

“We Can Only Remind Each Other of It”

The farm as South African ‘lieu de mémoire’ in the process of building a national collective memory

Abstract

The portrayal of the farm in South African (literary) writing plays an important role as ‘lieu de mémoire’. The dramatic political changes of the early 1990s have made the development of a collective memory in South Africa a pressing issue, and this article explores how two recent texts deal with the notion of power and violence in relation to the notion of the farm in the process of creating a collective memory for South Africans.

Introduction: History and Memory in South Africa

When ‘southpaw’ Corrie Sanders won the World Boxing Organisation’s heavyweight world title in Germany in March 2003, he said in a media interview afterwards that he would finally be able to fulfil his dreams of buying a game farm in South Africa.¹ From police officer to boxer to game farm owner: it seems like a rather odd combination of elements, but within the South African collective memory these three elements: (state) power, violence (physical or systematic and structural), and the farm, stand for a particular potent combination. In this discussion the farm as particular South African ‘lieu de mémoire’ will be considered, first in its historical context, and then as locus in recent South African writing, with special reference to *Kroniek uit die Doofpot* (Miles 1991) and *Country of My Skull* (Krog 1998).²

South African history and nation-building

Those who follow the debate on South African history will be aware of the voices who

¹ Steenkamp, 11 March 2003.

² According to Pierre Nora a ‘lieu de mémoire’ plays a functional role in shaping a particular version of the past. He says, “A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (Nora 1996: xvii).

debate the need for, and even the necessity of, cultivating something called a ‘collective memory’ if the project of nation building, started with the first democratic elections held in 1994, in South Africa is to succeed.³ The term collective memory is certainly not just an intellectual fad shared by historians (and writers) in South Africa who have picked it up from recent theoretical developments in Europe, introduced by Maurice Halbwachs and recently worked out further by other prominent historians such as Jan and Aleida Assmann: given the history of South Africa, the issue of a collective memory for all South Africans is a rather challenging and daunting task.

Because of political developments in South Africa during the past decades, the history of the country is under severe scrutiny at the moment. This is in itself not surprising if one takes into consideration how a specific version of the past was used to justify white rule in South Africa as the logic result of a process of civilisation. This version of the past deliberately silenced other versions that threatened this ‘white’ version. The rewriting of South African history is a process that has been going on for some time, and attempts are made to include the silenced or erased parts of history. The programme of establishing and strengthening a sense of the communality of historical events is certainly part of the more important aspects of this historiographical rewriting.

One of the more obvious ways to ensure that a sense of collective memory gets instilled in the minds of a group of people is through the formal education system. In its report to the Minister of Education, the History/Archaeology Panel stated that “promoting a strong study of the past is a particular educational imperative in a country like South Africa, which is itself *consciously remaking* its current history.”⁴ Not ignorant of the complexity of the historical context of the South African situation, the panel makes a direct link between the programme of nation building, the formation of a democratic culture and inclusive notion of being South African, the past, and memory, when it argues that:

In a country like South Africa which has a *fractured national memory*, the *development of common historical memories* of such fundamental processes as migration or poverty or political change can play an integrative role in our culture and polity. Attending to the complex legacy of memory can also help to foster

³ Cf. Nuttall and Coetzee, 1998.

⁴ Department of Education 2000: Internet. Emphasis added, MvdW.

shared understanding of one of the deepest *imaginative functions* of history, which is to show that through the historical medium of time, in the movement of continuity, change and conflict, or action and reaction, no one can avoid confronting the costs and pain which history brings to the surface.⁵

To reformulate and represent the vision of the past of South Africa in new imaginative ways could be said to be not only the task of official historiographies and school text books, but also of literature. In the next section I will briefly consider the role of the farm as important 'lieu de mémoire' in the historiographic representation of the South African past, and then look at how this locus has been represented in two texts. After the analysis, I will briefly consider the role of texts such as these in the educational context (in the light of the comments made by the History/Archaeology Panel about the necessity to foster a common historical memory).

