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Remembering the Violence of (De)colonization in Southern Africa

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Published in:
Regions of Memory

DOI:
[10.1007/978-3-030-93705-8_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93705-8_8)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2022

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Robbe, K. (2022). Remembering the Violence of (De)colonization in Southern Africa: From Witnessing to Activist Genealogies in Literature and Film. In J. Olick, S. Lewis, M. Pakier, & J. Wawrzyniak (Eds.), *Regions of Memory: Transnational Formations* (pp. 185-212). (Memory Studies). Palgrave MacMillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93705-8_8

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Remembering the Violence of (De) colonization in Southern Africa: From Witnessing to Activist Genealogies in Literature and Film

Ksenia Robbe

This chapter engages with the questions of the existence, the characteristics and the dynamics of regional memory practices in Southern Africa, the region stretching from the Republic of South Africa in the south to the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania in the north. Its focus is on the memories of the decolonization processes that have taken place throughout the region since the 1960s, as mediated by literary and film representations. While there is no shortage of celebratory commemorations of decolonization and regime change, and these can be regarded as a region-wide practice, this reading enquires into more ambiguous and critical remembrance practices that question accepted truths, reveal silenced experiences, and elaborate alternative subjectivities.

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Switzerland AG 2022
S. Lewis et al. (eds.), *Regions of Memory*, Palgrave Macmillan
Memory Studies, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93705-8_8

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Decolonization in these works is, then, conceived as a process continuing at present and extending into the future in a variety of ways. At the same time, remembering these periods and rethinking the ways in which the transformations have been framed involve engaging with the nature and continuities of colonial practices.

My discussion zooms into cultural productions from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, created over the past two decades, considering them as representative though certainly not exhaustive of the practices and forms of mediating memory in the region. While the novels written in the late 1990s have received considerable critical attention, this reading introduces a comparative perspective on them and juxtaposes these early post-transitional remembrances with the practices of the younger generation that started publishing their works in the late 2010s. It thus charts and analyzes the dynamics of cultural memory across the selected Southern African countries—from the predominance of trauma-related witnessing practices to the development of post-memorial practices in the works of younger writers and film-makers who seek to imagine their (grand)parents' experiences of (de)colonization in order to articulate their own responses to coloniality. Gender appears to be an important factor in these representations. As all of them suggest alternatives to state-supported, official remembrance of decolonization, the memories “from the margins” which they perform involve the perspectives of/on women and those of/on men who do not conform to ideas of hegemonic masculinity.

The part of the Southern African region constituted by the Namibia—South Africa—Zimbabwe triangle represents a heterogeneity of colonial and postcolonial historical experience. The three countries experienced forms of British, Dutch, German, and apartheid colonialism that were, like the decolonization processes that followed, deeply entangled across the region. These entanglements include South Africa's colonial rule of Namibia (1915–1989) and the apartheid state-organized suppression of the anti-colonial struggle in Zimbabwe and Namibia (1960–1980s) as well as, on the other hand, collaborations between national liberation movements and postcolonial political elites. The transition processes involved many similarities and were interdependent: in all three cases, a constitutional framework for a controlled transition was implemented, and in Namibia and South Africa, the transitions involved the change from apartheid to liberal democratic rule (Saunders 2001, 7). Since the 1990s, the countries have been closely interconnected through migration, particularly to South Africa, through cultural interactions facilitated by the

common language (English) and the movement of cultural producers and productions (shared audiences and venues of production and distribution). These political and cultural entanglements form a major context and infrastructure for the mediated memories of decolonization to be discussed.

IN SEARCH FOR A REGION OF MEMORY: OFFICIAL VS. ALTERNATIVE MEMORYSCAPES

The question of whether Southern Africa can be considered a *region of memory* opens a new terrain, especially if one looks beyond the official, state-supported practices of memory and commemoration. The latter became a subject of historical, cultural, and anthropological studies in all three countries (Coetzee and Nuttall 1998; Werbner 1998a, b; Coombes 2003; Marschall 2010; Melber 2003; Becker 2011) and some readings have drawn comparisons between the politics of public history and memory across the region (Melber 2003; Kössler 2010a; Becker 2011). The politics of “elite memorialism” (Werbner 1998a, 8) that silences voices not aligned with the state was first identified and critiqued in the context of Zimbabwe (Werbner 1998b, 71–102). Not only public commemorations and other state-sponsored memorial practices, but also historiography during the 1990s turned into a propaganda mouthpiece with critical voices being excluded and the earlier discourse of “nationalist history” having morphed into one of “patriotic history” (Ranger 2004). A similar trajectory has been traced within the public memory in Namibia, involving “the military image of the liberation struggle, the focus of the victorious and now ruling party and its claim to rule in perpetuity” (Kössler 2010a, 41). The ideologies underpinned by these exclusionary memory practices have legitimated the use of violence against political opponents, to a much greater extent and over a longer period in Zimbabwe, but also in Namibia when a secessionist movement in Caprivi was violently repressed (*ibid.*, 39). In South Africa, the multiculturalist discourse of the “rainbow nation” during the 1990s has often, despite its performed inclusivity, sidelined the experiences of marginalized groups—(black) women, the poor, and the working class—as, for instance, research on the production of testimonies during the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has shown (McEwan 2003; Ross 2003; Krog et al. 2009). Since the 2000s, with the assumed closure of dealing with the apartheid

past, the official discourse has shifted towards celebration of the liberation struggle posited at the center of national consciousness, while “the stories of everyday life [have been] subsumed by the triumphalism of struggle history” (Baines 2007, 181).

Considering these similarities, we can trace a memoryscape constituted by nationalist narratives of struggle and martyrdom that foreground the experiences and subjectivities of present-day political elites and their claims to power. However, this memoryscape does not constitute a *region of memory* in the sense proposed by other contributors to this volume, as it does not challenge the imaginaries of a nation: in celebrating the heroism of those who were interacting and collaborating across the national borders during the colonial and apartheid periods, this regime of memory commemorates their struggles only as national actors and frames their sacrifice as committed for the sake of their nation. In contrast, alternative memories of decolonization, even if their framework of reference is mainly national, depict the complexity of subjectivities and memories of those individuals and collectives who interacted across the national and cultural borders. An important factor that distinguishes these latter memory practices, with implications for transnational identification, is their questioning of the continuities constructed in official histories and memories.

