

## CONFRONTING FOND MEMORIES OF APARTHEID

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Being nostalgic for apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa is frequently equated with being politically insane and morally questionable. In his recent book, **Native nostalgia**, Jacob Dlamini seeks not only to retrieve memories of the struggle against apartheid - memories that would be quite compatible with the anti-apartheid, post-apartheid national narrative - but to describe his nostalgia for *apartheid itself*, including life within the very instruments of the apartheid regime. Dlamini remembers his childhood in Katlehong, an apartheid township on the East Rand, *positively*, recalling scenes related in complex ways, to Bantu Education, ethnic radio, the relative order of the apartheid township and the Afrikaans language. These are memories, as Dlamini notes, which run contrary to the accepted notion that under apartheid, all blacks only suffered, and suffered in the same way.

The accepted struggle narrative, for Dlamini, amounts to a homogenization of black South African history, which he argues, has strategically served a select group since South Africa's democratization. "It is all too often taken for granted that the story of black South Africa is one long romance, starting in some golden age during which Africans lived in harmony with the land and each other, *followed by the trials and tribulations of European conquest, segregation and apartheid*, and ending in triumph with Nelson Mandela, the romantic figure par excellence, taking the military salute as South Africa's first democratically elected leader" (Dlamini, 2009:1 2, emphases added). We have in this narrative three epic parts: a harmonious period prior to colonialism, the disruption of this harmony by colonialism and apartheid, and then the birth of democracy, which although is not a return, is taken to be a restoration of African dignity. Locating positive memories in this middle stretch of history runs against the grain of the neat story of liberation. It questions post-apartheid national politics on the one hand as a continuation of colonialism, and on the other, as a new form of inequality. This is precisely the task Dlamini sets himself.

But Dlamini is cautious in doing so, and with recourse to Svetlana Boym's **The future of nostalgia**, he differentiates between "restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia" (Dlamini, 2009: 17), the former seeking out the concrete recreation of a lost past, the latter dwelling on "shattered fragments of memories" (Boym, 2001, cited in Dlamini,

2009: 18), on memories of the past that one does not necessarily seek to recreate. It is this latter form of reflective nostalgia, which as Dlamini emphasizes, retains the capacity for a critical relation to the past. It is this form of nostalgia that he sees as a suitable lens through which to consider his own childhood in Katlehong.

Dlamini manages to pair a rigorously critical attitude with his nostalgia, refusing to allow his past to be reinterpreted within the terms of the dominant anti-apartheid narrative. While nostalgia for apartheid may still be morally questionable – for good reason and particularly in the hands of someone with different political intentions – Dlamini displays, in some moments more than others, an ability to dwell on each memory and consider its *particular* meaning. Many of his memories are in fact nostalgic for a *struggle against* apartheid, and are as such quite compatible with the dominant narrative he takes on. For instance, he remembers fondly how a Radio Zulu presenter prefaced each propagandist item on the news with “Bathi ngithi (they say I must say this)” (Dlamini, 2009: 36). He also recalls listening to Radio Freedom, the banned ANC radio station, and supporting the boxer, Gerrie Coetzee, in his world heavyweight championship fight (because at least in part, he publicly opposed apartheid). Other memories are not first and foremost about resistance to apartheid, and the playful use of the Afrikaans language he remembers in Katlehong is such an instance. Some memories are also a mixture of oppression and resistance, for example, where Dlamini examines the ways in which people were able to reterritorialize rigid, empty sites and turn them into liveable places to create “the difference between Katlehong as it existed on paper for the state and Katlehong as it looked from the ground, as seen on a human scale” (2009: 43). The most controversial scenes Dlamini recounts of course, are those directly related to the apartheid regime, and an example that he refers to is the order of Katlehong as the “scientific township” (2009: 43): “To be scientific was to be modern and the new townships were considered by both the government and many urban Africans to be better than the slums that had characterized urban African life since the onset of South Africa’s Industrial Revolution” (Dlamini, 2009: 46). Some other scenes, although they bear the mark of apartheid and apartheid was the condition of their possibility, have little to do with apartheid. Here we might cite his descriptions of the street games of his childhood. On the whole, it is Dlamini’s openness to considering each memory in its specificity that is most impressive. To his question, “What does it mean for a black South African to remember life under apartheid with fondness?” (Dlamini, 2009:13), we do not get one answer. Rather, the reader is given a sedimentation of meaning, each new layer provided in the retrieval of each memory.

In his fifth chapter, Dlamini recounts some of his memories of his mother and their neighbours borrowing and lending “parcels” (money). He comes very near, in these descriptions, to what many may regard as a romanticization of a bygone social order wherein people “sought in their imperfect ways to see humans in their fullness” (Dlamini, 2009: 105). In this chapter he is also concerned with the elaborate rituals that followed the death of a member of the community. This, for Dlamini, is located in a time about which he is nostalgic – apartheid. Wary of being labelled a conservative, he is clear that what he wants to do, rather than mourn the loss of this time and place, is to challenge the notion that townships during apartheid were “zones of deprivation that can only ever be defined in a negative sense, in terms of what they do not possess” (Dlamini, 2009: 105). Clearly, despite being places of poverty, the township practices and rituals that Dlamini describes as having taken place around money and bereavement possessed for him a positive moral content. As he notes in an earlier

chapter, “Sadly, we no longer kneel for the dead” (Dlamini, 2009: 56). In a very similar vein and reflecting on his schooling, Dlamini conjures scenes very close to conservatism but not properly captured by this tag that would be given to those who refuse to reinterpret their personal histories according to liberation dogma. Dlamini is not of course blind to the fact that Bantu Education was an instrument of apartheid racial oppression, that it was something to be resisted, but knotted into his memories of apartheid school days is also a longing “for a time when education was liberation” (Dlamini, 2009: 93).

Dlamini has applied a challenging line of thinking to a post-apartheid context, creating the possibility for novel insights into the social and political conditions to which the writing of our history is subject. Dlamini both sketches these conditions and challenges them, examining the psychic effects they have had on him as a black South African, while making a contribution to the growing body of literature on the complex nature of nostalgia for fallen regimes. In doing so, he refers to a range of thinkers such as Adorno, Agamben, Arendt, Benjamin, Calvino, Foucault, Freud, Lefebvre, Marx, Pamuk, not to mention his unreferenced use of Ferguson, Tolstoy, Anderson and Barthes, where he presumes the reader’s familiarity with their catch phrases – the “anti-politics machine,” “every family is unhappy in its own way,” “imagined communities,” and the “death of the author.” The litany of one line quotes from a gallery of big names does give the impression that each reference marks a profound moment of realization for Dlamini, and that each quote has enabled him to retrieve his nostalgia located in apartheid and has helped make the madness of his nostalgia legible to himself. The references he utilizes, however, are frequently underexplored. For this reason, **Native nostalgia**, while fascinating, is also a small and perhaps hastily written book, for which there is surely a larger one to follow, a book many will eagerly anticipate after reading this one.