Prisons inside Prisons: Post-conflict Life Narrative in *A Tragedy of Lives* (Chiedza Musengezi & Irene Staunton, eds.) and *The Book of Memory* (Petina Gappah)

Fiona McCann

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4773>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.4773

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2016

Number of pages: 91-100

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Fiona McCann, "Prisons inside Prisons: Post-conflict Life Narrative in *A Tragedy of Lives* (Chiedza Musengezi & Irene Staunton, eds.) and *The Book of Memory* (Petina Gappah)", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 39.1 | 2016, Online since 05 April 2021, connection on 18 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4773> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4773>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Prisons inside Prisons: Post-conflict Life Narrative in *A Tragedy of Lives* (Chiedza Musengezi & Irene Staunton, eds.) and *The Book of Memory* (Petina Gappah)

This article addresses the ways in which the prison experience of women in contemporary Zimbabwe is represented in both fictional and non-fictional texts. I will be arguing that the attempted reconfiguration of the prison space in Gappah's novel is rendered possible through the prior exposition in the non-fictional life narratives of the external societal, economic, institutional and gendered prisons to which Zimbabwean women find themselves condemned. I will argue that the life narrative form adopted, whether fictional or non-fictional, offers a textual space for resistance in which women prisoners become visible and audible subjects of self-representation.

In 2003, twenty-three years after Zimbabwe became independent and Robert Mugabe's triumphant rise to power, Chiedza Musengezi, founding member and director of Zimbabwe Women Writers, and Irene Staunton, publisher at Weaver Press, edited *A Tragedy of Lives*, a collection of testimonies by women prisoners serving sentences in various Zimbabwean prisons. These women were interviewed by several women poets, academics, NGO workers, journalists and teachers, all of whom have in common a love and talent for creative writing. The project was aimed at giving voice to a group of women who have been silenced, relegated to "a male organised and dominated space" and who are "the strangers and the marginalised within the prison system" (Stewart 5). The project was also conceived of as "a powerful lobbying tool for change not only of prisons, but of women's overall condition" (*ibid* 9) and as such is as much concerned with politics as it is with the aesthetics of self-representation. Over a decade after this important publication, Petina Gappah published her first novel, *The Book of Memory* (2015), in which the eponymous albino woman, Memory, currently awaiting execution, having been sentenced to death for murder, writes her life story in an epistolary fashion to a white American journalist researching Zimbabwean prisons. The novel, which is entirely fictional and constructed through flashbacks to Memory's childhood and, to a lesser extent, her young adulthood, embraces a wide spectrum of Zimbabwean life experiences, from the township to the opulent suburbs, from repressed homosexuality to serious mental health problems and infanticide, from exclusion to inclusion, and, like the testimonies in *A Tragedy of Lives*, highlights storytelling as a means both of uncovering silence and reconfiguring the prison space. This article will try to demonstrate the significance of the shift from documentary to the aesthetics of fiction and the fluid transitions possible between life stories and fiction.

Linda Moore and Phil Scraton, in a book which takes as a case study women imprisoned in conflict and post-conflict Northern Ireland, point out that "[m]etaphorically, and in some cases literally, the prison is an island operating beyond the referent points and parameters of regular social life," (54) and this calls attention to the politics and delimitation of space and time inside prisons. They conclude their analysis by reiterating "the unmet needs" of the prisoners "against a backdrop of violence and restraint, [...] the systemic denial of bodily integrity, self-harm, segregation, appalling physical and mental health care in facilities shared with men, punitive detox programmes, restricted

contact with families [... and] authoritarian, poorly trained guards,” (233) all of which are relevant concerns raised in both the fictional and non-fictional stories of women’s imprisonment in post-conflict Zimbabwe.¹ These texts all focus on the “ways in which the design of spaces affects the kind of decisions that prisoners make, both in terms of the macro-scale re-engineering of spatial environments, and the micro-scale recalibration of the fabric of everyday places,” (Moran, Conlon & Gill 5) with reference both to the prison space, and the wider context of contemporary Zimbabwe in a post-conflict era fraught with often violent intra-territorial claims.

