



The Ethics of Reading and Writing across Time in South Africa

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Review Article

The Ethics of Reading and Writing across Time in South Africa

Carli Coetzee, *Written Under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa*, African Articulations series (Woodbridge and Johannesburg, James Currey and Wits University Press, 2019).

Hedley Twidle, *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa*, African Articulations series (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2019).

The Regenerating Library

Carli Coetzee writes that '[t]he library that is continuously renewed is a place where knowledge is reinvigorated for each generation, repurposed from the requirements of the present' (Coetzee, p. 108). Libraries, although not central to the arguments of either book being reviewed here, capture something about the concerns in both. Coetzee's *Written Under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa* and Hedley Twidle's *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa* testify to the importance of the archive for understanding the present through and in relation to the past. Both monographs investigate memory practices, historical relations and the voices given space in texts through time. Crucially, both books highlight how the archive is not static. Libraries, document collections, books and cultural legacies are assembled, interpreted, read and analysed. Coetzee and Twidle's monographs show how vital it is to return to earlier materials to look at them anew, to question our previous understandings of them, to investigate the mnemonic work they perform and to unveil what role they play in relation to new material. At their core, both monographs emphasise the importance of having an archive in the first place and, with that, access to a continuously changing understanding of history in relation to which knowledge can develop.

I write this text shortly after a wildfire burned down the University of Cape Town Library's Jagger Reading Room in April 2021. The destruction of rare materials of utmost importance to South African and African history and culture makes clear the value of access to older materials to know one's past. Libraries bookend *Experiments with Truth*. Twidle begins with the found library – Njabulo Ndebele discovering a hidden crate of his father's books in the mid 1960s, 'a secret archive of non-fiction from southern Africa and beyond' (Twidle, p. vii) – and ends with telling of Ivan Vladislavić's *The Loss Library* and the unfinished and unrealised archive. In between, he touches on 'a dialectic of archival absence and excess' (Twidle, p. 85). The dearth of a library, or of the relevant library, becomes a key point, as both monographs attempt to think through what an ethical relationship towards

South Africa's past and present could look like as processed through writing and reading. Coetzee's words with which I opened this article are written in relation to the burning of artworks during student protests at the University of Cape Town in 2016. She links the idea of the renewing library to Virginia Woolf's notion 'that you must build your college differently' as a place where you '[I]et the pictures and the books be new and always changing. Let it be decorated afresh by each generation with their own hands cheaply' (Coetzee, p. 108). While Coetzee's and Twidle's books show us the ethical implications of a generative approach to the archive, the losses sustained in the Jagger Reading Room fire make clear how important the preservation of past materials is for developing a nuanced understanding of and approach to current questions and issues. 'Burning down' the libraries of the past, so to speak, is to detach current debates from vital elements of the past that have a bearing on today. Instead, the ethical library is one that is continuously built, not on the ashes of the past, but by regenerating, reconstructing and refreshing itself and its relations to its already existing stock.

Animating Coetzee's and Twidle's studies is thus a question of how one crafts ethical relationships to reading the present, the past and memory. Should the past and the present be linked? How should you do this and what happens when you do? How do you understand the present through the past? How is memory transmitted across generations? What roles does the archive play? How can the 'master narratives of the new South African order' (Coetzee, p. 15) be understood and challenged? What roles do the forms and tools of culture and text play in transmitting memory, viewpoints and versions of history? How do the factual and the fictional intermingle? How do we understand contested narratives of the past and the present? How do we ethically and culturally engage with 'unusable pasts'¹ in the heightened present?

In approaching these questions, Coetzee's book offers an embodied reading of multi-directional cultural memory practices in contemporary South African culture. The book is divided into two sections. The first part discusses four historical case studies centred around Nelson Mandela, Eugene de Kock, Ruth First and, finally, Hamilton Naki and Christiaan Barnard, and their relations to the present. The second part embeds its arguments and its readings of cultural and textual artefacts in the 'fallist' movements, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. The governing metaphor throughout the book is that of blood, which is employed to investigate, as Coetzee says in relation to one of her case studies, how 'blood becomes a library and an archive of circulating experience, transmitted generationally' (Coetzee, p. 138).

