and define what it means to assume responsibility for the past according to the white myth, the more Rian is left powerless, feeling the “claws” of the paradox of the past which is his. From his work as a critical journalist Malan observes that since the early colonial days of conflict the past is an accumulated sum of hatred and atrocities on either side, in which “nothing had been forgotten, and nothing forgiven”.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{21}\) Malan, *Traitor’s Heart*, 370.
\(^{22}\) Malan, *Traitor’s Heart*, 115.
He has himself a strong feeling of being part of this contradictory cultural set-up, tormented by the personal and cultural contradictions that shape his identity not only as a white South African but also as one of the Malan stock and thus an embodiment of the collective Apartheid past. He has no room to express this double identity determined by the contradictions of the past, let alone change them. His encounter with black as well as white brutality forces Malan to adopt a radical emotional distance to political groupings on both sides. In spite of his rational understanding of the causes of Apartheid, he must admit the difficulty, if not impossibility, of coming to terms with life in South Africa. He leaves the country to avoid military service, but comes back, recognizing that the personal and collective past that has shaped him binds him to his native country. His way of taking responsibility for this larger paradoxical past is to give it a language as an investigative journalist, in the hope that he may himself build the power to live with and in the inerasable contradictions inherited from the past as a historical collective and personal destiny.

This predicament is most clearly shown in the final chapter from far away Msinga in central South Africa. It is the story about Neil and Creina Alcock, a headstrong and idealistic white couple who move to the village Msinga in order to improve the livelihood of the local tribes in the starving and drought-ridden formally autonomous black enclave of KwaZulu. They set out to found a small community in mutual love and trust, based on a sense of communality promoting forgiveness as essential for the negotiation of conflicts. In short: what Desmond Tutu would call *ubuntu*. Malan realizes that the Msinga project is the most radical test of the viability of this approach. If the project fails it cannot be more effectively repudiated that “such communality existed in South Africa”, making the Msinga story “the ultimate Apartheid horror story”. But the strange fact is that even after the final violent disruption of the project, the surviving wife, Creina, still believes in its basic ideas and takes responsibility for the disastrous ending of the project, which leaves Malan in an interpretational dead-end as hard to escape from as his encounter with black violence.

The Alcocks live on an equal footing with the local Zulus, or so it seems. Neil is fluent in the local language while Creina is not, but she is working with the women to produce art and crafts to secure some income. The couple also take abandoned children from the region into their household. To further develop a sustainable living for the community they establish an experimental farm, which after a couple of years and many difficulties with blacks and neighboring whites alike seems to have found a stable ecological and economic foundation.

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23 Malan, *Traitor’s Heart*, 235.
24 Malan, *Traitor’s Heart*, 342.
The worst obstacles are, however, not of a practical nature. The blacks will have to accept that white people can teach them something of value and that land has to be fenced in as private property, although for the common good, in order to secure long-term sustainability. All this is against traditional local conceptions of the land and its people, and the rationally based responsibility for the future is out of joint with the local animistic and magical-religious belief in fate determined by the spirits and the ancestors. Land cannot be owned, and both the social power and survival of cattle are determined by the spirits, not by human planning. Taking responsibility for the past in view of the future is an incomprehensible vision. Power over the future is not a human concern, but only the chance of a gain here and now when it occurs right in front of you, also when it implies theft from the white benefactors. It would be shameful not to steal, given the fact that the ancestral spirits have provided you with a golden opportunity. Keeping honor and avoiding shame in this framework are basic concerns for everybody. This is also ubuntu, yet now placed in a context that makes the isolated Msinga a globalized contact zone for all dimensions of colonialism, postcolonialism, localism and, with Malan present, also of global media.

So, planning as a distancing from the past is an operational choice for the Alcocks alone, and the development of a shared sense of communality between them and the local tribes is to a large extent an illusion. It only appears to be a reality as long as it is not challenged by conflicts deeply rooted in local and age-old customs or by a reduced success in farming. The whole business takes a radical turn when Neil is killed in a local skirmish between two neighboring tribal communities in the midst of the peace negotiations between the parties. From that moment on, Creina, is isolated—a weak woman without protection and therefore a legitimate prey, also for the black children who have been raised in her house. She is vulnerable, and the blacks would show a shameful weakness had they not stolen what they could put their hands on, now the spirits had given them the chance to enrich themselves. Honor and identity are intimately linked to a successful exploitation of chance, which can only be seen as a gift from the ancestral spirits, but not bound to a sense of duty or responsibility toward Creina in respect of the long-term care she has sacrificed herself to carry out. The community dissolves and Creina has no role to play there or in any white community.