In her introduction to the international anthology of women’s prison writings, *Wall Tappings*, Judith A. Scheffler points out that “[a]s a group, and to a large extent as individuals, women prison authors are among the most forgotten writers, epitomizing the plight of the silenced female writer,” since, “in the starkest sense the woman prisoner lacks Virginia Woolf’s ‘room of one’s own’ and must contend with a lack of privacy, money, and education and the demoralizing effects of anonymity” (xxix). The publication of women’s fiction and life writing which are anchored in the prison space suggests that what has hitherto been a space of silence is becoming increasingly recognised as a sub genre of its own, and this attention to representations of women’s carceral experience is supported by recent work carried out in the field of human geography where “prison ethnographers are beginning to make explicit a longstanding implicit awareness of the significance of space which has remained underplayed in much scholarship to date” (Moran 11).

I will be contending in this article that both the life-writing or life-telling stories in *A Tragedy of Lives* and the fictional account of one woman’s prison experience in the novel *The Book of Memory*, which functions as a fictional life-writing text, offer new ways to think about the carceral space and the wider nation-state as gendered and oppressive spaces which attempt to render women offenders as invisible as possible. These texts are therefore very much forms of “resistance writing” as Barbara Harlow defines it: “a counter-hegemonic practice of writing which both organizes and documents the [...] resistance to a bureaucratization and mechanization of the human and social mind and body which takes place inside the prison institution” (124). Harlow focuses on writing, but I will also be considering the generic implications of transcribed oral life stories and fictional life-writing and how they intersect with a radical politics of resistance embedded within the very aesthetics of the texts under study.²

Gillian Whitlock calls for prudence in the nomenclature surrounding what Bart Moore-Gilbert refers to as “postcolonial life writing” and what she terms “postcolonial life narratives.” She distinguishes between “memoirs,” “memoir,” and “testimony” and is attentive to “the changing value and currency of testimony,” (96) which, she states, “conventionally draws a very different history into view: the experiences of the disem-

1. By referring to Zimbabwe as a post-conflict country, I am not merely alluding to the fifteen year liberation struggle which ended in 1980 with Independence, but also to the volatility of the country ever since. Even as recently as the 2000s, conflict over illegal reappropriation of land, particularly farms, by war veterans (a contested term in itself as Laurie points out [25]), with the blessing of ZANU-PF (which was under serious political pressure from the emerging MDC headed by Morgan Tsvangirai), ended in extensive violence and bloodshed. “By late 2002, 90% of farms – comprising 10 million hectares – had been seized without compensation to their title-holding owners. Farmers and most farm workers were evicted in the process. By 2009, less than 400 of the estimated 4,300 commercial farmers who had been present in Zimbabwe in 2000 remained on their land” (Laurie 1).

2. The resistance to which I am referring is also to the very conditions of incarceration, although the forms which it takes are indirect and rarely aggressive. See analysis below of Gappah’s novel.

powered and the dispossessed,” (97) while “memoirs are not only about individuals, they are also about an event, an era, an institution, a community” (96). She concludes that “[t]estimonial life narrative is embedded in the history of anti-colonial resistance” and that it “raise[s] questions of authority, agency, authenticity, and power” (203). The texts under study here may well offer insight into events and eras, but they are so embedded in the personal that they are clearly testimonies which attempt to emphasise the sometimes limited agency of the tellers. Moore-Gilbert for his part endorses recent feminist scholarship which has underlined the ways in which “Auto/biography” as a genre “offers women the opportunity to transform themselves from objects of representation to Subjects of self-representation” (112). Both the life narratives included in *Tragedy* and that of the eponymous heroine of *The Book of Memory* raise a series of questions which resonate with those evoked by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith in their study of the intersection of the act of narrating and human rights. These questions concern both the production and circulation of narratives pertaining to human rights abuses: “Who tells the stories and who doesn’t? To whom are they told and under what circumstances? Why, when, how, and where do narratives become intelligible as stories of human rights? What historical, cultural, and institutional conditions affect the shapes stories take? What are the personal, social, political and ethical effects of stories and their venues of production for both tellers and listeners?” (5). It will not be possible to address all of these questions within the framework of this article, but the aim of the following analysis will be to address how the form and aesthetics of life narrative (fictional or otherwise) enable “the affective force of stories” (Shaffer & Smith 7) to emerge and force acknowledgement of otherwise invisible and inaudible experiences in contemporary Zimbabwe.