Twidle's book, on the other hand, is firmly anchored in the textual. He takes on the vast category of 'non-fiction'. Across ten chapters (including an introduction and an afterword), he considers the ethically intricate ways in which real people, places and events are shaped into narratives and how the resulting writings represent and craft a multitude of voices in their struggles with fact and fiction. Twidle himself divides the non-fictional genres that he writes about into three broad categories: literary journalism, the critical essay and life writing (Twidle, p. 3). His chapters are organised according to topic as much as genre, however, with some centred on a historical figure, such as the initial chapters about Demetrios Tsafenda and about Adrian Leftwich and the African Resistance Movement, while some are organised around specific texts or authors, such as the following chapter about Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* and *Askari*. These three chapters also come together under the theme 'literatures of betrayal' (Twidle, p. 95) and generally deal with autobiography. The following two chapters consider biography by means of Ronald Suresh Roberts's *No Cold Kitchen* about Nadine Gordimer and Mark Gevisser's *Thabo Mbeki: The*

1 To use the term that Twidle employs throughout *Experiments with Truth*; see Twidle, p. 14.

Dream Deferred. Twidle then turns to literary journalism, looking at Jonny Steinberg's work, to land finally in a chapter on memoirs and critical essays by the 'born frees', such as Panashe Chigumadzi, Thabo Jijana and Malaika wa Azania. Although Twidle covers a large array of non-fictional forms, he is, as he puts it, 'ultimately more interested in those works that seem to be in flight from, or writing their way out of, recognisable templates' (Twidle, p. 3).

In discussing Coetzee and Twidle's books, I focus on questions of ethics, memory, the past in relation to the present, and literary form; these concerns crosscut the two monographs. First, I discuss questions of time and how Coetzee and Twidle focus on reading the past, present and future. Then I contemplate the relation of time to memory and how remembering and mnemonic practices form a core in current South African scholarship. I move on to consider the question of form and genre, central to much current scholarship on African literature and culture. Lastly, I consider how a sense of history, memory and form are crucial for the ethical reading practices that both Coetzee and Twidle outline.

A Thickened Present

After steadfastly facing the future in the immediate aftermath of apartheid, South African discussion has turned back towards the past. This is not a simple relationship of nostalgia towards or rejection of the past. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission might be said to have attempted to facilitate a relationship to the past where grievances were expressed and could hence be put to rest, the current moment is attuned to the unresolved tensions of the past that linger in the present. Scholarship has conceptualised the current moment in relation to 'bad feelings' such as disappointment,² derailment and 'plot loss'.³ Andrew van der Vlies expresses the entanglement of feelings and time as follows: '[v]arieties of disappointment and the dysphoric feelings associated therewith thus have a past in South Africa; all involve feeling trapped in an imperfect present that is not as the future was imagined, a present beyond which it might be a struggle to see'.⁴ Issues hotly debated in the 21st century, such as land restitution, reparative justice and the 'fallist' movements, which started in 2015 on South African university campuses – #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall – have shed light on how the present is still mired in the injustices of the past, but also how the present is shaping injustices of the future through, for example, exclusionary tuition fees and poor working conditions for support staff at universities.

Coetzee and Twidle both examine the temporal conditions that South African cultural production is held up in and expresses. Through detailed readings of specific case studies, they demonstrate both how contemporary literature and art develop out of and are attached to older forms and how they engage in ambivalent ways with history, memory and the past. Analyses and discussions often circle around and even get stuck in old, well-worn tropes and metaphors. Twidle makes the point that 'what one is often left with is South African history and apartheid as a stock of all-too-familiar and overused signs' (Twidle, p. 22). Coetzee characterises '[t]he tropes through which South Africa has often been read', such as 'transformation, emergence, entanglement, reconciliation', as those which are read 'diagnostically in search of a cure' (Coetzee, p. ix). To counteract these tropes, the meaning of which risks stagnating and their explanatory power therefore risks being sapped, Coetzee

2 A. van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), p. vii.

3 L. de Kock, *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction in Postapartheid Writing* (Johannesburg, Wits UP, 2016), p. 3.

4 Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, p. viii.

advocates ‘vigilant, careful and ethical reading practices that break the skin to extract history-rich bloods through which to interpret the present’ (Coetzee, p. ix). Twidle, similarly, describes the underlying goal of the ‘historical impulse’ as to ‘thicken a sense of the South African past’ (Twidle, p. 23). The point is thus not to dig into the past for the sake of digging but to unearth the past for the benefit of the present.

Both authors turn against a tendency in post-apartheid South African social, intellectual and literary debate to speak of newness and ‘born-frees’, but also of the denial and the one-sided understandings of the past. What Coetzee and Twidle in their different ways instead aim to do is to ‘thicken’ or ‘enrich’ an engagement with the past, which also, vitally, will thicken or enrich our comprehension of the present. In this way, they enter an ongoing conversation that has increasingly challenged the newness of post-apartheid writing’s break with the past. As Leon de Kock points out in his analysis of post-apartheid writing, ‘a significant section of postapartheid literature finds itself less liberated from the past than engaged in the persistent re-emergence of this past’.⁵ This means that, while the tropes and the ‘all-too-familiar and overused signs’ might need nuancing and adding to, they should not be completely discarded either (Twidle, p. 22). Current cultural exploration cannot be detached from previous cultural expression. Coetzee and Twidle thus examine past writings in relation to present ones, how the past features thematically in writing and how culture draws on, continues and remodels the past and its tropes and forms.

