

Reception: texts, readers, audiences, history

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MICHAEL ALI: “*There are certain things people do not forgive, or forget. Rape is one of them. A crass, banal statement. Who are the ‘people’ who do not forget or forgive? The raped? The children of rape?*” (*Bitter Fruit* 205).

LYDIA ALI: “Only women, wombed beings, can carry the dumb tragedy of history around with them. History is a donkey’s arse . . . Hand Silas his heritage, say something short but profound, kiss him on the cheek, then walk away, free of him and his burdensome past” (*Bitter Fruit* 251).

SILAS ALI: “He was not capable of such an ordeal, he acknowledged. It would require an immersion in words he was not familiar with, words that did not seek to blur memory, to lessen the pain, but to sharpen all of these things” (*Bitter Fruit* 63).

Katherine Mack, “Public Memory as Contested Receptions of the Past”

When does the past become past? What of the past should be remembered and what forgotten? Who has the right or obligation to remember or forget? Whom does such remembrance and forgetting serve? As demonstrated by the epigraphs above, these remain unsettled questions for the characters of Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001), one of a host of post-apartheid novels that addresses the complex dynamic of remembering and forgetting in transitional South Africa. Set during “a twilight period, an interregnum between the old century and the new” (255), *Bitter Fruit* bears witness to the myriad ways that South Africans grapple with the legacy of apartheid and an uncertain future. These characters’ reflections

reveal what might appear to be a paradoxical trend, one that historian Jean Comaroff describes as a simultaneous desire “to put history behind” and to engage in “fresh forms of public recollection” (127). In their most generative expression, however, remembrance and forgetting are mutually constitutive, not antithetical: “Acts of forgetting make possible new memories” (Vivian 117). Though he derides the impulse to remember as he indulges it, Michael, the “bitter fruit” of an apartheid-era rape, acknowledges that “he can no longer think of the future without confronting his past” (131). Lydia, Michael’s mother, resents both her husband Silas’s and the state’s attempts to make her bear the “burden” of a past that she neither wants, nor feels is truly past, and towards which she seeks to establish a productively forgetful relationship. Silas, Lydia’s husband and the liaison between the South African government and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), vacillates between desiring a frank encounter with the past and one that is muffled and obfuscating, ultimately producing a form of willed amnesia. Each grapples with remembrance and forgetting in a country wherein ‘dealing with the past,’ most obviously through the mechanism of the TRC, has become a cultural preoccupation.

This essay draws upon the complexities and debates about remembrance and forgetting in the ‘new’ South Africa to introduce scholars of reception to the interdisciplinary field of public memory. I suggest that two characteristics

distinguish public memory from other forms of memory: ‘circulation’ and ‘engagement amongst interpreters.’ These characteristics place public memory within the ambit of reception studies, as remembers continually receive and interpret the past across time and genres ranging from the instrumental to the aesthetic. To demonstrate how public memory might function as a generative analytic for scholars of reception, I examine a chain of remembrance, one comprised of an institutional reception of South Africa’s apartheid past, the TRC, and Achmat Dangor’s novelistic reception of that past and the TRC itself, *Bitter Fruit*.

Reception: the Distinguishing Characteristic of Public Memory

Reception and memory scholars both assume the presentism and trivalent temporality of their objects of study. Historian Pierre Nora, for example, observes that “memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present” (14). Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argues similarly that those aspects of the past that rememberers deem unimportant in the present will cease to be remembered (78). In short, the meaning of the past does not inhere in the events themselves, but rather in the desires of memory-makers who are motivated by contemporary concerns and whose imaginaries reflect the contours of their “horizon of expectation” (Jauss 8). While memories, like textual receptions, are presentist in orientation, their temporality is trivalent. Reception scholar Jonathan

Frow describes the production of a text as a “present act launched into an open future, and a working of the past as it is intertextually figured” (20). Literary theorist Mieke Bal describes cultural memory in similarly Janus-faced terms as “an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (vii). For reception scholars, recognition of this trivalent temporality deepens understanding of the “historicity” of the text (Frow 20). For memory scholars, this recognition focuses attention on the insistent ‘presentism’ of remembrance despite its ostensive focus on the past—the fact that present-day and future concerns motivate rememberers’ recall of the past.