A Tragedy of Lives

All of the stories assembled in the anthology of writings by Zimbabwean women prisoners begin with an affirmation of the identity of the teller: either “I am [...]” or “My name is [...]”. This immediately draws attention to the individual agency of the storytellers and to the specificity of each story anchored in a particular domestic context. The cumulative effect of these stories, divided into sections determined by the nature of the crimes for which they were imprisoned (ranging from “Reproductive rights” and “Domestic issues” to “Commercial sex workers” and “Witchcraft”) nevertheless depicts a devastating tableau of deprivation, poverty, violence, and sexual assault and, as such, emphasises the way in which individual testimonies coalesce into a sustained, collective narrative of the marginalised. Yet this attention to identity already contains a certain irony since the Foreword states unequivocally that “the names of the women have been changed to protect their privacy” (xviii). Further mediation occurs in the transcription and translation of the original testimonies, most of which were spoken, then written up, in Ndebele and Shona.³ Identities are therefore at once visible and veiled from the outset and the mediation of the interlocutors deliberately rendered obvious so as to acknowledge the collective effort to circulate these narratives and the tension between

3. Philippe Lejeune underlines the importance of what he calls the complete re-creation involved in any transcription, let alone when translation is also involved: “Transcrire n’est pas une simple opération de copie, plus ou moins délicate ou fastidieuse. C’est une re-création complète” (290).

individual and generic experiences. This question of visibility also works alongside the numerous references by these women to their invisibility once inside prison as families either cannot afford or simply choose not to visit them, an invisibility which is further increased as each woman's name (and hence her identity) is replaced inside prison with the name of her crime (48, 56, 66, 85). Moreover, the decision to publish their stories in English, translated from Ndebele or Shona, is not just a reflection of the role of English as a *lingua franca*, but also assures a wider circulation and thus allows these narratives to resonate on an international level with other life narratives of suffering and resistance.

The bulk of these stories focus both on why the teller has ended up in prison and on what that prison experience has been like, and this two-fold approach is a means of exposing the double exclusion faced by these women. "Monica" for instance sums up the unfamiliarity of prison using geographical terms: "I felt as if I was no longer in Zimbabwe but in a different country altogether" (70). This statement underlines the sense of dislocation noted by Schaffer & Smith where "[t]he scrambling of zones of time, space, subjectivity, and community engenders new patterns of remembering and new modes of response on the part of individuals" (18). When "Monica" feels as though she is no longer in Zimbabwe, she is not only alluding to the strangeness of prison time and space, but also to the prison as a suspended space outside of the nation-state, with its own rules, a point to which I will return shortly.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these testimonies is their laconic, even terse, delivery. Parataxis is the dominant style, although this may admittedly have to do with the specificities of Shona and Ndebele and their translation into English. Yet even allowing for this, there is surprisingly little emphasis placed on emotions, as each element of the story is recounted in a matter-of-fact manner. Thus, the act of pouring burning hot cooking oil into the ear of an abusive husband (47) is recounted with the same degree of distance and minimal detail as the perpetrator's arrest in "Bet"''s story, although the shift from active verbs when describing how she intended to "harm" her husband to passive ones when she relinquishes control over her life and accepts her punishment ("The police took me"; "I was put in a cell"; "I was charged"; "I was not allowed"; "I was released" [47]) indicates how her agency is eradicated once the judicial apparatus slides into place. Similarly, the stories of involuntary infanticide told by "Maureen," "Agnes," and "Tabeth" are all marked by restraint, even understatement, and a notable emphasis on prison life. There are no rhetorical flourishes and the overall effect is one of an aesthetics of the banal, an effect which reinforces the pervasiveness of the experiences, both outside of and within prison, exposed in these narratives, and which amplifies the shocking experiences.