Land and the farm in the history of South Africa

A good starting point in the search for a common historical memory in South Africa would be the space shared by South Africans. This space is the land, and more specifically in the South African context, the land as farm. The earliest inhabitants of South Africa were farmers of various kinds: the Khoi in the Cape were aboriginal herding people and in the interior Bantu speaking people migrating southward from central Africa settled in the interior of South Africa as mixed farmers.⁶ With the arrival of white colonisers in the Cape the tradition of European farming such as wine-making was established. These facts, however, did not keep school history textbook writers from conjuring up another version that would suit the claim for white power better. Generations of South African school children were taught that the history of South Africa started in 1652 when Jan van Riebeeck was sent to the Cape with the order to build a fort and to supply passing VOC ships with fresh water, fruit and vegetables (in other words: with the mission to do some modest farming at the southern tip of Africa). It is certainly no co-incidence that for many years a public holiday was celebrated on 6 April to commemorate this 'founding' of South Africa. Within the revised history curriculum such a simplified Eurocentric perspective on history seems to be

⁵ Department of Education 2000, Internet. Emphasis added, MvdW.

⁶ Thompson, 2001.

no longer tolerated and the history of people living in South Africa before the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck has been incorporated in various ways into the formal historiography of the country.⁷

During the nineteenth century, white farmers moved away from the Cape province into the interior of the country, in order to get away from British imperial authority. They started farming in the interior part of the country, seizing land for their ‘cultivation’ (not only in a sense of tilling the soil, but also with a Biblically inspired civilisation agenda). This process of white movement into the country finally led to the acceptance of laws prohibiting Africans to possess land (the *Natives Land Act* of 1913). The exception to this rule was the establishment of ‘homeland’ regions, where black land ownership was allowed (the *Native Trust and Land Act* of 1936). This meant that by the middle of the 20th century, when the National Party achieved political power, a conflation of notions of land possession and ‘whiteness’ had been established and consolidated.

The ideals of an Afrikaner nation were strengthened by myths of a civilisation duty placed in the hands of whites and the honorary position in the country was given to the ‘Boere’, who were not only those who actually farmed, but had become the general descriptor of the white, Afrikaans speaking part of the South African society. The farm as locus where a big part of the South African past was enacted is also the locus where much of the complex relations between black and white South Africans were fostered and developed. However, for a big part the history of the farm in South Africa has been the simplistic story of (white) farm owner versus (black) farm labourer. In the past, before the land acts of the early twentieth century, black sharecroppers existed successfully in South Africa, but those who refused to become waged labourers for white farm owners were forced to withdraw to overpopulated, communally possessed territories (the ‘homelands’ or Bantustans).⁸ The possibility of economic independence became the prerogative of white farm owners, while blacks were left with the option of either working on (white) farms, or

⁷ Leslie Witz gives a critical overview of the changes in recently published history text books (books written for the new ‘outcomes-based education’ programme of the Department of Education) concerning the role and position of Jan van Riebeeck in South African history, explaining that, “the inverted past may have placed him at a different point in history – he is no longer the first South African – but it has left him in a place of prominence from which he looks unlikely to disappear” (Witz, 2000: 339).

⁸ Charles van Onselen (1996), describes the life history of one such a black sharecropper, in his study *The Seed is Mine: The life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper 1894 – 1985*, against the background of Apartheid.

search for a job in the cities. As far as the master narrative goes whites owned farms and blacks were farm labourers.⁹

The need for a more complex story about the farm is the motivation behind this paper. The farm holds an important position in the story of the genesis of the Afrikaner, but such a myth is problematic. In the discussion to follow it will be shown that the farm, despite past representations of it being the locus reminding of a courageous (white) past and prosperous (white) future, it is also the locus of tremendous terror and trauma. Not only the heroic stories told about the farm, but also the acknowledgement of the relation that exists between the farm as location and the evil that had taken place in the country, need to be considered by both black and white South Africans, with the aim of recognising that the experience of violence, and the abuse of power are shared by South Africans.

The farm and literature

The farm is not only an important element in social and political discourse, but forms an important part of the discourse on culture and identity, certainly for (Afrikaans-speaking) white South Africans. Examples about the conflation of the notions of identity and the farm can be found in many places; I will just cite the opening words of a famous Afrikaans song “Boereplaas”, to illustrate my point: “O Boereplaas, geboortegrond, jou het ek lief *bo alles*” (emphasis added, MvdW).¹⁰

⁹ After the ANC came into power in 1994, a Department of Land Affairs was created to oversee the process of dealing with this history of land ownership. A land reform programme (White Paper on Land Policy, 1997, and Land Restitution Bill, 1997) was initiated, consisting of restitution, redistribution and tenure reform.