To call attention to the particular characteristics of public memory that distinguish it from other forms of memory and relate it to reception studies—circulation and ‘engagement amongst rememberers’—I draw on Michael Warner’s understanding of publics. Warner argues that publics result from the reflexive circulation of discourse amongst strangers (74-6), what he describes as the “mere fact of uptake,” rather than from “members’ categorical classification, objectively determined position in the social structure, or material existence” (87-8).

Accordingly, public memory is not *the* memory of *a* given group of individuals, a description better suited for cultural or collective memory, but rather an activity characterized by strangers’ ongoing engagement with—or, in the discourse of

reception studies, receptions of—the past. Put simply, individuals or groups do not simply *have* public memory; they *do* public memory. Their “uptake” of the past, be it conscious or unconscious, contentious or harmonious, unifying or divisive, constitutes them as a contingent public (Warner 87). Communal remembrance thus becomes “a crucial aspect of our togetherness” (Phillips 4). Whether rememberers are conscious of the motivations behind their “uptake” of the past matters not. Their “uptake” places their remembrance into circulation, making it available for others to critique, endorse, or ignore, in which case—that is, the case of no subsequent “uptake”—the remembrance would cease to be public. In this conception of public memory, memories, like texts, are “not a discrete datum” (Frow 25). Public memory becomes, like one “object” of reception study, an “open-ended chain of reception . . . a trajectory without goal” (Frow 20). This concern with ongoing and contentious engagement with the past dislodges public memory from any one domain, be it that of public historians, museum curators, or government officials, or any one genre—a history textbook, exhibition, or official state report.

This definitional claim about public memory has methodological implications. If public memory consists of a series of receptions and engagement about the past, rather than a static, communally held memory, the analysis must track its evolution, not seek to describe its contents. Rather than seeking memories’

essential meaning, form, or beginning, then, scholars track their “uptake” and evolution across time and genre. Rhetorical hermeneutics, a form of reception study, provides one way of doing so. Rhetorical hermeneutics “is a form of cultural rhetoric studies that takes as its topic specific historical acts of interpretation within their cultural contexts” (Mailloux 56). When those “acts of interpretation” address the past, we can consider them to be memories. Importantly, rhetorical hermeneutics concerns not only the interpreter’s relationship to a text, but also the relationships amongst interpreters. Indeed, “for rhetorical hermeneutics, these two problems are ultimately inseparable” (Mailloux 50). James Young’s “art of public memory” lays the groundwork for a notion of public memory that encompasses the relationships amongst rememberers. For Young, the art of public memory “includes the activity that brought [the memorials] into being, the constant give and take between memorials and viewers, and finally the responses of viewers to their own world in light of a memorialized past—the consequences of memory” (ix). I propose the addition of a fourth component to Young’s “art of public memory”: the engagement amongst rememberers. For, rememberers do not stand alone: they respond to the ways that others have framed and made sense of the past. Like the interpreters of rhetorical hermeneutics, they enter an ongoing “cultural conversation” (Mailloux 54), one that shapes their “uptake” of the past

and whose “uptake” will in turn influence subsequent recollections and the present-day uses to which those recollections are put (Warner 87).

Remembrance of the sexual violence of apartheid

To exemplify this notion of public memory, I analyze a chain of remembrances of the sexual violence experienced by women during apartheid. More specifically, I examine three receptions of this violence: the initial charge of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the special “Women’s Hearings” of the TRC, and Achmat Dangor’s novel, *Bitter Fruit*. *Bitter Fruit* engages with the past events concerning female victims of sexual violence and with the TRC’s engagement of that past. In keeping with the notion that memory is ‘presentist’ and trivalent, I call attention to the arguments that each of these receptions makes about the significance of remembrance in the ‘new’ South Africa—in other words, the ways that these receptions use the past as a vehicle for arguments about the present and future. To demonstrate what makes this memory work ‘public’, I call attention to the ways that these receptions of the past engage with not only the past event—sexual violations of women—but also with one another’s remembrances. This case study thus showcases the complex dynamics of ‘engagement amongst rememberers’ on two levels: Achmat Dangor responds to the TRC’s mode of remembrance, while the rememberers in his novel *Bitter Fruit* deliberate one-another’s rights to and practices of remembrance.