The temporal mechanism behind the official memory practices across the region, as has been observed in individual contexts, is the forging of seamless continuity between the earlier and later resistance to colonialism, from the nineteenth century to the present. In Zimbabwe, this has taken the most obvious form through the fashioning of colonial and postcolonial history as a succession of three *Chimurengas*. Chimurenga, the Shona for “revolutionary struggle”, was the name of the Shona and Ndebele revolt against the British colonial administration in 1896–1897. The guerrilla war that was fought between 1966 and 1979 and resulted in independence was imagined as the Second Chimurenga. What is more contentious, however, is the dubbing of the expropriations of land from white farmers in 2000 as the “Third Chimurenga” by the Zimbabwean government. Furthermore, the recent military coup which displaced Robert Mugabe from presidency involved voices calling it the “Fourth Chimurenga” (Chigumadzi 2018, 14). These acts indicate the compulsion within the society to group varied historical struggles under an unambiguous umbrella of anti-colonial resistance. In Namibia since the 1980s, historians associated with the liberation movement and with the postcolonial

state have attempted to construct links between the early twentieth-century resistance and the later struggle of the SWAPO against apartheid (Kössler 2010a, 42–43). Such links are misplaced since different areas of the country have experienced varied colonial invasions which they resisted on their own; the multiethnic nationhood there is only a recent construction.

In South Africa, tendencies of interlinking icons of anti-colonial wars and anti-apartheid struggle can be observed in post-2000 practices of memorialization. An example of this is the Duncan Village Memorial commemorating the 1985 massacre of anti-apartheid protesters while using the symbolism of “traditional” culture by placing a Xhosa warrior at the center of the composition—a misplaced traditionalism that resulted in the community’s lack of identification with the monument (Marschall 2012, 196). Moreover, the forging of transhistorical continuities in official memory is often linked to discourses of “unity in diversity”, particularly in South Africa. Together, these discursive techniques mask the politics of privileging dominant ethnic groups and bracket out questions of social justice. By creating a multiculturalist façade, this politics of memory works to attract foreign investment and tourism through a growing heritage industry (Witz et al. 2001; McGregor and Schumaker 2006, 655, 657; Becker 2011, 536–38).

Beyond this set of hegemonic discourses and practices, the landscapes of memory in all three countries display multiple contestations and alternatives. These include community protesting against monuments or creating non-intended practices around them (Marschall 2012; Minkley and Mnyaka 2015); developing new curatorial strategies in community museums (Rassool 2006); as well as commemorative rituals and performances such as local history re-enactments and apparel production (Biwa 2010; Kössler 2010b). My reading, however, will focus on literature and film as examples of media that rely on transnational networks and allow for faster exchange across national borders, through distribution and (online) publication mechanisms as well as the movement and collaboration of cultural producers across the region. The potential for regional frameworks of reading Southern African literatures has been explored in the past two decades (Driver 2000; Driver and Samuelson 2004; Weiss 2004; Mwikisa et al. 2010), including in studies of imaginings of the region beyond national borders in literary texts (Primorac 2011; Jackson 2018). None of these studies, however, has focused on questions of

memory or considered regional similarities between the ways of dealing with experiences of (post)colonial violence.

This chapter begins such comparison by exploring regional scapes of remembrance beyond the official narratives of unambiguous celebration and enquires into the dynamics of these scapes over time. My reading suggests that cultural productions of the late 2010s reveal a shift in the modalities of remembering the violence of (de)colonization. Hence, the discussion consists of two parts corresponding to this periodization. The first part, engaging with the dominant modality of witnessing in the literature and film of the late 1990s and early 2000s, compares three novels—Kalenji Hiyalwa’s *Meekulu’s Children* (Namibia, 2000), Yvonne Vera’s *Stone Virgins* (Zimbabwe, 2002) and Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (South Africa, 2000). I consider them representative of critical memory during this period: they focus both on the experience of liberation wars and anti-apartheid resistance “from below”—involving violence against suspected spies and traitors, as well as against women and ethnic minorities, within the movements and military organizations—and also on everyday violence in public and domestic contexts.¹ Narrative and visual renderings of these experiences, which are insufficiently acknowledged in public memory and often unaccounted for by perpetrators, interrogate the imagined breaks between the colonial and postcolonial or apartheid and post-apartheid regimes.²

The second part turns to recent productions by representatives of a younger generation: the poetry volume *Collective Amnesia* by Koleka Putuma (South Africa, 2017), the non-fiction work *These Bones Will Rise Again* by Panashe Chigumadzi (Zimbabwe, 2018) and the film *Unseen* by

¹An example of a region-wide dialogue through such productions of memory is the series *Landscapes of Memory* (1999) which included documentaries from Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa produced by local directors and reflecting specific contexts while being interconnected through themes of trauma, memory and reconciliation (c.f. Mhando and Tomaselli 2009).

²The establishment of independent governments and (formal) democracies did not result in the termination of large-scale violence and armed conflict. In Zimbabwe, which achieved independence in 1980, the ZANU-PF confronted resistance by the rival party and responded with massacring around 20,000 of “dissidents” and civilians in Matabeleland North between 1982 and 1987 (operation “Gukurahundi”). In South Africa, the transition period of 1990–1994 saw an escalation of violence resulting in the death toll estimated between 5000 and 14,000 cases which were hardly discussed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–1998). The more recent occurrence of state-supported violence against striking miners at Marikana in 2012 demonstrates continuities between the practices of the apartheid and post-apartheid state.

Perivi Katjavivi (Namibia, 2016). While the earlier productions largely rely on tropes of trauma, memories of the new generation who did not experience the time of the “Struggle”, involve confrontations with traumas in the form of postmemory. The practices of postmemory in these works generally align with Marianne Hirsch’s (2008) theorization and are comparable to second- and third-generation remembrance elsewhere, but involve a stronger activist element and a decolonial consciousness.