Since the end of the 1990s, the issue of land reform has been a hot item in South Africa because of the land reform policies of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe. The policies of Mugabe are associated with the occurrence of much violence, leading to negative media reporting in the West and a sense of insecurity in South Africa among white farmers who fear that the same violent and undemocratic process taking place in Zimbabwe will happen in South Africa too, despite the fact that a constitutionally guaranteed process safeguards the process in South Africa against such Zimbabwean extremes. During the 1990s, incidents of farm attacks in South Africa received much attention in the white media, but as some have pointed out, the incidence of farm attacks is relatively small in comparison to the incidence of violence many of the township inhabitants in South Africa face on a day-to-day basis. Accusations of a ‘third force’ have been made in an effort to explain the farm attacks. In an attempt to provide an alternative explanation, Johnny Steinberg provides a convincing analysis of the situation on white farms in South Africa, and explains the context of violence and murders on farms in his study *Midlands* (2002), by carefully considering the very complicated history of black and white relations on the farms.

¹⁰ [O Boer Farm, place of birth, it’s you I love more than anything else]. Malvern van Wyk-Smith uses the same song as an example of an instrument with which the “spiritual and cultural foundation (...) of the Afrikaner’s national well-being and health” was provoked (Van Wyk Smith, 2001: 17).

It is not only in poetry and songs that the farm is represented as something special. A sub-genre of prose writing developed in Afrikaans (and to a much lesser extent in English) called the 'plaasroman' (farm novel).¹¹

Suffice it to mention just a few important elements of the farm novel: the locus of action is the farm which is portrayed as the place where all important actions take place and where generations, like the seasons, follow one after the other; much attention is paid to farming activities; an idyllic reality is portrayed, ignoring the cruelty of reality (such as dispossession of land, poor living conditions and harsh treatment of workers, etc.); all relations are organised and governed by the patriarch; white characters are ignorant of racial issues and the interaction between black and white is limited to the bare necessities; black characters only appear in the guise of silent, minor figures. In novels of this type, the farm is depicted as the space where patriarchal order rules, where the hero earns his right to the land through blood sweat and tears. The share of the black workers in performing the hard physical labour associated with farm work is usually not described, or at most just briefly glossed over.¹² Coetzee pointed out that the failure to mention who performs the labour is one of the contradictory issues regarding the farm novel and the South African reality, but can be understood if placed within a political, ideological frame.¹³ He says that the land and soil of South Africa was, in the past, seen to be a wild place that threatened the 'civilisation' of the European who had come to South Africa with this mission of carrying civilisation into the heartland of the dark continent. The remedy against this possible threat of nature was 'cheerful toil'. Toil, Coetzee says, was also the reason why claims to land are made: through the blood, sweat and tears of my father, and my father before him, we have built this farm into what it is today, and therefore we have a right to it.¹⁴

Although the farm novel is usually regarded as a sub-genre representing rather old-fashioned South African writing (the traditional examples of the farm novel written by authors such as Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Van den Heever, etc. were all written before

¹¹ It is not my aim to give a detailed description of this genre, see for the development of this sub-genre J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988), H. Roos's discussion of the development of Afrikaans prose in *Perspektief en Profiel* (1998) and H.P. van Coller's discussion about the farm novel and the ideological reflections of a political and social reality in South Africa (1995).

¹² For an interesting discussion on this issue of land rights, farm labour and the recent 'farm novel' writing, see Wentzel 2000, who links the current agricultural crises in South Africa to literary responses.

¹³ Coetzee, 1988.

¹⁴ Coetzee, 1988: 5.

the first half of the twentieth century) the farm as locus in the novel has certainly not become obsolete in a period when most white South Africans are urbanised and cannot claim (absolute) political power any longer. In recent South African writing the locus of the farm is used in various ways, and the legacy to the farm novel can be clearly read from these texts, even though this legacy is often parodied, for example, in *Foxtrot van die Vleisetters* (1993), by Eben Venter, and *Kikuyu* (1998) by Etienne van Heerden. The same holds, in a sense, for novels such as *Hierdie Lewe* (1993), Karl Schoeman, *Ek Stamel ek Sterwe* (1996) by Eben Venter, and *Op Soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (1998) by Christoffel Coetzee.¹⁵ Although not all of these texts can necessarily be categorised as ‘farm novels’ (or even parodied versions of the farm novel in some cases), the farm is conspicuously present as an important ‘lieu’.