While this has been done before, the most compelling aspects of Twidle’s work are those that deal with that he calls ‘unusable pasts’ (Twidle, p. 14) and ‘ugly feelings’ (Twidle, p. 199).⁶ One way in which Twidle’s study ‘thickens’ the past, and thus the present, is to ask what we do with pasts that do not fit comfortably into old narratives of apartheid repression and resistance, and thus post-apartheid truth and reconciliation. How can writing represent and understand those figures, like Demetrios Tsafendas or Adrian Leftwich, who cannot be neatly incorporated into the stories we tell about what has happened, who we are now and what is to come? Twidle shows how non-fiction has wrestled creatively with these figures by presenting the past as uncomfortable, unclear, unrecognisable and unstable. This leads ultimately to the creation of an estrangement of the past (Twidle, p. 22), where ‘histories that cannot be made to perform a simple or immediately recognisable political gesture’ make the reader question too easy truths (Twidle, p. 14). Reading contemporary non-fiction in relation to and parallel with earlier 20th-century non-fictional writing allows Twidle to trace lines of inheritance but also of change and avoidance. Twidle’s enterprise of meticulously reading historical and contemporary canonical and influential non-fictional writings allows us to catch hold of how the subjects portrayed and the subjects portraying themselves are often ‘not in step with official timescales or metaphors of societal transformation’ (Twidle, p. 211). Nevertheless, these reading practices also show that writing in South Africa might have a hard time escaping, as Twidle puts it, the ‘script of pre-determined cultural types, or the epistemic damage caused by a racialised history of knowledge-making’ (Twidle, p. 182). Emerging from Twidle’s careful readings across time is the insight that any claimed post-apartheid break with the past is far from clean, that engagement with uncomfortable and seemingly unusable pasts allows us a richer sense of both past and present and, finally, that any claim to ‘newness and rupture in many ways reprises episodes from the South African past’ (Twidle, p. 199), a claim that Coetzee substantiates richly in her work.

The controlling metaphor of Coetzee’s work is that of blood, which she employs especially through the expression ‘history-rich bloods’ (Coetzee, p. ix), calling for a ‘blood-rich or even en-blooded reading’ (Coetzee, p. 114). The meaning and significance of these

⁵ De Kock, *Losing the Plot*, p. 58.

⁶ ‘Ugly feelings’ is a phrase that Twidle borrows from Sianne Ngai.

metaphors in relation to temporality and history become clearest in her discussion of the trope of ‘emergence’. Like Twidle, Coetzee opposes the idea that certain strands of post-apartheid cultural production are understood as fundamentally new, presenting a radical rupture with the past and emerging only now, in the post- or even post-post-apartheid period. Instead, she argues for understanding the ‘bloodlines’ in which culture is produced. She points out that specifically black 21st-century South African writers, such as Thando Mgqolozana and Kopano Matlwa, have been read as ‘new’ or ‘emerging’, in essence placing them in a timeless vacuum. Doing this ‘deletes the contextual and historical bloodlines’ of these works (Coetzee, p. 122). Placing her own argument in relation to previous work by Grace Musila, Coetzee astutely points out that ‘a sense of “newness” sometimes does not confirm the absence of precursors or ancestor texts, but instead merely confirms a reader’s inability to imagine or provide a certain social or literary context for a work’ (Coetzee, p. 123). She turns to the Abantu Book Festival, which took place in Soweto Theatre on 6–10 December 2016, as an instance where ‘writers and intellectuals were consciously inscribed into, and read against and alongside, existing and *long-heard* voices’ (Coetzee, p. 122). By seeing, acknowledging and reading the bloodlines of cultural and intellectual work, new writing is brought into the ongoing formation of an archive that lays claim to history, going backwards but also going forwards.⁷