Doxa about the preventative and healing powers of remembrance motivated the formation of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC's mandate charged it with generating an "inclusive remembrance" of the human rights violations that were committed in the context of the most violent years of apartheid, beginning with the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and concluding with the first democratic elections in 1994 (*Truth 1*: 116). While the Commission investigated the most violent period of the apartheid past, it did so with the explicit intention of serving present-day concerns: the construction of the 'new' South Africa. The tortuous formulations of the Minister of Justice's introduction to parliament of the TRC's establishing Act showcase the Commission's trivalent temporality and 'presentism.' According to Minister of Justice Dullah Omar, the TRC would circle through South Africa's "deeply divided" past so as to provide "a pathway, a stepping stone toward the historic bridge" that would lead South Africans "towards a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence" (*Truth 1*: 48). The Commission located itself squarely within the present, but its eyes were trained toward the past and its feet were on the "pathway" headed toward the "bridge" that would guide the 'new' South Africa into the future.

The TRC was comprised of three committees, but for the purposes of this essay, I will only address the memory work of the Human Rights Violations

Committee (HRVC). The HRVC gave victims of gross human rights violations the opportunity to contribute “their own stories in their own languages [to] the South African story” (1: 112). The maxim that guided the HRVC’s approach to the past was “revealing is healing.” Victims’ remembrances of the past ostensibly fostered two present-day goals: first, *victims’ personal healing* by giving them the opportunity to have their experiences acknowledged by a sympathetic audience of commissioners who represented the new government and by South African citizens who attended the hearings or witnessed them via the media’s coverage, and, second, the *country’s “healing”* by contributing to an official record of the past that would serve as an antidote to denial and/or forgetting about apartheid-era violations per one of the other maxims that guided the TRC process: “Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it” (*Truth* 1: 7). In his “Foreword” to the TRC’s final report, Chairman Desmond Tutu explains why the goal of non-repetition entails remembrance: “It is only by accounting for the past that we can become accountable for the future” (*Truth* 1: 7). Here Tutu articulates a commonplace in liberal democratic societies about the preventative power of remembrance, one that assumes through its very language of “accountability” that our relationship to the past is rational and conscious.

Several months into the hearings held by the HRVC, a gendered pattern of testimony became apparent. More women were testifying than men, and they were

doing so as so-called “secondary witnesses,” speaking as relatives or dependents of victims rather than “as direct victims” (*Truth* 4: 283-4). The Commission sought to address this gender imbalance in victims’ testimony by holding special “Women’s Hearings.” The “Women’s Hearings” constitute a double-reception in this chain of public memory: they are simultaneously a reception of the sexual violations experienced by women and a reception of women’s reluctance to speak about those violations at the regular public hearings of the HRVC. In designing the “Women’s Hearings,” the TRC acted on recommendations made by Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies, research fellow and lecturer in political studies at the University of Witwatersrand respectively. Goldblatt and Meintjies urged the Commission to reconsider the questionnaires used by statement takers to elicit more details about women’s experiences; not to probe too deeply for graphic details, and yet not to avoid “embarrassing” or “private” subjects like sexual abuse; and, to offer closed hearings, staffed only by female commissioners, to make it easier for women to speak of experiences not commonly discussed around men, such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse. Goldblatt and Meintjies also proposed holding hearings in which community leaders could testify on behalf of those women who were not comfortable speaking before the Commission themselves. In response to these recommendations, the Commission amended the form used to record statements; held workshops in which participants explored ways to bring more women into the

process; and conducted three “special hearings on women” in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg. (*Truth* 4: 283). Despite the Commission’s efforts to elicit their stories, some women victims still refused to participate in the TRC process for reasons explored in Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*.

Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*: A reception of women’s silence and of the “Women’s Hearings”

Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* constitutes an “uptake” of women’s silence about the sexual violations they experienced during apartheid and of the TRC’s “Women’s Hearings” reception of that silence. The novel is simultaneously an outcome and catalyst for public memory. While *Bitter Fruit*’s representation of this “dark side of war” aligns with the Commission’s goal of casting light on South Africa’s apartheid past (“Ledge”), specifically the sexual violations experienced by women, its motivations for doing so are different. The Commission sought to place these violations in the public eye so as to create, in its words, an “inclusive remembrance,” one that would promote “unity” and “reconciliation” in the ‘new’ South Africa (*Truth* 1: 116). Desmond Tutu’s foreword to the TRC *Report* articulates this goal of closure: “Having looked the beast of the past in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness and having made amends, let us shut the door on the past” (*Truth* 1: 22). As Shane Graham observes, however, “Rather than allowing South Africa to ‘close the book’ on the past, as many of the commission’s

proponents suggested would follow from its work, the TRC helped make possible the continual writing and rewriting of that book” (3). South African poet and novelist Andre Brink goes so far as to suggest that, “unless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future” (30). Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* “extends, complicates, and intensifies” the enquiries initiated by the TRC. Indeed Dangor stated his intention “to observe our history from what I hope is a compelling Babel’s tower” (“Random House”). As a novel, it makes that history a public memory in the sense that I describe—available for uptake, circulation, and diverse interpretations.

A public memory approach considers Achmat Dangor, a novelist, public intellectual, and anti-apartheid activist, to be a rememberer—an active participant in the effort to shape South Africa’s present through his engagement with its past. In an interview with Random House about ‘why he writes,’ Dangor explained: “Politically, I have always been moved by the need to help bring about change . . . From the day I was born until literally 46 years later, I lived in a country that desperately needed change, and desperately resisted change” (“Random House”). In a different interview, Dangor recalled three specific “flashes of insight” that drove him to remember in the form of the novel, *Bitter Fruit* (“Ledge”). In the vocabulary of public memory, these “insights” constitute his ‘presentist’

motivations, as they convey his conscious, and what he deemed necessary, decision to participate in the interpretive uptake of the gendered violence of apartheid.

The first “insight” resulted from Dangor’s frustration with the TRC. He felt that none of the participants in the TRC hearings “grasp what they’re doing. They’re taking all of South Africa’s history and putting it in the public domain . . . It was really something that I felt needed to be done from a re-imagined point of view” (“Ledge”). Here Dangor implicitly endorses the TRC’s “openness to public participation and scrutiny” (*Truth* 1: 104), while insisting that its process has only begun the necessary excavation of South Africa’s violent past. He insists that the arts can contribute to the process by exposing South Africans’ “sometimes deliberately contradictory viewpoints” of their past (“Random House”). Dangor’s observations about the role of the arts and the imagination after the TRC echo those of South African writer and critic, Njabulo Ndebele, who claimed: “While some key elements of the intrigue are emerging [from the TRC], I believe we have yet to find meaning. In fact, it is going to be the search for meanings that may trigger off more narratives . . . the resulting narratives may have less and less to do with facts themselves and with their recall than with the revelation of meaning through the imaginative combination of those facts” (Ndebele “Truth” 20-1). Unlike the TRC, which was driven by its *telos* to create an “inclusive

remembrance” that would help “to close the book,” these “imaginative combination[s]” are not obliged to represent, reconcile, or transcend the differences in South Africans’ perspectives on the past. They instead invite ongoing “uptake” that will keep the past open to additional interpretations. Consistent with the trivalence of memory, South Africa’s past thus becomes a vehicle for deliberations about its present and future.

Dangor’s second “flash of insight” concerned his desire to give voice to the stories of women who chose not to participate in the TRC’s “Women’s Hearings”: “[women who are] personified—represented—by the character of Lydia” (“Ledge”). In this regard, *Bitter Fruit* is also a critical reception of the TRC. Through the voice of Lydia, a victim of an apartheid-era rape who refuses to testify, the novel critiques the TRC’s mode and valuation of public remembrance and its concomitant attempts to break women’s silence. Dangor’s preoccupation with the challenge of representing women’s experience of sexual violations echoes that of other post-apartheid South African writers whose work also critically, though more indirectly, engages the TRC and its attempt to narrate the past. *Bitter Fruit* includes excerpts of Lydia’s diary entry about the rape and gives voice to her explicit rejection of the invitation to speak at the TRC’s “Women’s hearings.” J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, in contrast, contain no such direct representations of the sexual violations, nor do they explicitly critique

the TRC's attempt to solicit women's stories. They nevertheless address similar issues about women's ability and desire to speak of their experience of sexual violations, and about others' willingness to bear witness.