One could argue that the same can be said about a novel such as *Kroniek uit die Doofpot* by John Miles and even Antjie Krog’s moving account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, *Country of My Skull*. I would like to show how, in both these texts, the farm plays a very important role and links up with the notions of violence and power.¹⁶

The farm as lieu has remained important, not only because of political issues such as land reform and farm violence, but also because of revelations made at the TRC hearings. During the testimonies given at the TRC hearings, shocking stories were revealed of death squads and training camps.¹⁷ Since the end of the 1980s rumours have been going around about organised police killings happening at a place called ‘Vlakplaas’, a farm north of Pretoria. These rumours were met with scepticism in South Africa, although a commission of inquiry was asked to look into these allegations during the early 1990s. This was followed by court cases against the most prominent death squad members. It was with the testimonies before the TRC about Vlakplaas that the notions of the farm, power and violence

¹⁵ *Foxtrot of the Meat Eaters* (Venter), *This Life* (Schoeman), *I am Stammering, I’m Dying* (Venter), *Searching for General Mannetjies Mentz* (Coetzee).

¹⁶ *Kroniek* was translated into English as *Deafening Silence* and in Dutch as *Kroniek uit die Doofpot* in 1992 (sic).

¹⁷ In 1995 the *National Unity and Reconciliation Act* was accepted by Parliament, starting a process that changed the collective memory landscape of South Africans in a dramatic way. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed and for months (from 1996 until 1998) South Africans were confronted with the horror of events that had taken place under the Apartheid regime. Stories told by both victims and perpetrators revealed the systematic and structural destruction, murder, intimidation and violence that raged in the country over decades, not only performed by security police members, but also performed in ANC training camps by comrades.

culminated most shockingly, and one cannot, with the memory of Vlakplaas, keep on thinking about the farm without taking the factors of violence and power into consideration too.

Kroniek uit die Doofpot

In 1991 John Miles published the novel *Kroniek uit die Doofpot*, the story of a black policeman, Tumelo John Moleko, a man with a clear sense of righteousness. He becomes the victim of white racism and is eventually killed (together with his wife) by police officers after a process of discrimination and systematic marginalisation following Moleko's growing knowledge of the involvement of the police in the disappearances of ANC members and other people who posed a 'potential threat' to the white government.¹⁸ It is the story of police brutality and describes the useless battle of an individual against the structural power of the Apartheid regime. Despite the fact that the notion of the farm plays an inconspicuous role in the novel (because I am certainly not claiming that *Kroniek* should be read as a farm novel, but rather as a novel where the farm as 'sign' is important for interpretation), I would like to argue that it is one of the more important references in the novel, linking the notion of identity (Moleko's identity) to that of structural repression, violence and injustice.

The novel starts in Senekal in the Free State, 1952, in a rural area. The reader learns that Moleko's family are farm labourers on white farms within a system of land tenure.¹⁹ When the young Moleko leaves this farm community in the Free State to go to Hammanskraal Police Training College to become a police officer (a job he had always considered to be righteous and honourable), he receives a clay pot from his mother as reminder of where he comes from: he, like the clay used for the pot, comes from the soil of Buurmansfontein.²⁰ The clay pot acts as reminder of who Moleko is (a person who believes in righteousness), and where he comes from (the farm Buurmansfontein). Moleko learns through painful personal experience that the search for justice within the South African system of racial repression is a lost cause, and the gradual demise of the clay pot (it gets broken by Nkosi, a fellow student who will eventually be part of the group who kills Moleko) mirrors this lost battle of Moleko.

¹⁸ This novel by Miles (who in the past had several of his books censored by the censorship board of South Africa) received three prominent South African book prizes and was filmed as a TV drama series in 1997.

¹⁹ Miles, 1991: 11-14.

²⁰ Miles, 1991: 18.

Moleko keeps a shard of the broken pot in his pocket as reminder of where he comes from. When Moleko is physically harassed by a white senior police officer, (the incident that triggers his fall from grace) the shard is explicitly mentioned, linking Moleko's background (the farm) quite literally with violence and power.²¹ When, after a long series of incidents, Moleko finally gets arrested (the episode which introduces his final senseless battle against the system), he recalls that the shard had fallen out of his pocket during the shuffle of the arrest, that it was picked up by someone (not himself), and thrown away: a symbolic gesture of his realisation that he has lost the battle for justice and fairness:

Hy onthou wel sy teenstribbeling toe hulle die klein potskerf optel wat uit sy sak geval het, daarna kyk, dit tussen die vingers omdraai... en wegsmyt: die laaste stukkie van sy kleipot.²²