This aesthetics of the banal is all the more arresting when these testimonies evoke the daily abuse to which the prisoners are subjected within the carceral space, especially specifically gendered forms of abuse. Several women evoke the humiliation of menstruation and the deliberate withholding of sanitary protection. "Jane," for instance, states the following: "Every day before we were locked inside we undressed for inspection. Nobody laughed at anyone. We passed through the female guards and opened our legs for them to inspect. [...] We had no pants even during our periods. We had to use old rags, those red ones" (85). "Maureen" shares a similar story: "[a]t half past four, lock up time, we were ordered to fully undress. We would lift our legs as they inspected us to see if we were hiding dangerous items. During your monthly periods you had to see to

it that you did not mess the blankets. At times we thought of using the blanket edges to act as sanitary pads” (79). In both these cases (among many others), the prisoners focus on the double indignity of, on the one hand, bodily inspection practices which are tantamount to sexual abuse and, on the other, the absence of basic hygiene. There is at once something highly symbolic and intensely physical about this move by prison guards to render abject these women’s bodies, and it is not coincidental that the strip search and the absence of basic sanitary protection are grouped together in these narratives as two facets of the same problem: the porosity of the boundaries of the body within the carceral apparatus and, as Foucault puts it, “the individual and collective coercion of bodies” (169) and the deployment of the “technique of training, of *dressage*” (166) which gradually erodes all agency, including that related to bodily integrity.

Yet it is not merely within the prison space that these women are oppressed and their bodies objectified. Their frank stories of fraud, prostitution, domestic violence, and infanticide are all recounted against a backdrop of economic hardship and patriarchal control which leaves women little agency, and suggests that even before entering prison, they were trapped in various other prisons which led them to commit the crimes they did.

This collection corresponds to a “site in which locally experienced ways of suffering find their form and articulation,” focusing on emphasising “new formulations and possible transformations of our quotidian perceptions and political apprehensions of art and suffering” (Hadj-Moussa and Nijhawan 16; 19). This practice of telling one’s prison story is ultimately presented as a strategy of resistance, either because of the inclusion of a moral, or because of the acknowledgment of the process as cathartic practice, as many of the women end their stories with a warning to readers about not doing what they have done. In this respect, their stories owe much to traditional oral storytelling practices. Only two women offer an acknowledgment of the significance of being able to recount their experiences. “Monica” ends her testimony with this admission: “This story used to weigh heavily on my heart. Once jailed, you live in the shadow of prison all your life. Now that I have told it I feel better. The lump has lifted” (76). “Tabeth” adopts a different perspective: “Telling the story is a painful experience for me and I do not think I will repeat it” (102). In the first instance, the storytelling process is intimately linked to physical sensation, and this is perhaps arguably also the case in the second example. Taken holistically, however, these narratives contribute to developing what Austin Bukenya terms “oracy” (as opposed to orality), defined as “entail[ing] self-definition, self-assertion, negotiation of relationships, resolution of conflicts, claiming of rights and indictment of their violation,” (33) and to rendering visible and audible an otherwise invisible and inaudible group of women.