Just like the trauma narratives of the preceding decade, this emergent mode invokes breaks and discontinuities in processes of relating to the past. But compared to the earlier writing, their imaginations are more invested in the restorative work of linking to the past in alternative ways. I am referring to such imaginations as *activist genealogies*. The term “genealogy” relates to the Foucauldian method of studying “histories of the present”, i.e., of tracing the uncertain processes through which the past becomes the present. However, in contrast to the use of this method to “disturb what was previously thought immobile” and “show the heterogeneity of what was imagined as consistent with itself” (Foucault 1991, 82), the works by the young Southern African authors do not only reveal the colonial roots of contemporary social norms, but also recall moments of empowerment within the colonial past that may suggest how similar subjection to power can be dealt with in the present. This affirmative approach that retraces *decolonial* subjectivities in the history and memory of one’s community (usually starting with one’s family) is what distinguishes these works. Since the novels from the earlier period—particularly by Vera and Wicomb—have received much critical attention, my reading concentrates on comparing their modes of remembering rather than providing detailed analysis. In contrast, the texts and film analyzed in the second part are very recent and still await critical readings. My consideration of them is, therefore, more detailed though also comparative.

CONFRONTING THE VIOLENCE OF THE STRUGGLE: WITNESSING AND QUESTIONING RECONCILIATION DURING THE 1990 AND 2000S

The novels by Hiyalwa, Vera and Wicomb are among the most innovative and socially critical texts of the turn of the century and the surrounding decades in Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. They are interconnected both thematically and aesthetically: all engage the pitfalls of the politics of

reconciliation in the respective countries and draw upon the modes of witnessing and testifying. All three foreground the experiences of violence during the struggle for decolonization that have been silenced and erased from public memory. These counter-memories are narrated and focalized by marginalized figures: young rural women in Hiyalwa's and Vera's novels, and a woman freedom fighter and a man who does not conform to hegemonic masculinity in Wicomb's novel. The texts can be considered narratives of trauma. The use of this mode, and the foregrounding of haunting and the impossibility of fully comprehending and assimilating the past, is political in all three works: they interrupt the practices of "forgetting" this violence within the official memories of decolonization. The novels, thus, converge in questioning the mainstream discourses of reconciliation, but they also, vary in their alternative imaginations of communal and national healing.

These texts co-construct a memoryscape of dealing with the violence suffered by civilians and members of liberation movements across the region. I read this as a regional memory constituted through trauma narratives of gendered suffering, in which representations of women's violated bodies and their similarly disrupted but resilient psyche stand for the condition of postcolonial, post-conflict societies.

Hiyalwa's novel narrates the life of a small village on the border with Angola between 1976 and 1989, through the perspective of a young girl named Ketja who had lost her both parents in an attack by the government army (representing "the boers"); her two younger siblings managed to escape and were transported to military camps in Zambia. Ketja is brought up by her maternal grandmother Meekulu, from whom she learns the virtues of dignified survival and caring for the community. Throughout the narrative, the girl is struggling with the trauma of witnessing the murder of her family, the loss of siblings, and the destruction of the community by the colonial government forces as well as the liberation army, whose soldiers make regular raids into the village and recruit children into the Struggle. Both groups of militants are depicted as bringing devastation into common people's lives: "The colonial army and the freedom fighters [...] had turned our homes into a battle field and we had become victims of the two forces" (54). Yet one of the most poignant points is when Meekulu asserts that for her all "soldiers from the forest" are "her children" (56). Moreover, her statement—"[e]very child in this land is my child. A child of my neighbour is my child. We all feel connected to each other. We are one people." (57)—implicitly extends to the government

soldiers (though to Ketja's question if this "people" also includes "the boers", Meekulu responds with "a quiet long look" (ibid.)). This inclusive vision of the "one people" at the time of extreme violence lays the ground for a desired reconciliation that acknowledges the everyday suffering as well as resilience of all Namibians, beyond liberation army fighters.

Vera's novel responds to a somewhat similar situation, though focusing on a more brutal episode, through a narrative that clearly identifies the silenced practices of mass violations in 1980s Zimbabwe. At the same time, it reflects on the entangled origins of this violence, which reveal overlaps between "victims" and "perpetrators." Most clearly this idea is embodied in the figure of Sibaso, who fought the liberation war on the side of the ZAPU and is persecuted by the government forces conducting the massacre. Looking for a place to hide in a village, he kills the protagonist of the preceding narrative, Thenjiwe, and rapes and mutilates her sister Nonceba. The latter survives to bear witness to what her family and community had suffered at the hands of both the "dissidents" and the government forces. Represented through Nonceba's traumatic narrative recalling Sibaso's violation of her body and psyche, the account of his perpetratorship involves the most intrusive and haunting actions and aftermaths. At some points, however, the narrative provides an insight into the logic of this inexplicable violence by foregrounding Sibaso's trauma of the "bush war" and of being persecuted (107), and his ideals of liberation being compromised by the new elites (89). Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson read this "violent neurosis" as an example of (postcolonial) melancholia displacing self-destruction upon women and annihilating natural cycles of time associated with them (2004, 186–88). The narrative contrasts this portrayal of melancholia with tentative mourning represented by the figure of Cephias. A former lover of Thenjiwe, he finds Nonceba at a hospital, takes her to his home in Bulawayo and builds a caring relationship with her which involves their shared mourning of her sister. While Sibaso and Cephias' ways of dealing with the past and present of violence are contrasted, the narrative also includes several intersections between the two figures, even making the reader suspect in the scenes of Sibaso's appearance that the killer and rapist might be Cephias, and later forging symbolic connections between these characters which parallel the interconnectedness of melancholia and mourning (ibid., 188–89).

A similar treatment of victimhood and perpetratorship as a space of ambiguity pertains to Wicomb's *David's Story*. Here too, the fighters of

the ANC military wing (MK)—those who in post-apartheid South Africa would be expected to be honored as heroes—appear to be the ultimate and paradoxical victims of intimidation and harassment perpetrated by various political (and criminalized) factions within and outside the organization. The story of David’s participation in anti-apartheid struggle, however, turns out to be impossible to convey, despite his compulsive desire to have it written down (for which he engages a woman “scribe”). The scribe’s discourse as a witness to his psychological struggles ultimately reflects the impossibility of truth-telling. David’s recollections for the intended book, she soon realizes, expose multiple silences which he explains by the requirements of secrecy or by the “falsities” of memory (194), but which appear to the readers as signs of his trauma. His narration itself is full of “deleting and rewriting misremembered event[s]” (141). This compulsive re-telling of the past involves references not only to his own suffering and his complex position within the movement as a colored person who, the narrative implies, must have supported “dissidents” within the MK and was tortured for this (195–96; Driver 2000, 236). As a major site of trauma, the narrative invokes the figure of Dulcie—(re)constructed by the writer from snippets of David’s talk about a woman comrade—who is subjected to torture by the mysterious people, probably other MK fighters, appearing almost as ghosts in David’s narrative (185). In a parallel to the male figures of Vera’s novel, Dulcie’s torturers reveal an “ambiguity [...], something that makes them both friend and foe as they tend to the cracks and wounds carefully inflicted on parts of the body that will be clothed” (179). This ambiguity extends to David himself who, as the narrative hints, might be complicit in Dulcie’s suffering, even if only as a witness (Meyer 2012, 356).