Disgrace (1999) is narrated throughout by David, an aging white male professor whose relationships with women are primarily sexual and often predatory. David is literally prevented from witnessing the gang-rape of his daughter Lucy by a locked door. When "a vision" of the rape comes to him, "he writhes, trying to blank it out" (97). David nevertheless insists to a female friend of Lucy's, "I know what Lucy has been through. I was there," to which she responds: "But you weren't there, David. She told me. You weren't" (140). Over and over, *Disgrace* reminds readers of the limitations both of their desire and their ability to "know." Exasperated as much by Lucy's decision to maintain silence about the rape as he is by her decision to remain on the farm where it happened, David tells her: "Either you stay on in a house full of ugly memories and go on brooding on what happened to you, or you put the whole episode behind you and start a new chapter elsewhere" (155). Lucy rejects David's binary of miasmatic remembrance and amnesiastic beginnings as well as his appeal that they discuss "rationally" what he describes as her "alternatives" (155). She simply states: "I can't talk any more, David. I just can't . . . I wish I could explain. But I can't" (155). Like Lydia

of *Bitter Fruit*, Lucy refuses to break her silence to satisfy others', including her father's, demands for understanding and closure.

Zoë Wicomb *David's Story* (2001) contains only one sidelong reference to the "Women's Hearings." On the very first page of the novel, a chambermaid overhears the hotel receptionist speaking to none other than Mrs. Meintjies of the "Women's Hearings": "You go ahead, Mrs. Meintjies, and we shall be most interested to hear your verdict on the blah blah big-words" (5). That dismissive exchange constitutes the only explicit reference to the TRC in *David's Story*. Not coincidentally, however, the event that David needs to understand in order to narrate his past—to write 'his story'—has everything to do with the TRC's inquiry into the past, and, more specifically, the work of the "Women's Hearings." That event is the rape of Dulcie, David's fellow guerilla, at the hands of other guerillas in MK, the armed wing of the African National Congress. Despite the efforts of David's amanuensis who probes him for more information, Dulcie remains a "protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself" (35). Dulcie constitutes the structuring absence at the heart of *David's Story*. The novel concludes with the amanuensis throwing up her hands in despair: "The words escape me. I do not acknowledge this scrambled thing as mine. I will have nothing more to do with it. I wash my hands of this story" (213). Neither *Disgrace* nor *David's Story* nor *Bitter Fruit* seeks to resolve the "problem"

of women's silence by representing, understanding, or bringing closure around their experiences. They instead call attention to the framing of women's silence as a "problem" and to the difficulty others have bearing witness.

Dangor's "third insight" compelled him to address the "taboo barrier" that prevented South Africans from hearing women's stories of rape and other sexual violations. He refers to this "taboo barrier" as the "the soft flesh of South Africa, the parts that we don't want to talk about or feel, the wounds and the bruises" ("Ledge"). Here Dangor seems to conceive of South Africa's past as embodied experience, remembered as much in the body as in words. Dangor claims that he had this final inspirational "insight" upon concluding that the Commission held *closed* hearings not only because "many of the victims requested it, [but also because] South Africa wasn't yet ready to talk about the dark side of war" ("Ledge"). He attributes that reluctance to South Africa's colonial legacy of "the worst kind of Victorian prudery" ("Ledge"). Dangor implies that the Commission held the special women's hearings not only out of respect for women who did not want to speak their stories publicly, but also because it feared challenging the taboo around sexual violations. *Bitter Fruit*, then, constitutes his effort to challenge the prudery that erects those "taboo barriers." The Andre Gide quote that opens part one of the novel makes Dangor's intentions explicit: "I will teach you that there is nothing that is not divinely natural . . . I will speak to you of

everything.” *Bitter Fruit* reeks of “mortal belching” (8), “pungent farts” (8), “decaying metabolism” (4), and “overripe figs” (38). It further challenges South African readers’ “Victorian prudery” with detailed descriptions of sexual encounters, both gay and straight, often abusive or non-consensual, and always overlain with issues of power and race.¹