It is not only the pot shard that acts as reminder of the farm as lieu in this novel. At some stage Moleko and his family celebrates Christmas by attending the local annual neighbourhood theatre performance, where the serious theme of the history of land ownership is alluded to. At the beginning of act one, an old lady offers the audience some tea, but apologises for the fact that she cannot offer them any milk, because they no longer have any cows. A young soldier replies: “‘Ons het nie meer melk nie,’ sing die jongeling al skommelend in sy weermag-gewaad, ‘want die Boere het ons koeie afgevat en lánkal, lankal die grond.’”²³

In another telling anecdote a meeting between the ‘Boere’ and the (white) head of the KwaNdebele police (one of the ‘homelands’) is described. One of the farmers asked at this meeting how the ‘crisis’ (of growing black resistance against the Apartheid regime) could be resolved, and the brigadier ‘jokingly’ suggested that all those (meaning black youth) between fourteen and twenty-five should be shot dead (revealing that for many South Africans no other solution could be conceived of beyond a violent and literal annihilation of

²¹ Miles, 1991: 101.

²² [He does remember his demur when they picked up the small pot shard that had fallen from his pocket, looked at it, turned it around between the fingers...and threw it away: the last little piece of his clay pot.] Miles, 1991: 259.

²³ [‘We don’t have any milk left,’ sings the young one in a swinging fashion in his army uniform, ‘because the Boers took our cows, and long ago, long ago (they took) the land]. Miles, 1991: 163.

the ‘problem’).²⁴ This passage clearly reveals the relation between the attitude of the farmers towards their position of ‘power’, the use of violence and the relation between them as white land owners, and black South Africans. The grim irony of this anecdote is that in Moleko’s case, this is exactly what had happened, and that there were many others like him, killed by such death squads as the one that operated from Vlakplaas.

Vlakplaas itself is also referred to: Moleko’s first ‘friend’ during his training as a police officer, Nkosi, becomes involved in security police activities and Moleko at one point gasps in exasperation that Nkosi frequents Vlakplaas.²⁵

The novel deals with a number of the issues that complicates the South African situation: the farm as basis for identification is shown to be not only a white prerogative (Moleko’s own identity is tied up with the farm, symbolised by the clay pot and eventually the pot shard), violence and violent murder for political motives were not only committed by whites on blacks: the character Nkosi stands as example for this (and mirrors real life people such as Joe Mamasela, famous Vlakplaas askari who was involved in many of the Vlakplaas killings), and the fear for one’s life is certainly not a white issue only (as many white South Africans are made to believe through, for example, the way that farm attacks are portrayed in the media).

Country of My Skull

In 1998 Antjie Krog published her account of the TRC hearings in *Country of My Skull*,²⁶ described by Sanders as “a hybrid work, written at the edges of reportage, memoir and fiction.”²⁷ In one of the chapters of *Country of My Skull*, Krog describes the amnesty hearings of a group of police officers who were responsible for the death of a young policeman and his wife. Those readers familiar with the text by Miles would recognise this incident represented by Krog. It turns out that Miles’s story was based on the life and murder of Richard Mutase (called Moleko in Miles’s novel), police officer, killed in 1987 by members of Vlakplaas. Krog uses the testimonies, and juxtaposes the different versions of

²⁴ Miles, 1991: 331.

²⁵ Ironically enough, the Afrikaans text says, “Nkosi *boer* in Vlakplaas!”, *boer* in this case meaning to frequent, but it also means *to farm*. Miles, 1991: 291.

²⁶ In 2000, Krog, who is perhaps better known as a poet, received the Swedish Hiroshima Foundation for Peace and Culture Award for this book. A movie version, directed by John Boorman, and starring Samuel L. Jackson and Juliette Binoche, was filmed in South Africa during the first half of 2003.

²⁷ Sanders, 2000: 15.

the story against the fictional account of Miles.