In all three novels, as these cursory readings demonstrate, narratives of trauma posit critiques of reconciliation narratives in Southern Africa. The traumas of decolonization suffered by former combatants are (dis)placed onto women and their bodies, which are violated but also demonstrate possibilities of survival, resilience and recuperation. In their representations of the latter, the novels draw upon female cultural icons. While these images have been engaged by nationalist imaginations too, the novels’ narratives re-appropriate them and explore the silenced potentialities of these symbols.

In *Meekulu’s Children*, the trope of motherhood is realized through the first-person testimonial narrative of Ketja written as a coming-of-age story, at the end of which she becomes head of the family including her siblings

and other children-survivors. The dynamics of the plot—Ketja burying her grandmother and reflecting on her own future role—stresses the motif of appropriation of a gendered national symbol on a community level and matrilineal inheritance. In her embrace of all “children of this land” (56), “Meekulu co-opts a symbol of Namibia the Motherland and claims it as herself, adopting a model of female power which is both maternal and stakes a claim over contested land” (Kornberg 2018, 254). In a similar vein, *The Stone Virgins* involves references to Nehanda, the royal ancestor of the Shona, whose spirit enters the bodies of women-mediums. During the First Chimurenga, she guided the militant Charwe who spearheaded resistance against the British (and was subsequently hanged by them). Vera also explores this figure in her earlier novel published in 1993, *Nehanda*. *The Stone Virgins* includes more indirect references to the prophecies of the spirit’s resurrection by alluding to the saying attributed to Charwe/Nehanda (“my bones will rise”): “The bones are rising. Rising.” (Vera 2002, 59). Just like the title’s reference to the virgins who used to be buried with kings that critiques the sacrifice of women’s bodies and subjectivities within Zimbabwe’s official memory, citing the words and imagery related to Nehanda signifies a “refus[al] to use women in the way they are used in a nationalist project” (Driver and Samuelson 2004, 195). *David’s Story* includes a sub-plot tracing the early twentieth-century history of the Griqua, a Southern African group of multiracial colored people, and their chief Le Fleur, who seems to have been David’s great-grandfather. The focus of this exploration is the Griqua’s nascent nationalism, which reproduces racist ideologies of Afrikaner and English colonialists with an anti-colonial tint, and particularly the ways this ideology subsumes women’s creativity that had been central to the advance of the nation. The narrative parallels these recollected episodes with the gender politics of the anti-apartheid movement.

The narratives of embodied memory—focalizing violence through women’s perspectives (Ketja, Nonceba, Dulcie)—perform resistance to nationalist sacrifices of women’s bodies. This traumatic memory relies on invocations of witnessing and the mode of testimony, but these narratives avoid essentialist claims to representation; the past becomes accessible only as a trace and through traumatic displacement. Ketja’s memory includes several descriptions of her dreams that are populated by figures of the walking dead, mediating her loss and angst, and visions of her siblings participating in the war (their experience of exile never being explicitly conveyed) (52, 72). Nonceba’s and Thenjiwe’s experiences are narrated as

a series of flashbacks, with no clear storyline, focusing on sensations, resonant words and objects. David's narrative is overtly structured through displacement—of his own traumas and the memory of Dulcie invoked only as a trace in his writing about Sara Baartman³ and as “a scream somehow echoing through [his] story” (134).

The novels, however, part ways in their imaginations of healing or working through trauma; these differences are contingent on the politics of reconciliation in each of the countries. They are most clearly reflected in the narratives' endings. The last scene of Hiyalwa's novel portrays Ketja and Meekulu's other adopted children carrying the grandmother's body to be buried near her house, and being obstructed by government soldiers. Ketja speaks out against them, but the confrontation is ultimately resolved by the arrival of a UN security vehicle and, simultaneously, a group of mourners who help to deliver the corpse and the children to their old/new home (Hiyalwa 2000, 117–19). This hopeful ending signifies the birth of a new community through Ketja adopting the role of a symbolic mother for *all* children. In contrast to the mainstream narrative of the Namibian transition which proposed to forget the past of colonialism and war (in conjunction with blanket amnesty), the novel posits the memory of the civilian victims—Ketja's parents and grandmother killed by the colonial army—at the center of the nation's regeneration. “From now on”, Ketja reflects, “I will have the task—a very big responsibility—to show the children the resting place of their parents and relatives and where many children of Elombe are buried.” (113). In Vera's novel, Nonceba's gradual recovery, facilitated by Cephass' care (also in his symbolic capacity as a historian reconstructing the precolonial image of Bulawayo) can be read as a metaphor for the nation's recuperation. Yet her return to the normality of life is only part of what needs to happen. In Cephass' thought, “What he sees in Nonceba is only what is recoverable ... It would be too much to ask for her to be entire. It would be impossible.” (Vera 2002, 158). This, again, should be read against the background of the state's superficial politics of mourning which recognizes the “excesses” of post-liberation violence only to silence their remembrance. Wicomb's judgement of post-apartheid memory politics is even more somber. David's and Dulcie's stories keep haunting the writer, defying representation and recovery; both

³Sara Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited at human zoos in Britain and France during the early nineteenth century and examined by anatomists as a “link” between animals and humans.

end in suicide and the writer's resolution to "wash [her] hands of this story" (Wicomb 2000, 213). This defiance involves a sharp critique of post-apartheid practices of remembrance and jurisprudence, represented by the granting of amnesty in exchange for truth-telling during the TRC, which was generally framed as a therapeutic process necessary for the new nation to come into being.

Thus, the memoryscape of representing the 1980 and early 1990s transition processes in Southern African fiction is defined by deconstruction of the victim/perpetrator dichotomies and of heroic tropes in official discourse. Instead of the binary visions, it foregrounds multifaceted everyday experiences of war and conflict. It focalized these events through the subjectivities of women, some of whom are combatants, i.e., it also interrogates the constructed boundary between civilians and soldiers, war heroes and survivors. While all examined representations rely on and elaborate tropes of trauma, the novels also stress the agency of (female) survivors. This is achieved through tracing (imaginative) matrilineal genealogies to women ancestors who are represented as symbols of perseverance and care for victims and perpetrators (*Meekulu's Children*); as reclaimed icons of anti-colonial leadership whose image has been abused by a nationalist ideology (*The Stone Virgins*); and as powerful, emancipated women whose role in liberation struggle has been obliterated even within a liberal narrative of transition (*David's Story*).