At this low point in her life Malan asks her to tell the story to his tape recorder. She shifts between forgiving the Zulus and opposing them, the first position exposing her defenselessness, the latter her lack of understanding of local customs. In the end she gains some acceptance from the local people; not as a white person or as their benefactor, but as one who against all odds is able to survive under the local conditions that existed before the Alcocks arrived, now that all traces of their experiment have vanished and only Neil’s spirit is there. The dead
Neil also provides her with an ancestor like everybody else, which provides her with a certain social status.\textsuperscript{25} With an ancestral spirit she gets a status as a human in the sense of \textit{ubuntu} (or \textit{botho} in isiZulu). Malan realizes that Creina’s life conditions are beyond his grasp, but also recognizes that this is the reality of South Africa and thus also his reality, determined by the same contradictory past.

Creina stands up to the occasion. When she and Neil started out, she did not know what their project would lead to and what it really took to learn to know, live and love it. She declares that at the lowest point, with a couple of death threats being sent to her, she experienced utter “darkness”,\textsuperscript{26} but also a profound sense of love for this life, realizing that “love is worth nothing until it has been tested by its own defeat”.\textsuperscript{27} She chooses to stay on as an individual choice with no power to define the conditions, only to trust the power of her own resolve.

Creina’s reconciliation with Africa is highly individual and exceptional. In contrast to the township boy Jacob Dlamini and the white middle class woman Claudia, her way of gaining personal power by taking responsibility for a past that was an illusion from day one cannot be turned into a general principle. This is, however, what Malan tries to do by combining it with his own experiences: “for me, it was like standing in the mouth of some diabolical furnace, like staring into hell”.\textsuperscript{28} Creina’s story gradually reveals the horror of her life, but also enables him to formulate a literary strategy through which the individual voice of Malan’s autobiography combined with Creina’s account creates the power to survive by taking responsibility for a past beyond imagination.

5 Responsibility and Power

Responsibility and power are both an ethical and social phenomenon with a collective and personal dimension. In his novel \textit{The Cry of Winnie Mandela} (2003) Njabulo Ndebele explores this double characterization as a predicament of the many black South African wives that had to wait for their husbands who during Apartheid left home for years on end as migrant workers, imprisoned freedom fighters, exchange students abroad or gallivanting men.\textsuperscript{29} They all have different pasts and some are made stronger by it, others insane. Ndebele frames his story

\textsuperscript{25} Malan, \textit{Traitor’s Heart}, 422–23.
\textsuperscript{26} Malan, \textit{Traitor’s Heart}, 409.
\textsuperscript{27} Malan, \textit{Traitor’s Heart}, 409.
\textsuperscript{28} Malan, \textit{Traitor’s Heart}, 409.
\textsuperscript{29} Njabulo Ndebele, \textit{The Cry of Winnie Mandela} (Claremont: David Philip Publ, 2003).
with that of Penelope, the waiting and faithful wife of Odysseus. Whether she remarries or not, the past will be an empty space of a missed shared life for which she cannot take responsibility, but maybe by accepting it she may empower herself to take responsibility for its consequences for her. To four women stepping out of the anonymity of everyday life, he now adds a fifth woman, Winnie Mandela. She too was waiting, not as a private person but in the public limelight which makes every step she takes on her own behalf a wrong step, turning her into a split identity with violence as a result for which she was brought into the TRC hearings, and forced to apologize and, indirectly, to ask for forgiveness.30 Like Malan she is trapped by an intertwined public and private past with no space of her own where to develop the power to take responsibility for precisely her past. Like him, she is caught between official power and powerlessness, between massive responsibility and defenselessness ultimately perverted into black violence, and between the status as the iconic mother of the nation and the instigator of black terror—contradictions that for her are intensified by gender and race.

Having or acquiring the power to take responsibility for the past is a difficult process with no guarantee of a successful ending. On the one hand, responsibility is a social act that positions a person assuming this responsibility in a normative context within a community; on the other hand, it is an act prompted by personal conviction. When power is connected with, even based on the exercise of responsibility, it will also find a balance between the collective and the personal. As a social and political power, it opens up a social space for the unfolding of personal responsibility, defined and constrained by a judiciary constructed within different types of regimes, ranging from variants of democracy to forms of governance based on family and tribal affiliations, to authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. Power and responsibility within such differing degrees of formal and political constraints require both self-empowerment and public legitimation. As my examples have shown, in these conditions the past is always a past within a context of many pasts, never the past par excellence. Nonetheless, the empowering gesture may acquire a collective significance. The South African situation in the 1990s is an extreme case of these possibilities, which makes the fragility of the balance between the collective and the individual visible. Here, both the formal and informal normative legal structures and the personal responsibility for one’s own history were challenged and continue to be so in the country. TRC was an attempt to come to terms with that challenge, and South African literature continues to be a struggle to articulate its complexities.

Bionote

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