Bitter Fruit traces the dissolution of the Ali family. Like all memory texts, its temporality is trivalent. The action takes place in 1998, the year after the TRC concluded the regular public hearings for victims, but the event that drives the narrative occurred many years earlier in December 1978, when Silas and Lydia Ali, recent newlyweds, were detained by the apartheid police. Unbeknownst to Lydia, Silas was a member of the anti-apartheid organization, the African National Congress. During the round-up, Du Boise, an older Afrikaans policeman, rapes and impregnates Lydia while Silas is chained to the inside of a police van. Lydia is released immediately afterward, and she and Silas never discuss the rape or its “bitter fruit”: their son, Michael. Michael’s reflections on Lydia’s diary, which records the details of the rape, call attention to her uncensored descriptions: “Lydia’s prose is clear, translucent almost. It has the transcendent quality of pain captured without sentimentality. She describes the rape in cold detail, Du Boise’s eyes, his smell, his grunts, the flicker of fear when he reached his climax” (128). In addition to Lydia’s rape, readers learn of incestuous encounters, extra-marital

liaisons, cross-generational affairs, and racially-charged sexual fantasies involving a nun. *Bitter Fruit* does indeed assault readers with the unforeseen and unintended consequences of the bodily fulfillment of desire. In the final third of the novel, Michael murders both the father of a friend who was sexually molested by that father and Du Boise. He then severs ties with Lydia and Silas and prepares himself to go to India “after he has learnt enough about being a Muslim to perhaps become one” (277). Lydia tells Silas that their marriage is over after he witnesses her having a passionate sexual encounter with another man at his fiftieth birthday party. *Bitter Fruit*'s final image is of Lydia driving out of Johannesburg to an unknown, but definitively non-familial, future.

In the very first scene of the novel, Silas breaks the silence around the rape when he tells Lydia about his chance encounter with Du Boise in a supermarket, a discussion that culminates in an argument about the TRC's call for public remembrances of apartheid-era violations and its direct appeal to women, like Lydia, to testify at the “Women's Hearings.” During the argument, Silas, so resistant to discussing the rape and its consequences within the privacy of their home, nevertheless tells Lydia, “we have to deal with this” (15), by which he means that she, Lydia, should speak at the women's hearings and thereby move beyond her anger and pain—an implicit endorsement of the ‘future’ thrust of the TRC's memory work. Before they argue about whether she should testify at the

“Women’s Hearings,” though, Silas and Lydia argue about their status as victims and consequent rights of remembrance. From the perspective of public memory, *Bitter Fruit* stages a debate ‘amongst rememberers’ about remembrance. Lydia accuses Silas of “choosing” to remember (13). Silas rejects her suggestion that he could *not* remember—that remembrance entails volition. He retorts: “It’s not something you easily forget, or ever forget” (13). Their argument turns into a debate about the differences in their experience, and, consequently, about the content of Silas’s memory. Lydia exclaims, “He raped me, not you” (13), to which Silas responds with a reminder about the suffering he experienced: “I was there, helpless, fucken chained in a police van, screaming like a madman” (14). He maintains that “we have to deal with this” and then responds to Lydia’s disapproval of his use of the collective pronoun ‘we’: “With what we went through, both of us.’ Seeing the smirk on her face, he insists: ‘Yes, for fuck’s sake, I went though it as much as you” (15). Silas rejects Lydia’s, and, by extension the TRC’s, dismissal of his experience as a witness, and thus a victim of, the rape.

Lydia resents the tardiness of Silas’s concern, his claim that he has the right to remember the rape, and his reliance on the Commission to facilitate their overdue engagement with its repercussions and move unencumbered into the future of the ‘new’ South Africa. She endorses the Commission’s assumption that she is the primary victim, but rejects its suggestion that she can ‘remember’ the

rape, as, for her, it remains an open and still present wound, rather than a memory. Trauma theorists claim that the experience of unavoidable violence severely hinders victims' ability to integrate their traumatic experience, i.e. to turn it into a memory: "It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma" (Hermann 37). Lydia makes precisely this point when she counters Silas's claim that his suffering was equivalent to hers. She characterizes his experience as "a memory to you, a wound to your ego, a theory" and exclaims: "You can't even begin to imagine the pain" (14). Lydia here suggests that remembrance is a luxury, one available only to those for whom the wound has sufficiently healed or for whom it was not particularly severe in the first place. She argues that her bodily experience of the rape has not yet, nor ever will, become a memory, and that its severity trumps the psychological assault to Silas's manhood.