Although these novels (and other representations from the 1990s and 2000s elaborating similar plots and tropes) have drawn public attention to the gendered violence of decolonization and transition, this memory has been only marginally incorporated into mainstream discourses and practices. The official remembrance of the period today shows little difference to that of the earlier decades, even despite the recent displacement of Robert Mugabe from his 27-year rule of Zimbabwe and the stepping down of Jacob Zuma from presidency in South Africa. Over the past decade, remembering colonialism and decolonization has become a major theme in popular mobilizations and activist practices which challenge the rule of the parties that grew out of liberation movements.⁴ In most cases,

⁴In South Africa, the most prominent example has been the #RhodesMustFall movement against the colonial monuments. In Namibia, there exists activism for the remembrance of the Herero and Nama genocide of 1904–1908; the German government officially recognized this event as genocide in May 2021. In Zimbabwe, decolonial memory practices involve drawing on traditional spirituality and ideas of justice in addressing colonial and postcolonial violence orchestrated by the state (Morreira 2016, 57–88).

however, approaches that identify colonial practices in post-independence and post-apartheid politics and draw on indigenous ideas of justice have not been embraced by larger publics or (sufficiently) supported by international organizations. These approaches, nevertheless, are being actively developed within contemporary artistic practices including literary writing and film, to which my discussion now turns to consider the continuities as well as departures of the younger writers and film-makers from the earlier representations of memory. In the times of post-transitional disappointment regarding the possibilities of influencing postcolonial memory politics, where do they locate hope and agency?

VOICES OF THE “BORN FREES”: POSTMEMORY AND GENEALOGIES OF (DE)COLONIALITY

In the following discussion of works by a writer, a poet, and a film-maker, produced over the second half of the 2010s, I use “born free”—the Southern African idiom referring, optimistically, to the generation born after decolonization or the end of apartheid—as an umbrella term (the three authors were born in the 1980s and early 1990s). I regard their work as representative of the emerging aesthetics and politics of the 2010s and of the younger generation’s voices within it. While most of their productions are focused on the authors’ respective countries (those where they or their parents are from), South Africa as the regional powerhouse constitutes an important context for their life and work. Panashe Chigumadzi was born in Zimbabwe and emigrated with her parents to South Africa in 1994. She grew up and still lives there whilst keeping strong connections to Zimbabwe. Perivi Katjavivi, a son of a prominent Namibian politician and leader of the SWAPO in exile and an English-born, naturalized Namibian who played a key role in the Namibian publishing post-1989, was born in Oxford and grew up in Windhoek during the 1990s. He received an MA and is doing a PhD in South Africa. South Africa’s regional “pull” in these cases is reflective of the economic and educational patterns of (trans-)migration, whereby many people spend their time between the neighboring countries. Also, much of the publishing and film industry is concentrated in South Africa, which explains the strong presence of the authors in this country. The choice of the authors for the current discussion is determined by the “visibility” of their works nationally and transnationally as well as the similarity of decolonial

memory practices that I regard as defining the shape of an emerging regional memory.

Whereas the earlier regional memory was centered on witnessing and testimony, the experience of the younger generation leaves little space for such practices. Their works, however, foreground trauma as a condition shared by the younger Southern Africans and one which has deeper roots than their own or even their parents' generational experience. Kim Wale, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, and Jeffrey Praeger reflect on this societal condition in South Africa as "post-conflict haunting", which involves "not simply a memory of past violence, but a lived, everyday experience of continued suffering and exclusion" (2020, 2). The works of literature and film discussed below convey this sensibility which is increasingly invoked in Southern African contexts by the younger generation who voice disappointment with the lack of political will among the post-transitional elites to tackle the burning issues of social inequality. In South Africa, where reconciliation was an institutionalized state-supported project, and where, thus, the expectations of its outcomes were particularly high, the sense of betrayal and of being haunted by the colonial/apartheid past has been bitter. This sensibility started taking larger collective shape in the wake of the Marikana massacre in 2012, when 34 striking mineworkers were shot down by the police—a turning point in post-apartheid society that for many revealed the uncanny continuities of the present with the apartheid past. The growing sense of the continuing coloniality post-2012 gave shape to the massive student protests in 2015–2016 under the slogans of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (Naicker 2016). An integral component of these protests and related activism were the practices of visual art, photography, and poetry, mediating the imaginaries of recalling resistance to apartheid in the past, in the context of the continuing coloniality of the present. These works of art and poetry involve a strong mnemonic dimension as they "recall the aesthetics of anti-colonial expression and infuse it with more contemporary decolonial inquiry into the ways of knowing the past" (Robbe 2016, 453). Photographs taken by students during the protests, as Kylie Thomas observes, constitute the "acts of decolonial world-making" through the "new iconography of resistance" that "draws on, references and re-animates the past and yet breaks away from the social documentary forms of representation that characterized the struggle against apartheid" (2018, 99). At the same time, in Namibia, memory activists representing the Herero and Nama communities have been challenging the post-independence politics of remembering centered on the

national myth of anti-apartheid struggle that obscures the longer histories of violence and anti-colonial resistance (Harmick and Duschinski 2018).

In the present examination of the texts and films that appeared at the time of social movements and memory activism against coloniality, I propose that the new imaginaries and iconographies that involve decolonial practices of (post)memory—what I call here “activist genealogies”—are being articulated in literature and film on a regional scale. Just like photography and art, these texts relate to the earlier modalities of witnessing in literature through a dialectics of suffering and hope, performed through representing trauma and reclaiming the marginalized agency of female cultural icons or family figures. The difference of the more recent productions lies not only in their shifting of trauma from the mode of witnessing to the mode of postmemory,⁵ but also in their understanding of current traumas as shaped by the longer practices of coloniality—from the first encounters with colonialism to the present day. Along the lines of decolonial critique, my reading refers to “coloniality” as an epistemological characteristic of modernity that posits Eurocentric knowledge and its subject as universal and continues doing so after the end of colonial rule.⁶

In terms of form, works by the younger authors gravitate towards hybrid genres, enhancing documentary writing with elements of fiction and vice versa: Chigumadzi’s book combines features of memoir, journalistic writing and poetic prose; Putuma’s Spoken Word poetry includes narrative elements (a bullet point list in “No Easter Sunday for Queers” and “On Black Solidarity”); an essay structure in “Oh Dear God, Please! Not Another Rape Poem”); Katjavivi’s film merges conventions of documentary (the genre that has been prevalent in Namibian productions such as Richard Pakleppa’s) and feature film. Related to the hybridity of form and of generational memory is the focus of these productions on everyday life in postcolonial societies, where boundaries between ordinary experience

⁵Marianne Hirsch’s term that “describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2008, 106).