This brings us to a key concern underlying both Twidle’s and Coetzee’s investigations, which asks, as Twidle puts it, ‘[w]hat is at stake in such linkings of past and present? And to what extent should they be indulged or resisted?’ (Twidle, p. 22). Twidle’s and Coetzee’s projects could be described in the terms that Australian environmental and anthropology scholar Deborah Bird Rose used for her work of investigating an ethics for decolonisation: ‘[r]ecuperative histories and ethnographies are not aimed towards dialectic opposition or overcoming; rather they trawl the past and the present, searching out the hidden histories and the local possibilities that illuminate alternatives to our embeddedness in violence’.⁸ A part of this type of practice, which is made visible by Coetzee, is to be continuously ‘re-testing and re-editing the events and the documents we think we already know’ (Coetzee, p. 79). The purpose is, thus, not simply to unearth the past so that we can move forward but to explore the uneven textures of the past and how they relate to the present, to received knowledge and to future knowing. Drawing on Rose’s ideas of decolonial thinking allows us to make it clear that ‘there is no former time/space of wholeness to which we might return or which we might resurrect for ourselves [...] Nor is there a posited future wholeness which may yet save us. Rather, the work of recuperation seeks glimpses of illumination, and aims towards engagement and disclosure’.⁹ Similarly, a key point for both Coetzee and Twidle is that timelines do not have a clear start and end point, following a forward motion. In their engagements with the past, the present is ‘thickened’ rather than revealed. This thickening happens through recognising the contradictory histories and perspectives of the past, where lives are unexpectedly and ambiguously brought together.

Mnemonic Lines

Archival procedures and issues of temporality are linked in the mnemonic lines explored by Twidle and Coetzee. How does attention to mnemonic traces change how we read literary and cultural works? What memories are passed on in literary and cultural practices that are attuned to past events in relation to current ones? How is individual and collective memory shaped by archives changing over time? While Twidle is mostly indirectly concerned with

⁷ Coetzee, *Written Under the Skin*, p. 123.

⁸ D.B. Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney, UNSW Press, 2004), p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*

mnemonic practices, Coetzee deliberately anchors her work in theories of intergenerational cultural memory; however, both monographs make following mnemonic lines central to their ethical reading practices. Questions of memory strike at some of the burning points of South African intellectual debate, such as the relations between individual and collective identity, what collectives are shaped by memory practices, whose memories are brought to the fore, and how generations relate to each other.

The past and the present, the individual and the collective, remembrance and forgetting can be linked through the notion of inheritance. Twidle's and Coetzee's work shines a light on the role of inheritance in South African cultural production mainly through two perspectives. On the one hand, they argue for the importance of considering contemporary writing and cultural work in the light of past efforts. Coetzee's resistance to certain interpretations of the concept of 'emergence' makes clear how the recognition of the inheritance of past forms, content and concerns becomes an ethical matter of performing memory practices that can lead to a deep contextualisation. Equally, central to Twidle's ethical reading practices is to consider what he calls 'unpredictable, uneasy or even "mostly useless" literary inheritances' (Twidle, p. viii). Twidle, thus, encourages us not to turn a blind eye to matters that perhaps fit uncomfortably with current ideas of intellectual and cultural engagement, and to understand how the category of non-fiction can allow for explorations of complex allegiances and representations. On the other hand, inheritance is brought to the fore in relation to concerns of memory, trauma, witnessing and testimony. Twidle shows through careful readings how formal matters such as point of view, narrator and voice affect the memory work that non-fictional writing can perform through genres such as autobiography, memoir and biography. Coetzee takes the argument one step further and follows what she calls 'bloodlines' across generations, considering primarily how current generations engage in memory work with past generations through a variety of cultural practices from literary writing, photography and literary festivals, but also, in her own words, how 'the gains and transfers are [...] distributed up and down the bloodlines in a mutually interactive generation and regeneration of knowledge' (Coetzee, p. ix).

This focus on the multi-directional generational flow of memory is perhaps the most challenging to follow in Coetzee's argument. As developed by Michael Rothberg, multi-directional memory aims to show how collectives' memories can be entangled despite seemingly separate histories and how groups can articulate their own narratives in relation to those articulated by other groups; in other words, how memory can be 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing'.¹⁰ To some extent, there is a temporal component to this argument, as present ideas shape how we read the past, and past discourse influences today's discourse; but chiefly this is a cross-cultural argument. Coetzee seems to introduce an aspect of cross-generational flow to the concept. The links between past trauma and present lives clearly show, as Coetzee argues with the help of Gabriele Schwab, that the 'born-free' generation should be read as the 'skilled-reader' generation, who are not 'passively blank pages' but 'skilled readers of that which is written in the blood – of their parents' but also of their own bodies' (Coetzee, pp. 5, 114). Coetzee's 'bloodlines' allow us to see how trauma and memory are passed on, used, changed, transformed and challenged. Additionally, she argues – and this is important – that a regime of care for the self and the other can be articulated because of the remembrance of these bloodlines and the memories that have been transmitted, and care can thus be passed along the bloodlines 'up and down' (Coetzee, p. 139). What exactly 'up' the bloodlines entails is not entirely clear. Is Coetzee talking about living generations or is she intending a transfer further back in time? If so,

10 M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

how does she envisage that memory work and resulting care can be directed towards the past? Nevertheless, the intergenerational collaboration, ‘even if this work is disturbing, unpleasant or troubling’ (Coetzee, p. 6), that Coetzee calls for is important. Rothberg speaks of a ‘multidirectional sensibility’, which he sees as a ‘tendency to see history as relational and as woven from similar, but not identical, fabrics’;¹¹ multidirectional cultural memory can ‘create arenas where injustices are recognised and new frameworks are imagined that are necessary, if not sufficient, for their redress’.¹² In this, Coetzee sees the potential for a framework of care.