The Book of Memory

Petina Gappah’s novel builds on the foundations of the life narratives discussed above⁴ in order to expose the ways in which the eponymous heroine, Memory/Mnemosyne, is not just an inmate of the infamous Chikurubi prison in Harare, but, more significantly, a prisoner within the dysfunctional Zimbabwean state. Found guilty of the murder

4. Gappah explicitly mentions her debt to *Tragedy* in the Acknowledgements section of the novel (273) and several of the fictional prisoners’ stories bear a strong resemblance to the life narratives in that collection.

of the white man, Lloyd, who took her in as a child, educated her, looked after her, and renamed her Mnemosyne, Memory, the name she prefers, has been sentenced to death and is fighting to appeal her sentence. There is no closure on this issue at the end of the novel as the appeal hearing still has not taken place in the final pages, and this suggests that it is ultimately not the outcome which is important, but the process of remembering. The novel gradually becomes simultaneously the story of Memory's life and a book about memory "[w]ith all the treachery of [...] imperfect recall" (267). In what remains of this article, I will try to show that what Gappah is doing through this novel, like the life narratives in *Tragedy*, is expose the multiple prisons (social, economic, historical, institutional) curtailing everyday lives in post-Independence Zimbabwe, all of which are exacerbated by the ways in which spaces are gendered. Concomitantly, I will be exploring Gappah's generic choice to fictionalise life narrative and I will be suggesting that, notwithstanding some stylistic flaws,⁵ this novel provides a strong counter narrative to the state-sanctioned historiography of post-Independence Zimbabwe.

The very name of the eponymous protagonist, Memory/Mnemosyne, draws attention to her symbolic status as both repository and creator of memories. Mnemosyne in Greek mythology was the personification of memory and mother of the nine Muses, and there are traces in Memory's story of all nine aspects of literature, science and the arts that they represent: tragedy, hymn, music, comedy, history, epic poetry, lyric poetry, and dance all make appearances in the novel, sometimes with subversive intent. Tragedy abounds with two infanticides, a double suicide, and a third death directly related to the policing of sexuality and intolerance towards homosexuality; hymn makes its appearance through Psalm 23 and the popular liturgical song "Bind us Together," yet the message of solidarity contained in this hymn is rejected by the alienated Memory as a "song of saccharine banality" (59); music pervades the novel in allusions to popular songs by Western groups and serve as an indication of Memory's gradual disconnection from her roots (165), as do the references to popular Western sitcoms (243); historical references stretch as far back as 1890 (249) and, more generally, the novel also provides an overview of the constantly reappraised recent history of Zimbabwe, hinting at its instability and incessant labelling ("The 'Year of the People's Struggle' was followed by the 'Year of Consolidating the People's Struggle,' the 'Year of Transformation,' the 'Year of the People's Socialism' and the 'Year of the child'" [169]); Scheherazade and the epic *Arabian Nights* are also referenced as Memory, like her literary predecessor, is literally "writing to keep [herself] alive," (84-5) and the township where the protagonist spends her childhood is full of moments of spontaneous dancing and its own lyric poetry in Shona (39). The only muse unaccounted for is astronomy. This recourse to Greek mythology illustrates Memory's role as a figure of syncretism in this novel, accommodating Western and Zimbabwean mythologies, literally giving birth, through her narrative, to cultures and arts. More than anything, however, it is Memory's status as an outsider which is emphasised from the beginning, since, as an albino, she cannot expose herself to sunlight and is therefore isolated from the other children, and, in keeping with indigenous beliefs, is also alienated once inside the prison because of the fear she engenders in the other prisoners. Her perceived monstrosity is in fact presented in

5. The novel is uneven in parts, both in terms of plot development and in terms of voice, particularly Memory's. It also appears to tick all the boxes of Zimbabwe's contemporary difficulties, sometimes stretching the plot so as to include them, and running the risk of placing greater emphasis on the novel as sociological account than as aesthetic work.

universal terms when she comes across a newspaper clipping for a London freak show in an old book “exhorting the public to witness THE AMAZING WHITE NEGRO,” prompting her to speculate on “the imagined lives [she] could have had, had [she] been, for instance, born in Pompeii or in Egypt or in Atlantis or the Wild West” (51). The interchangeability of diverse mythologies and space-times, reinforced by the rhythmical repetitions, here suggests that what they all have in common is simultaneous fear of and attraction to otherness.