In addition to countering the TRC's assumption that the past is indeed past, Lydia rejects its argument about the healing dimension of public remembrance. Though she initially wanted to speak about the rape, and is frustrated and disappointed by Silas and her parents' inability to do so, she rejects the Commission's offer, and Silas's encouragement, to speak at the TRC's "Women's Hearings" more than twenty years later.² She resents Silas's attempts to make "her pain his tragedy" (127) and reflects bitterly that he only crashed the "zone of silence" into which they had both settled "because of his ego, his concern with *his*

suffering” (122). She mocks the Commission’s maxim of “revealing is healing,” recalling with more than a hint of sarcasm the words of “the young lawyer from the TRC” in whose eyes she detected “an evangelist’s fervour”: “This is an opportunity to bring the issue out into the open, to lance the last festering wound, to say something profoundly personal” (156). She confronts the Commission’s claims about the transformative power of public speech with her own assertion that testifying will change “nothing”: “It would not have helped her to appear before the Commission, even at a closed hearing . . . Nothing in her life would have changed, nothing in any of their lives would change because of a public confession of pain suffered. Because nothing could be undone” (156). Lydia here counters the allegedly therapeutic effects of the Commission’s “Women’s Hearings” by posing an equally forceful argument about the permanence and immutability of the effects of the rape. For, as she told Silas in the heat of their argument, for her, the rape is not yet a memory. Lydia aspires neither to forget the rape nor to remember it in excruciating detail in front of the TRC. Rather she seeks to free herself from public and private “commitments to a past not of [her] choosing” (Vivian 57).

‘Dealing with the past’ is one of the central cultural preoccupations of the ‘new’ South Africa. The turn to the past has not surprisingly provoked public memory in the way I have defined it—debate amongst rememberers in a variety of domains and genres about the rights to and uses of remembrance. Approaching

Bitter Fruit as a public memory text directs attention to its participation in these debates, as novelist Dangor is himself a receiver of the past who intentionally figures debates about what and how to remember. These are precisely the issues that surface in the argument that *Bitter Fruit* stages between Lydia and Silas, two of many characters in *Bitter Fruit* who interrogate the past and make arguments about its import in the present. A public memory approach, which considers the relationships and exchanges amongst arguments about remembrance that occur in different domains—legal, governmental, academic, literary, and popular—and that takes seriously, though not deterministically, the motivations of rememberers, provides insights into the beliefs and values of a cultural regime.

Conclusion

A public memory approach shares with reception studies an interest in the meaning-making capacity of the receivers of texts, that is, of rememberers and interpreters respectively. Like reception studies, public memory does not cede meaning-making capacity entirely to the text, the text's maker, or the historical context, but rather considers the dynamic exchanges between a receiver, other receivers, and those textual and contextual elements. A public memory approach makes rememberers' motivations a legitimate "object of analysis" (Frow 17), not because those motivations determine the meaning-making of the receiver of that remembrance, but because those motivations call attention to the 'presentism' of

all acts of remembrance. Rememberers' ongoing receptions of the past event form a chain of public memory that scholars can trace. A public memory approach contributes to reception study the possibility of tracking rememberers' receptions across genres, including but not limited to the literary, to whatever text or domain in which those remembrances appear. Tracking these different receptions of a past event, and the receptions of those receptions, does not provide a more accurate depiction of what actually happened—that is the task of the historian. It does, however, provide insight into the values and beliefs of cultural regimes in a given moment in time—an aim that memory and reception scholars share.

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Notes

¹ For further consideration of the “queering” of post-apartheid cultural production, consult Brenna M. Munro’s “Queer Family Romance: Writing the ‘New’ South Africa in the 1990s” (*GLQ* 15.3 2009: 397-439). Munro recounts the history of gay rights in the anti-apartheid movements and examines the increasing visibility of queer politicians, performers, and literary characters in post-apartheid South Africa.

² In an essay about the rhetoric of silence, I examine how *Bitter Fruit* receives and makes arguments about Lydia’s persistent silence. “Speech and Silence in Transitional South Africa: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Special Hearings on Women and Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*” will appear in *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, Eds. Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe. Southern Illinois University Press. In Press.

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