Reading Twidle adds an interesting complication to the idea of multi-directional memory practices that could bring about an ethics of care. Twidle notes that a ‘recurring problematic’ of South African narrative non-fiction is ‘the difficulties and incipient betrayals that attend the transfer of information held in trust across certain social, racial or linguistic boundaries’ (Twidle, p. 75). Twidle asks who the information detailed and relayed in non-fictional writing is for and who the narrator and the author are – in short, who is representing what and whom – for whose consumption? But also, how does holding back certain information and not stepping over certain boundaries or, conversely, actually crossing those lines, affect narrative voice, the bounds of truth-telling and the intimate relation with the reader? Analysing Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009), Twidle remarks that, for some of his students reading the book, ‘it represents an experiment in cultural translation too risky for the post-transitional context’ (Twidle, p. 78). Twidle, though, hooks on to precisely the risk taken with the experiment of transfer and translation of information and memory performed through a generically unstable and speculative text as something that can productively layer an understanding of the South African past and present as ambiguous and multi-faceted. Perhaps these kinds of texts are affecting a kind of care precisely by taking risks and attempting to ‘narrate how the death of apartheid was not a punctual event, but an on-going, uneven social process [...] that will reach across generations’ (Twidle, p. 96). The taking of risks means that failure of translation is also a possibility. With the help of Johnny Steinberg’s works in his South African trilogy,¹³ Twidle remarks on the risk of the ‘narrator as “a kind of confidence man,” dealing too intimately and overpoweringly in the lives of others, the latter seduced by a quality of attention and analysis that will always partly demean him’ (Twidle, p. 182). The complexity in cultural work illustrated by both Twidle and Coetzee enables a multi-directionality that Rothberg highlights to question the link between collective memory and group identity.¹⁴ Still, the questions to keep in mind, as Coetzee reminds us, are ‘why one might wish to break the skin to extract the blood in the first place, for whose benefit the blood is extracted, and where the bloods will go’ (Coetzee, p. ix). Reading South African culture contextually, we need to think about our motives in reading archives and mnemonic lines, who are we who do it, for what purposes we do it and for whom.

Blood as the controlling metaphor in Coetzee’s work is an efficient way of catching hold of gendered embodied memory. Coetzee argues that ‘[t]raumatic memories that remain silent are carried in and on the body, somatically writing the disavowed past’ (Coetzee, p. 5). But the metaphor gains its clearest actualisation when it focuses on period blood, particularly in the analysis of Kopano Matlwa’s book *Period Pain* and Zanele Muholi’s

11 M. Rothberg, ‘From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory’, *Criticism*, 53, 4 (2011), p. 528.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 538.

13 J. Steinberg, *Midlands* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2002); J. Steinberg, *The Number: One Man’s Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2004); J. Steinberg, *Three-Letter Plague: A Young Man’s Journey through a Great Epidemic* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2008).

14 Rothberg, ‘From Gaza to Warsaw’, p. 524.

photographic series *Isilumo Siyaluma* ('Period Pain'), and on childbirth in Makhosazana Xaba's story 'Midwives, Mothers, Memories'. Elsewhere in *Written Under the Skin*, the metaphor of blood can at times strain when the cultural artefact investigated has no relation to blood, and the metaphor is somewhat shoehorned into the analysis to fit the book's general theme. Here blood is an explicit theme in the texts and the artworks, in which the 'en-blooded' reading method makes obvious sense. Linking the literal connection between generations through period blood and childbirth to the metaphorical connection between generations through shared or inherited blood becomes particularly potent in enlightening how memories can become embodied and make visible a gendered materiality of memory. Coetzee, importantly, makes clear how this gendering is not limited to female bodies when she discusses male circumcision, blood and inheritance. The bond between the private nature of period blood and circumcision and their public significance in relation to control of bodies, procreation, family and collectivity and, thus, a passing on of tradition and meaning, makes clear the centrality of gendered materiality regimes of memory-making. The analysis of Xaba's story also, interestingly, joins the written paper archive to the blood archive through meditations on medical notes of childbirth to reflect on how memory is transmitted through materials (Coetzee, p. 141). Here, Twidle's various analyses of non-fiction that uses apartheid government records remind us of the abusive power that can be vested in the written archive. Coetzee acknowledges that 'blood'-readings can be incorporated into a database; part of an ethical reading project is to document 'routes of circulation' (Coetzee, p. x). Ultimately, Coetzee's focus on gendered embodied memory leads her to the insight that tracing intergenerational connections can foster a regime of care, for one's own body and for those that come before and after. However, the focus on blood easily leads one to think in terms of biology and genetics, and what happens then to families that are found and made?