It emerges quite quickly, however, that in spite of the apparently universal aspect of Memory’s oppression, a specific local context exacerbates what Barbara Harlow has identified as “a reconstruction of traditional female roles and family patterns” due to “political pressures,” “the consequences of migrant labor” and “the failures of post-colonial governments” (134). Until the closing pages of the novel, the reader, like Memory, believes that she was sold to Lloyd by her parents as a child because she is an albino, a fact which ostensibly provides the motive for the crime she says she did not commit. This is rendered plausible because the family lives in poverty, one of her siblings recently died when she was supposed to be watching over her, and the mother, when not suffering from “headaches and other complaints,” (97) runs from traditional healer to evangelical preacher in an attempt to secure a cure for Memory. Indeed, what slowly emerges though Memory’s seemingly random memories looping back on themselves is that the family, and later Lloyd himself, are all locked into a series of intangible prisons: the father “rarely left the house” and “paid a boy to bring him what he needed” (95) and the reason for this only becomes clear at the end of the novel when Memory is reconciled with her elder sister. The latter explains that their mother suffered so badly from depression due to the death of her eldest son that she tried to kill Memory and successfully killed their older brother and younger sister. Memory is not sold to Lloyd; he offers to take her in and protect her temporarily (although this becomes permanent). The genesis of the mother’s severe depression is to be found in the “enforced slavery” (250) of her first marriage and the patriarchal rule she dared to contest; the father is effectively imprisoned at home as he cares for his mentally ill partner and attempts, although fails, to protect his children from being killed by her; Lloyd, like the eponymous protagonist of *The Hairdresser of Harare* (Huchu) who is also gay, is unable to break out of the uncompromising heteronormative codes of Zimbabwean society and is tragically condemned to remain, and die, in the closet;⁶ even Memory’s only surviving sibling prefers the comfort of holy orders and has become a nun, a choice which her sister reads as a form of imprisonment.

The carceral space itself is presented in this novel as one of humiliation and degradation against which Memory and the other prisoners attempt to resist. Because the prisoners themselves must collect the soiled sanitary protection (“foul-smelling and bloody pads”) with their bare hands, they all “wash out the blood from the pads before disposing of them” (67). This is simultaneously an act of solidarity and a response to superstitious beliefs about witchcraft rituals using blood, but it also draws attention to the limits of individual bodily integrity, as bodies literally overflow and thus intermingle. What is abject here is not the menstrual blood as signifier of the Kristevan abject ma-

6. In some ways, this appears to be the ultimate taboo in the novel, as the fact that his death is due to a particular sexual practice (carried out alone), is only obliquely hinted at through the signifiers of a plastic bag on his head and the screen of his computer. This narrative silence around the cause of death echoes the power of the heteronormative state.

ternal but the prison guards' efforts to use it as a means of removing any individuality from the prisoners who are united by "a stench that covered [their] clothes and hair" (67). Mulling over the English and Shona nomenclature of prisons ("penitentiaries," "correctional facilities," "jere," "jails") and their implied meanings ("nothing suggesting rehabilitation, just being shut away" [113]), Memory reflects on the evangelical tyranny of one prison guard in particular, Synodia (whose name ironically, through its sonority, evokes sin), and the hyperbolic injunctions she barks at the inmates. The prisoners subversively mock her while appearing to participate in her proselytism: "You must fill your blood with his power, so that even the mosquitoes that bite feel that power. They will suck the power in your blood.' 'Power in the blood!' echoes Evernice" (115). Gappah ironically suggests through this grotesque analogy that evangelical proselytism is a negative contagion, rather like diseases spread by mosquitoes, and in the light of the above discussion on the prisoners' solidarity faced with how to help those on sanitary waste duty, Evernice's response is a potentially metonymic and subversive reminder of the small acts of resistance carried out by them.