⁶“Decolonial critique” here refers to the practices of delinking from the colonial matrix of power in attempting to establish socio-cultural relations of a different kind. This critical approach draws on Franz Fanon’s analysis of continuing colonialism and the pitfalls of decolonisation and develops it with regard to present-day conditions while imagining ways of overcoming this regime (Quijano 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2007).

and politics are less distinct than during the earlier times of anti-colonial struggle or military conflict.

Koleka Putuma's debut collection *Collective Amnesia* (2017) is one of the most outright and vivid expressions of black South Africans', and particularly women's, experiences, struggling with present-day manifestations of coloniality. The title refers to the push of the mainstream post-apartheid discourse to simply leave the colonial past behind, thus rendering invisible the continuity of colonial power structures within the society. This involves more than a manipulation of the black majority by the whites who continue holding on to power; this discourse also includes the patriarchal bias within the black communities, which does not allow for expressions of women's agency, as well as the older generations' silencing of pain and suffering as a way of coping. Thus, speaking out against the colonial structures of the present, the poems reflect on black people's complicity in their reproduction. The shaping of alternative ways of remembering is a major agenda of Putuma's work as a poet and theater-maker; in her own words, "[s]he is particularly interested in how narrative making can be a catalyst of healing, resistance and excavating memory".⁷

A major theme in the collection is the trauma effects of the younger generation resulting from living in an African society which is thoroughly "white" in its treatment of experiences and perspectives that diverge from the Eurocentric mold. The opening poem "Black Joy" represents a fond childhood memory of spending time at grandparents' home together with siblings and cousins and sharing simple food and entertainments. It is interrupted by a reflection on the perspective of a white observer that infiltrates the minds of those who are remembering:

But
 isn't it funny?
 That when they ask about black childhood,
 all they are interested in is our pain,
 as if the joy-parts were accidental. (13)

The scenes of everyday life in this poem do not romanticize poverty, but they present an alternative to the stereotypical images of black suffering that sharply contrast the apartheid past and the post-apartheid present and render the experience of the "born frees" as a clean slate. A similar

⁷<https://cocoputuma.wordpress.com/about/>.

struggle is staged in “Hand-Me-Downs”, which recalls the practice of passing on one’s clothes and things to younger siblings. The chain of sharing extends to the entire community and places the speaking subject within a lineage (the inheritance of objects metaphorically connects with the process of remembering—“Inherited memory” is the title of the cycle): “I also come from a lineage of borrowed and borrowing./The neighbour’s sugar was an open jar without a debt collector.” (15) The metaphor culminates in a dehumanized image of black people who are treated like second-hand things by the culture of coloniality: “Cheap./ Disposable./ Damaged./ Labour.” (17) Just like the previous poem that shows both the pain and joy of living in a township, this one depicts the two sides of the culture of second-hand things: the thirst for the new and the expensive along with the experience of humanity that such sharing entailed and that seems to be almost forgotten (18–19).

The theme of traumatization as a result of postcolonial amnesia is further developed in “Water”; here the current state of distress acquires more historical depth by being related to the traumas of slavery and colonialism. The poem opens with the stereotype of black people being afraid of the sea and swimming. The pain of being mocked and thinking of oneself through the images of the “*Baywatch*-like” is related to the embodied memory of slaves transported and swallowed by sea (96). The state of trauma is, then, displaced from humans onto the sea which is being “re-traumatised” every time black bodies touch its surface—traditionally, during public holidays (97). The traumatic memory of enslavement is only enhanced by the present in which the relevance of this memory is denied, and black people “are asked to dine with the oppressors/ and serve them forgiveness” (99). The speaking subject’s response is: “How, / when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage?” (ibid.). The reference to December 16, the Day of Reconciliation which was introduced in 1995 to combine memorable dates of the Afrikaner community (victory over the Zulus in 1864) and of black South Africans (a peaceful anti-apartheid protest and the founding of Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1961) stresses the colonial aspects of the negotiated settlement of the 1990s and of the public memory it attempted to construct (is it possible for black South Africans to celebrate their defeat and colonial conquest?). The speaking subject’s rejection of the narratives of transition is rendered with sarcasm in “1994: A Love Poem”, in which she asks to be loved “the way that white people look at and love Mandela” (101). This iconoclastic rendering denies the

functioning of “1994” as a historical watershed and re-focuses our attention on the persisting coloniality of discourse and memory.

It is, however, not only the white hegemony but also the older generation’s ways of dealing with pain and experience of oppression by simply silencing them that Putuma’s poems seek to debunk. Speaking about her generation in first person plural, she laments the fact that “we are taught/ that mourning is the opposite of strength” (56). “Graduation” renders a similar theme within the more personal scope of a mother-daughter relationship while at the same time addressing the two female characters as generalizable “you” (35). A later stanza introduces the generational difference between the women, revealing the daughter’s discomfort with the mother’s silencing of loss (37).

The recognition of the validity of the older generation’s approaches implies a caring yet resistant attitude and the claiming of autonomy. The dissociation from her mother only leads the subject to figure an alternative, queer womanhood, as she does in “Reincarnation”, through a reflection of a militant image of her grandmother (20). Such connections appear vital, as rendered in “Lifeline” which is a list of names of black women writers, scholars and activists from South Africa and elsewhere that constitute for the speaking subject “a gospel shut in [her] bones” (85). This imaginary lineage—a recurring image in the collection—represents an alternative memory of women’s place in history and suggests a starting point for decolonial narratives. In her recent reading of Putuma’s collection, Elleke Boehmer compares its style and mode of address to the 1970s poetry of Mongane Serote which was “radical, hard-hitting, and raw, openly powered by Black Consciousness values of race pride and anger at the apartheid system” (2018, 180). This aesthetic and political connection to an earlier generation of anti-apartheid (male) poets co-constructs the openly queer and decolonial genealogical imagination in Putuma’s work.