The centrality of women's bodies to understanding Coetzee's argument shows that gender and embodied matters are not peripheral or complementary issues to be treated in an isolated argument or chapter, but central to ethical reading practices. The lack of attention to gender and to embodiment and materiality is, therefore, a weak spot in Twidle's analysis. In discussing topics that did not make it into the final monograph, Twidle argues that he is not the person to write the chapter that he envisaged in his book as 'Daughters of struggle' (Twidle, p. 218). As his own three-page outline of the imagined chapter shows, there is much important work by female, especially black female, writers of non-fiction both contemporary and historical in South African letters. The idea of sequestering this work to a special chapter instead of incorporating it into the book in general lessens the nuance that could be achieved in the monograph as a whole (and perpetuates the treatment of women writers as peripheral to male writers). The idea to exclude this work entirely, however, leads to a much bigger problem, where the figure of South African non-fiction that Twidle draws starts limping as an entire limb is missing. Twidle himself explains that his book has argued 'against limiting versions of identity and identitarian politics' and 'question[ed] those forms of cultural policing which seek to decree [...] who can write about what, and how' (Twidle, p. 220). Nevertheless, he says that 'my attempt to engage Black feminist life writing showed me that there are limits to what can be technically accomplished', and he 'was simply not the person to write it' (Twidle, p. 221). Although we should be aware of the position from which we write, as long argued by standpoint theory, this does not mean we should not write, as the damage from exclusion can be far worse than a careful acknowledgement of one's position in approaching certain material. As it is, while Coetzee shows how black women's writing is central to formulating ethical reading practices in contemporary South Africa, this material and the perspectives it would bring are to some degree absent from Twidle's work.

These comments on ‘missing’ material prompt a more general question of whether the two books under consideration can be said to under-discuss certain topics. What is largely missing from both accounts of mnemonic lines is the pre-apartheid perspective. Like much scholarship on South African literature, literature and culture produced before 1948 is either omitted or kept to a mention of canonical texts such as Solomon Tkehisho Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa* (1916). Mnemonic lines can productively be traced further back and will add an even richer understanding to genres, tropes and perspectives used in culture today. It is, of course, difficult for one scholar to cover a whole century, and both Coetzee and Twidle already bring up a rich array of examples, especially Twidle, whose work rises to the encyclopaedic at times. But, for an ethical reading practice, not drawing the line at 1948 is important. Pumla Dineo Gqola’s *What is Slavery to Me?: Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-apartheid South Africa* (2010) or Lucy Graham’s *State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature* (2012) are examples of works that manage to consider such ‘long’ mnemonic lines.

The Ethics of Form

Scholarship on form of various kinds in African and South African writing has been flourishing recently, with texts on everything from the novel, print cultures and genre to digital writing.¹⁵ Twidle’s study puts form front and centre with its claim to be the first book-length study to take on South African narrative non-fiction. Formal matters are closely linked with topics touched on so far, as some genres and some narrative techniques lend themselves more naturally to exploration of the present in relation to memory and the past. Non-fiction seems particularly closely linked to questions of ethics, considering its relation to fact, to the telling of the author’s and others’ stories and to its documentary and reporting possibilities. In fact, it is non-fiction’s relation to truth and the telling of self and others that Twidle homes in on when he justifies his focus on this genre. Drawing on de Kock’s work in *Losing the Plot*, Twidle sees a ‘double imperative’ in what he calls literary or creative non-fiction, in which there is a ‘balancing of a fierce will-to-truth with an awareness of the endless human capacity for revision, self-delusion and error’ (Twidle, p. xi). Non-fiction becomes a genre with a ‘communicative passion or compulsion to make sense of a fractured country’ (Twidle, p. x). That sounds like a type of text that might impose a unitary vision, but Twidle’s attention to precisely the ‘double imperative’ reveals the contradictory and self-critical nature of many of these texts, and thus their potential capacity for a complex consideration of their topics. For Twidle, then, working with non-fiction allows us to question ‘whether working narrations of social relations are believable, whether they are just, whether the fictions that we live by are conducive to psychic health and open to change’ (Twidle, p. xii).