In the face of such limited possibilities for resistance, Memory uses her difference (the fact that she is an albino and that she has benefited from a Western education) to reconfigure the prison space, and she does this in two ways. Firstly, by tutoring the daughter of one of the prison guards, thus literally escaping from the confines of cells, the insalubrious conditions, and the routines of the main prison, and, secondly, by writing her own life narrative. In the first case, although still technically imprisoned, Memory finds herself thrown back into her past as she moves to the prison guard's lodgings. A series of connections are established between this "suffocatingly familiar" (240) house and her childhood house in the township, and between the imposing perimeter fence of the prison and the domestic green hedge which surrounds the guard's home, which signals a change in boundaries. The process of doubling is compounded by the superimposition of the present (hearing the children play games outside the guard's house) and the past (when Memory was forced to remain indoors and simply observe and listen to the others playing) and, more significantly, by the arrival of the guard's daughter, Yeukai, who is also an albino ("I saw myself again" [242]). This interlocking of past memories and the present is pushed one step further when one considers the significance of Yeukai's name, which means "remember" in Shona. Yeukai therefore becomes a means for Memory to remember her past and to transcend it, as well as representing the barometer of change, since she belongs to an "Albino Society" (243) which provides advice and help, and does not have to hide away indoors. Her involvement with Yeukai "is corruption, but it is a form of corruption that happens to benefit [her]," (243) a fact which suggests that Memory has used her individuality to reconfigure the material conditions of her imprisonment and render her stay more comfortable.

However, it is ultimately in the act of writing her story that Memory develops renewed agency. Using the form of fictionalised life writing, Gappah openly invites reflection, through the title and the name of the narrator, on the workings of memory, resonating with Ricoeur when he writes that "it is through the narrative function that memory is incorporated into the formation of identity" (84) and, also, that state-sanctioned history involves as much forgetting as it does remembering (85). Set against the backdrop of the expropriation of white farmers in Zimbabwe, Memory's memories expose a counter-narrative of the nation. Scapegoated so as to prove to increasingly agita-

ted international observers that the government is responding to the murders of white farmers, Memory's close relationship with Lloyd is used as evidence to suggest that this is a domestic issue (white sugar daddy exploits young black woman who kills him) and thereby deflect interest in the complex questions of land ownership and usurpation while showing the state to be taking a hardline response since Memory is sentenced to death. Memory's acerbic co-opting of the judge's words, without quotation marks ("it was important to send a message to the world that this country did not condone violence" [225]) are an ironic indication of the function of her narrative, which does the exact opposite, emphasising the everyday violence which is endemic to the country, and not so much condoned as exacerbated by bad government. Gappah is therefore playing with the generic limits of this narrative as Memory is simultaneously an "eyewitness" "caught in the turbulence of a specific moment in history," and "disempowered and dispossessed" (Whitlock 97). Contrary to the oral life narratives collected in *Tragedy*, Memory's life story is written and she takes pleasure in its tangible materiality, the paragraphs, notebooks, and the "tapestry" (85) she has created. Her narrative, unlike the non-fictional ones, also bears traces of the interaction of indigenous and Western cultural elements. She records that the first thing Lloyd says to her is "Speak, Mnemosyne," (2) a statement which nods to the title of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical memoir, the opening of which appears as an epigraph to the novel ("The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness"). This epigraph indicates that *The Book of Memory* should be read in this light, yet while Nabokov focuses on the "brief crack of light," Memory appears to be writing from the "abyss," in other words, the prison.

Nevertheless, in a self-reflexive remark early on, she appropriates the prison space in a Woolfian gesture: "I have my own cell" (10). This unorthodox version of "a room of one's own" points towards Gappah's desire to create a space for this female character and writer, the genre of life narrative, and the specificities of the prison writing genre as an African tradition to which Memory also belongs. Although she claims "I do not flatter myself that I am writing in the tradition of the prison diary," (85) going on to mention the exemplary Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Albie Sachs, this is, in fact, exactly what Gappah is doing, taking the women's oral narratives transcribed in *Tragedy* one step further and aestheticising the genre so as to reach an international public. Through the juxtaposition of well-known, but barely canonical, texts by Soyinka and others with Stephen King's popular fiction, Robert Graves' *I, Claudius*, and the *Arabian Nights*⁷ along with some of the life stories in *Tragedy*, Gappah transforms this *Book of Memory* into a syncretic cauldron of literary prison writing.