In ways similar to the performance of women’s lineage in Putuma’s poems, Chigumadzi’s book engages with the memory of Nehanda. This homage to Yvonne Vera’s writing is indicated in the phrase from her novel *Nehanda*, “history is created in the mouth”, placed in the epigraph. The author’s exploration begins with her personal memory of a photograph (the only copy of which has been lost) of her grandmother Lilian Chigumadzi after she passed away in October 2017. A month later, Zimbabwe was experiencing a historical moment when a coup displaced Robert Mugabe and the vice president of the ruling party took his place—the few weeks that were celebrated by many as the “Fourth Chimurenga”.

Chigumadzi's view of this change is skeptical as it has brought to power yet another military leader with a background and approach to politics similar to Mugabe's. In reflecting on the transformation, her project is to proceed from the memories of her grandmother and other women some of whom, like Nehanda's mediums, have been elevated to the status of Mothers of the Nation while others—like Grace Mugabe against whose succession as a president the coup had occurred—have been reduced to “Evil Stepmothers, birthing all that is bad in our society” (109). She decides to “lower [her] eyes from the heights of Big Men who have created a history that doesn't know little people, let alone little women, except as cannon fodder” (19) and re-imagine this history through memories of women, reflecting on the symbolical and physical violence inflicted on them during the 1980s and the recent transition.

This project of undoing the violence begins with the author's memory of Lilian's photograph as a sixteen-year-old girl, taken at the Panokromatic Studio in Mutare in 1956. The remembered photograph becomes a springboard for the author's imagination, who regrets never being able to speak to her grandmother about her life. The narrative takes Panashe on a journey to her grandmother's home village during which she visits other relatives, friends, and Nehanda's current mediums. She recalls the photograph as having fascinated her with the image of a young woman who was “[a]lone, unburdened, unattached, only Belonging to Herself” (30). Later she finds out that Lilian was a “born-rukesheni” (42), i.e., born and grown up in a township, which implied an experience of cosmopolitan modernity during the 1940–1950s. Associating this personal history with the 1956 song by Dorothy Masuka, which tells a story of a girl who wore trousers but was accepted by her lover nevertheless (53–54), she reflects on the necessity of remembering the experiences of women “who refused their places in time” (55). By (re)creating her grandmother's story as part of a cultural memory of Zimbabwe's modernity, the text seeks to liberate the memory of “women's resistance in rural areas, cities, mines and farms before, during and beyond the Chimurenga” that have been “foreclosed by the singularity of Mbuya Nehanda's ‘frozen image’” (92). The idiom of a frozen image is borrowed from Vera's reflection on Nehanda's only photograph taken before her medium was executed during the First Chimurenga (Hunter 1998, 77). First fixed by a colonial camera, it has then been appropriated by anti-colonial nationalists and the postcolonial state, which turned it into a national symbol and put Nehanda's present-day mediums under strict control (Chigumadzi 2018, 76–86).

Against this background of family and national memory, the narrator begins contemplating ways out of the cycles of violence, including the 2017 “military-assisted transition” (94). In Zimbabweans’ cultural memory, she observes, the postcolonial nation’s birth is associated with mass violence and deaths, including the sacrifice of Nehanda (*ibid.*). Thus, violence seems to have become the core of the national and individual identity—a realization that makes the narrator ask:

Is our fixation with Nehanda’s death a cathartic confrontation of our colonial trauma? Or is it an acceptance of violence as being always necessary in our making and remaking? Perhaps we continue to rehearse Nehanda’s execution because we have not found the way to resolve the traumas of our violent past and present? (95)

Against this time of traumatic repetition and of the opposition’s “presentist tradition” that does not offer a vision beyond Mugabe’s displacement, she reflects on ideas of timelessness and transcendence as a foundation for reimagining history as accessible to everyone. Its democratic potential is conceived as beginning with a women’s lineage echoing Putuma’s poem: “Chimurenga transcends time and space, belonging to our ancestors, our grandmothers, our mothers, ourselves, and to our daughters and granddaughters. Instead of reclaiming Chimurenga for our people, our opposition conceded it to Big Men” (99).

This democratic imagination transcends both the moment of decolonization and the recent transition as turning points. Instead of seeing “Zimbabwe’s future [as] a matter of the old dying and the new being born” (129), it proposes a vision of cyclical time involving “cumulative and intergenerational traumas and triumphs” (130). It also involves a transcultural regional imagination as opposed to exclusive ideologies of “Shona-ness” or even “Zimbabwean-ness”. Through her own migrant subjectivity, she reflects on the similarity of Zimbabwe’s and South Africa’s postcolonial discourses which had figured the moment of decolonization as “zero time” and imagined the new generation as being “born free” (63). An opening up of this continuity of colonial time occurs when the narrator finds out, through her grandfather’s slip of the tongue, that her paternal ancestors had migrated, in the eighteenth century, from the present-day KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa to the eastern part of Zimbabwe (44). Such discoveries of regional fluidity are intertwined with

imaginings of timelessness, and together they form spatio-temporal coordinates for new regional identities.

Perivi Katjavivi's film *Unseen*, in a similar vein, displaces the vision of Namibia's independence as a moment of the nation's birth. Following the three protagonists stranded in the urban spaces of Windhoek, it reveals that decolonization had left them in a limbo from which there is no escape. The stories of Anu, Marcus and Sara form separate plotlines which are interconnected through the sense of isolation and disconnectedness. Anu is a local rap musician who feels alienated from his former friends and the community of the "location" in which he grew up; he also realizes that there is no way for him to fit into the global music industry, even though he raps in English. His girlfriend tries to find an escape by sleeping with rich men, though every time she is dumped, she returns to Anu. Marcus, a black US actor, becomes one of these men, spending a brief period in Windhoek on invitation to play Mandume, the king of the Kwanyama who was either killed or committed suicide during the South African army's attack on his kingdom in 1917. The film shows Marcus's struggle to relate to the material of a different culture and time. At the end, the news that the Namibian director had failed to secure funding for the production confirms his sense of the futility of travelling to the small African country and of the alienation he experiences there.