Twidle analyses a wide range of non-fiction in relation to the ability of their narrative practices to tell complex or challenging stories about South African social, cultural and political life. The narrative perspectives and voices, the documentary practices, the use of witnesses and witnessing and of memory are all variously tied to the affordances of genres such as autobiography, biography, memoir and narrative journalism. While Twidle’s work

15 To mention just a few examples, S. Adenekan *African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing from Nigeria and Kenya* (Woolbridge and Rochester, James Currey, 2021); A. Harris *Afropolitanism and the Novel: De-realizing Africa* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2020); M. Wa Ngugi *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2018); T. Jaji and L. Saint (eds), ‘Genre in Africa’, special issue of *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 4, 2 (2017); D.R. Peterson, E. Hunter and S. Newell (eds), *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2016).

considers the concerns that these generic qualities give rise to, he particularly concentrates on the non-fiction that in various ways breaks with more strictly representational modes, as he claims that, in many of the texts he looks at, there emerges ‘a documentary poetics able to access histories and structures of feeling not easily available to more literal or directly representational modes’ (Twidle, p. 214). Instead, Twidle argues, perhaps a bit provocatively, that when non-fiction experiments with perspective, representation, voice and character, and with – as his title borrowed from Mohandas Gandhi’s autobiography indicates – truth, then a more complicated, nuanced, challenging and perhaps interesting ‘truth’ can be reached. He particularly turns against what he sees as a tendency for non-fiction to, at times in South Africa’s charged intellectual landscape, ‘self-consciously brandish (or wring hands over) their “subject position”’ or to see documentary ethics as ‘simply placing an author in a classificatory system’ (Twidle, p. 220). These responses, he argues, might be ‘less adequate responses to the challenges than those works which take up such crucial questions of representation in less explicit but more considered ways, routing them through a matrix of voice, style, plotting and narrative construction across the *longue durée* of a book’ (Twidle, p. 220). The manner in which form can allow for and shape representation is thus a central concern.

A pertinent question raised by reading Twidle is whether well-established forms need to be broken for ethical writing practices to emerge or if following formal conventions can allow for such writing. Twidle’s response seems to lean towards a preference for formal experimentation; in his own words, his interest lies in ‘those works that seem to be in flight from, or writing their way out of, recognisable templates and preestablished narrative modes’ (Twidle, p. 3). Coetzee seems to make a similar point when she draws out, from Lynda Gichanda Spencer’s argument about the novel genre, that ‘genre innovation’ can be seen as ‘in itself an activist form’ (Coetzee, p. 129). This kind of thinking is outlined by Tsitsi Jaji and Lily Saint in a 2017 special issue on genre in Africa (also referenced by Coetzee), where they explain it as follows: ‘[t]he literary as we understand it operating on the African continent is a field of play where difference is deployed strategically to push against fixed categories of analysis’.¹⁶ On the other hand, they also put forward the idea that ‘many writers find genre conventions the most appealing frames through which to write agonistically, subversively, and promiscuously’.¹⁷ Coetzee’s analysis of *Period Pain* as a self-help book illustrates how understanding literary texts in relation to conventions of popular genres can aid an ethical reading practice, as self-help books construct the self through writing and reading and imagines ‘protocols for better forms of care’ (Coetzee, p. 137).

These questions of adherence and breaking with form and genre bring us back to the previous points about literary inheritance. While a writer – and a reader – needs to be wary about mindless repetition of established truths, the inheritance of forms and conventions matter and can be drawn upon to make deeply contextualised art. Jaji and Saint point out that ‘it is often possible to read backwards from a contemporary popular form to its local antecedents and to discover that such genealogies yield rich insights into earlier forms previously studied in different terms’.¹⁸ They might also yield a deepening insight into current form and its usage.

In that vein, it is interesting to note that both Coetzee and Twidle speak of the archive when they try to describe the materials that their studies are engaging. Twidle talks of his book consisting of ‘unexpected encounters with the archive’ (Twidle, p. viii). Coetzee writes

16 T. Jaji and L. Saint, ‘Introduction: Genre in Africa’, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 4, 2 (2017), p. 154.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

that she is investigating ‘the existent archive’ (Coetzee, p. 15) and the ‘archives of the emergent present’ (Coetzee, p. 14). Coetzee, in particular, frames the wide range of materials that she engages – from novels, autobiographical writings, tweets, film, activist events, performance art, photography, to a literary festival – not only as individual forms or genres but as belonging to archives. Framing her material as ‘archives’ highlights both the timelines of her materials – that they are part of a past, present and future – and the idea that they coexist with each other and other materials; something that is part of an archive does not exist in isolation, spatial or temporal. The potential ethical implications of this mindset become apparent when seemingly disparate types of texts are placed in relation to each other as part of a larger whole, such as in Coetzee’s statement that ‘I link the novels and other writings to medical and literary forms of activism’ (Coetzee, p. 15). Using the book’s metaphor of blood, Coetzee frames the selections of materials that she makes as specific ‘scene[s] of the test event’ (Coetzee, p. 13). The suggestion of the ‘test event’ metaphor is that every individual piece of material that she looks at is a sample taken from a larger body of work, an archive already there. Of course, by choosing some texts and bringing them into contact with others, the archive is being made and remade.