Both *A Tragedy of Lives* and *The Book of Memory* are important additions to the growing field of prison literature as they bring into focus not only previously unheard stories of the specifically gendered experience of prison, but they also raise interesting questions about the politics of representation. *Tragedy* operates a double mediation, from oral to written and from Shona or Ndebele to English, yet this mediation is very

7. Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Albie Sachs were all imprisoned in their respective countries of Nigeria, Kenya and South African for taking a stand against the state, and all wrote from within prison. Stephen King's *Misery*, Robert Graves' *I, Claudius* and the *Arabian Nights* all have main characters who are imprisoned for different reasons. By weaving together these incongruous literary references borrowed from both fictional and non-fictional texts, Gappah is placing the emphasis on the overlap between the two types of text and on the power of the apparatus of narrative to bring to light silenced stories.

much foregrounded as a necessity if these stories are to reach a wider public. It is the message, and not the medium which is privileged here. Petina Gappah in *The Book of Memory* consciously arranges her narrative so that it formally reflects the wider concern with how memory operates, but she also inscribes it within a tradition of prison writing from the African continent, thus accentuating the importance of this canon and implicitly calling for a reappraisal of its aesthetic qualities, as opposed to its documentary or sociological value. In the final analysis, however, both texts expose the many prisons in which most women and many men find themselves in contemporary Zimbabwe, from the physical carceral space itself to economic, patriarchal and emotional prisons, and offer new ways of representing those experiences, creatively blurring the boundaries of life narrative and fiction.

Fiona McCANN

University of Lille SHS/Institut Universitaire de France

Works Cited

- BUKENYA, Austin. "Oracy and Female Empowerment in Africa." Ed. Russell Kaschula. *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Contexts*. Claremont, South Africa: New Africa Books, 2001. 32-8.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1975. Trans. Alan Sheridan. 1987. London: Penguin, 1991.
- GAPPAH, Petina. *The Book of Memory*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015.
- HADJ-MOUSSA, Ratiba, and Michael NIJHAWAN, eds. *Suffering, Art and Aesthetics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- HARLOW, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. London; New York: Methuen, 1987.
- HUCHU, Tendai. *The Hairdresser of Harare*. 2010. Glasgow: Freight Books, 2013.
- LAURIE, Charles. *The Land Reform Deception: Political Opportunism in Zimbabwe's Land Seizure Era*. Oxford: OUP, 2016.
- LEJEUNE, Philippe. *Je est un autre. L'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias*. Paris: Seuil, 1980.
- MOORE, Linda, and Paul SCRATON. *The Incarceration of Women. Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- MOORE-GILBERT, Bart. *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation*. London; New York: Routledge, 2009.
- MORAN, Dominique, Nick GILL, and Deirdre CONLON, eds. *Carceral Spaces: Mobility and Agency in Imprisonment and Migrant Detention*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.
- MORAN, Dominique. *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.
- MUSENGEZI, Chiedza, and Irene STAUNTON, eds. *A Tragedy of Lives: Women in Prison in Zimbabwe*. Harare: Weaver P, 2003.
- RICOEUR, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago; London: U Chicago P, 2004.
- SCHAFFER, Kay, and Sidonie SMITH. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Scheffler, Judith A. ed. *Wall Tappings. An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 2000 to the Present*. 1986. New York: The Feminist P, 2002.
- STEWART, Julie. "Introduction." Musengezi and Staunton 1-10.
- WHITLOCK, Gillian. *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*. Oxford: OUP, 2015.