The disjunction between the global and the local in these two stories is translated into the third plotline that features a depressed young woman, Sara, attempting to commit suicide in her apartment. Together, the three stories elaborate the metaphor of the postcolonial "unseen"—the local which, though speaking a global language, remains virtually invisible and ungraspable to both vernacular and transnational audiences, and the silence that surrounds the idiosyncrasies of "minor" histories. This condition of invisibility without end also appears as a state of being stranded in time. In his reading of recent (transnational) South African writing, Andrew van der Vlies describes this temporality as "no-time"—"a present that did not feature in the past's privileged narrative of time's future unfolding" (2017, 5–6). This temporality disrupts the dominant post-apartheid/ postcolonial imaginings of a new beginning; the past future itself appears to be colonized. The film conveys this idea most clearly in Sara's dialogue with a man who attempts to make her speak by asking: "What are you running from? Doesn't it ever get lonely?", to which she responds: "One can race around, race towards something, but there are limits, at the heart of the world, behind or beyond".

An alternative to this is articulated in Anu's monologue in one of the last scenes when, lying on bed with his girlfriend, he starts contemplating a different time to counter their disappointment in the present: "How far back do you think our childhood goes? Fifty years, a hundred, a thousand? I feel like it goes farther back than the memory of any race. Our dreams come from, like, deep below, you know. From a deep remembering of, like, forgotten ancient ancestry or something." Accompanied by meditative music, his narrative invokes the Pyramids of Giza as the greatest human achievement belonging to Africans and imagines his girlfriend as Isis reborn. This is the only moment in film when the camera stops capturing the characters or their environment and focuses on photographs: the viewers see a slide show interspersing the pyramids with early twentieth-century photographs of the enslaved and colonized people of Namibia. Thus, Anu's imagination, evoking "deep time" and a Pan-African reach, addresses the colonial past and its implications in the present. Drawing on the legend of Osiris and Isis with its empowering motif of rebirth, this imagination is hopeful, despite the persisting colonial trauma and bitterness: "So we've got a raw deal, ha?", asks the girlfriend. "The rawest. But it's cool, though", replies Anu.

CONCLUSION

While existing research has indicated similarities between official memory practices in post-1990 Southern Africa and particularly Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, this chapter has asked whether we can trace an alternative regional memoryscape that encompasses reflections on the violence and suffering of decolonization during the 1980 and 1990s (with references to the colonial periods and the continuing practices of coloniality). The readings have, thus, focused on literature and film that involve critiques of mainstream memorialization and invoke alternative constellations of past, present and future. Focusing on different generations of authors enables a consideration of the historical dynamics of such alternative remembrances, and an engagement of very recent works that have not yet received much scholarly attention.

The region of memory that this chapter traces across the three Southern African countries is constituted through the commonality of mnemonic frameworks through which the shared historical experiences of colonial and apartheid violence, decolonization, and "post-conflict haunting" are mediated. My reading has traced the dynamics of such a memoryscape

from the practices of witnessing and testifying to the violence of decolonization towards the recent articulations of memory that create activist genealogies of tackling coloniality across the periods of resisting colonialism, anti-apartheid struggle, and the contemporary critique of post-transitional/post-independence politics. The examined practices of literature and film are part of the larger societal processes of engaging with past violence and resistance: the literature of witnessing was inherently linked to the projects of truth-telling and reconciliation (institutionalized within the South African TRC and represented by smaller-scale projects in other Southern African countries) while the imaginary of activist genealogies is involved, as I pointed out above, in contemporary protest movements. In both cases, works of literature and film create common tropes and critiques of engaging with the past, and due to their “portability” (Rigney 2004), facilitate regional circulation of these mnemonic practices.

The comparative reading of three acclaimed novels published around the year 2000 demonstrates a series of similarities in their representations of anti-colonial struggle culminating during the periods of transitions and in their immediate aftermath. These include the narratives’ focus on the everyday experiences of male and particularly female protagonists involving the violence of war and military resistance. These representations show how violence entwines “victims” and “perpetrators” into ambiguous relationships and shared traumas. While traumatic tropes prevail in these novels, they also stress the agency of the (women) protagonists and differ in their imaginations of the possibilities for healing and reconciliation.

The narratives of the younger generation re-engage with imaginations of decolonization and transition, but zoom out of the modes of witnessing to create larger, though no less personal, perspectives. What Boehmer observes regarding Putuma’s poetry can be considered as characterizing the *region of memory* in recent Southern African writing and film: these productions “transport [readers] kinesically through and beyond the contested present moment” (2018, 175). In other words, they create frameworks of embodied memory that focus on structural violence and its *longue durée* in the postcolony.

Both the older and newer productions dismantle the imaginations of the end of colonialism and apartheid as moments of nations’ rebirth, when the past can be laid to rest and a reconciled people can begin history anew. Focusing on the present-day experiences of injustice, yet locating their roots in the earlier, colonial periods, Putuma, Chigandzi and Katjavivi’s works displace narratives of deliverance and (extended) transition. In

them, the traumas of decolonization are perceived as traumas of coloniality—of the past relations that reproduce themselves in the present. Based on this vision, they refuse understanding transitions of three decades ago as a radical break. These narratives, thus, posit a perspective *after* the hope for “recovery”, but also *against* the impossibility of hope. Their search for hopefulness involves re-imagining the hidden, previously un-narrated stories of everyday life, survival, and community.

The emerging practices of cultural memory analyzed in this chapter do not only communicate the trauma of (de)colonization but seek to understand the sources of the entire society’s traumatic relationship to both the colonial past and the past of anti-colonial struggle. While the earlier texts, as my reading has shown, elaborate connections to (female) ancestors beyond official memorialization, these newer works radicalize—in decolonial ways—the idea of *timelessness* that comes with such alternative re-assembling of past and present. Explicitly, as in Chigumadzi’s text, or implicitly, they propose conceptions of circular time which defy colonial and Eurocentric linearity in favor of metaphors of permanent movement and regeneration, which also re-imagine the region as a *historically fluid space*. They lend transnational, regional form to what Richard Werbner has referred to as local practices of “popular history in which the past is perceived to be unfinished, festering in the present—[...] the narratives which motivate people to call again and again for a public resolution to their predicament” (1998a, 9).

Acknowledgements I would like to acknowledge the support of the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies in Warsaw and the EURIAS Fellowship Programme of the European Commission (Marie-Sklodowska-Curie Actions—COFUND Programme—FP7) during my research and writing of this chapter.

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