‘Ethical Protocols’

Writing in 2018 about ethics in South Africa after apartheid, Lily Saint brings up the 2012 Marikana massacre, where 34 miners were shot at the Lonmin platinum mines by the South African Police Service, and the 2008 xenophobic violence that led to the death of more than 60 migrants from mainly Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as two great failures of ‘ethical relation’.¹⁹ She argues that, while, during apartheid, ethics had to take a back seat to politics in much writing, post-apartheid black writing has seen a shift towards a focus on ethical concerns.²⁰ Such a focus ‘provides a mode for ongoing sustained life that is not only a form of survival but also an avenue for finding love among the ruins’.²¹ Indirectly, she thus suggests that a focus on ethics can be a method for reparative relations in contemporary culture.

Ultimately, what makes it interesting to bring Coetzee and Twidle’s monographs into dialogue with each other is their approach to contemporary South African cultural and intellectual discourse through ethical reading and writing practices. Ethical reading and writing procedures are at the core of both their attempts to articulate a stance towards South African cultural debate following the ‘fallist’ movements. As Coetzee puts it, she is concerned with figuring out ‘the ethical protocols required in order to read the bloods of the present’ (Coetzee, p. 133). The approach that both settle on, in their different ways, is, as has been explored in this article, the idea of the importance of a more nuanced grappling with the past. It is not enough to fall back on well-established understandings of oppression and resistance, of newness and a past that is acknowledged and then left behind, or of a repetition of tropes. Both advocate digging into uncomfortable aspects of the South African past that might not fit neatly into pre-imagined categories. A focus on ‘newness’ is in danger of ignoring ‘contextual and historical bloodlines’ (Coetzee, p. 122), which risks a repetition of ‘episodes from the South African past’ (Twidle, p. 199). Twidle highlights how various non-fiction genres seem to be particularly well positioned to unearth and establish links to the past in the current South African context, while Coetzee shows how a new generation of cultural practitioners in South Africa take on the work of getting their hands dirty as a means

19 L. Saint, *Black Cultural Life in South Africa: Reception, Apartheid, and Ethics* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 145–9; the quote can be found on p. 147.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 147–8.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

of connecting to past generations and their inheritance and thus developing a care-regime. To return to the image of the library with which I started this review article, Coetzee's main point can be expressed in her words: '[t]o read the present like this, one cannot sit in the clear library; one needs instead to build the library that surges with ancestral blood, reinterpreted for a new generation' (Coetzee, p. 114). Importantly, this does not mean an indiscriminate digging into the past but an awareness and wariness of who is doing the digging and for what purposes. It is also useful to pose the question of whether the past and the present should be linked and what is gained there in each individual case.

Who gets to represent, speak for or analyse whom has always been a hyper-charged question in South Africa's racialised and colonial history. Twidle's exploration of point of view, narration and testimony in biography and narrative journalism, in particular, illustrates how tense and difficult these questions are, as does his own decision not to include in his study his envisaged chapter on non-fiction by black female writers. The idea of multi-directionality as articulated by Rothberg might be helpful here, as he proposes that the concept can foster an 'ethics of comparison that can distinguish politically productive forms of memory from those that lead to competition, appropriation, or trivialization'.²² It is precisely a form of comparison, which allows for contextualisation, intergenerational and intercultural understanding and a respect for the strangeness of the past, that lies at the heart of both Coetzee's and Twidle's reading strategies, with which one can attempt to counteract a competitive, pre-rehearsed or static understanding of cultural artefacts and texts that engage complexly with the present and the past. Recall Rose's point that '[r]ecuperative histories and ethnographies are not aimed towards dialectic opposition or overcoming'²³ – overdetermined categorisations, which easily spill over into those described by apartheid ideology, and 'truth and reconciliation' are not carefully productive ways to engage with each other in the present. Instead, the outcomes of Coetzee's and Twidle's studies would encourage us to listen to Rose's invitation to 'trawl the past and the present, searching out the hidden histories and the local possibilities that illuminate alternatives to our embeddedness in violence'.²⁴

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²² Rothberg, 'From Gaza to Warsaw', p. 525.

²³ Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*