In an attempt to construct meaning from the different versions, Krog points her attention to the detail of the pillow which features in all the different accounts. She questions herself about choosing this focus point and concludes:

the image of the Mutases, butchered under soft pillows and fluffy blankets, says so much about the brutality of the crime. And at the same time it explodes a whole series of clichés – like the white fear of being killed in your bed, or the idea of living with your head in the clouds – under a sweetly scented pillow.²⁸

At the beginning of her text, Krog describes herself trying to fall asleep in the bedroom of a family farm house somewhere in the Free State, while her brothers are called to investigate an incident of cattle theft:

As if back into a womb, I crawl – the heavy-light eiderdown, the hot-water bottle. Through a window I see the sleeping farmyard washed away in moonlight. A plover calls far off. Overcome with the *carefreeness* of my youth, I doze off – *safe* in this stinkwood bed, safe in this sandstone house, this part of the Free State. Everything so quiet. (...) The night is suddenly filled with menace.²⁹

This ironic reference is certainly not lost on those who have experienced the brutality of the South African reality (such as Mutase and his wife did, as well as the countless other victims of [political] violence in South Africa). The horrifying irony is further heightened if one keeps in mind that at this point Krog is about to embark on a journey where this ‘carefreeness’ is about to be turned into knowledge of the countless violations of human rights. This notion of security, or the absence of security, power, the farm and violence can be seen as prominent threads in the whole narrative of *Country of My Skull*.

A parallel narrative operates in this text, apart from the testimonies delivered before the TRC, interviews with commissioners, panel members, those seeking for amnesty, and those telling their private, painful stories of loss and grieve. This second narrative is the

²⁸ Krog, 1998: 89.

²⁹ Krog, 1998: 4. Emphasis MvdW.

private story of Krog herself, struggling with notions of identity and identification. The notion of the farm and farmers, or 'Boere', plays a very important role in this text. Krog uses the farm as locus to open and close this personal dimension of her story. At the end of her 'report' of TRC activities, she describes a Christmas celebration on the family farm, and reflects on the fact that "the scene is so peaceful, we are so lucky, so privileged...But whereas this privilege used to upset me in the past, now I can hold it against a truth that we are all aware of. No longer an unaware privilege, but one that we know the price and mortality of."³⁰

This issue of knowing (and memory, by extension) is a crucial theme in the text. At some point before, she describes how her son, doing a project for school, is writing a song about Joe Mamasela and phones her to ask for a word that rhymes with 'Vlakplaas.' A friend, who has emigrated, asks Krog who Mamesela is, and Krog says:

Maybe this is all that is important – that I and my child know Vlakplaas and Mamasela. That we know what happened there. When the Truth Commission started last year, I realized instinctively: if you cut yourself off from the process, you will wake up in a foreign country – a country that you don't know and that you will never understand.³¹

However, this is not so easy, as Krog also demonstrates. In another scene, she describes how she asks a white farmer for his opinion on the TRC, and she describes the ensuing (verbally violent) scene:

He stops in his tracks. He looks me up and down, while his lip curls in disgust. 'The SABC and the Truth Commission. *Fôkôf!*' he explodes with such venom that passers-by look in our direction. *Fôkôf! Fôkôf!*' he screams as he storms into the Co-op.³²

The reaction of this farmer can be read as the unwillingness to become complicit in the

³⁰ Krog, 1998: 272.

³¹ Krog, 1998: 131.

³² Krog, 1998: 216.

history revealed before the TRC of a complicated, violent past. Krog describes an incident similar to this one, and offers the interpretation of a psychiatrist as explanation:

A columnist in the Free State writes: Reject the Truth Commission with the disgust it deserves – on untested evidence it tries to portray the Afrikaner as the icon of all evil. Untested evidence has become the truth of the ‘*boerehaters*’. ‘Don’t despair,’ says Kaliski [the psychiatrist, MvdW]. ‘The fact that a person feels compelled to say: “These things are not true, these things are biased,” points to the first step in dealing with the Truth Commission. Previously people said nothing, now at least they are denying the information. [...] I think people are too impatient. [...] It will take decades,’ he says, ‘generations, and people will assimilate the truths of this country piece by piece.’³³

Although *Country of My Skull* is also definitely not a ‘farm novel’, it deals with the farm as important locus, not only because so much of the atrocities described took place on farms (“In the beginning the only farm we knew about was Vlakplaas. Then it came to light that similar farms existed in the old Natal, the Transvaal, the Orange Free State and the Eastern Cape”³⁴), but because the farm as locus is an important signifier of black and white relations in South Africa. Therefore Krog brings together the elements of the country and the necessity to build functional relations which acknowledges the common humanity of South Africans. In the past South Africans were denied this common humanity, making it possible for such violent interaction to happen. However, because this past is brought into the open and into that space where it could become part of the collective memory of South Africans, Krog, who at one point argues that no poetry should come from this (the knowledge of the trauma that South Africa has to deal with),³⁵ can conclude her text with this poem:

because of you
this country no longer lies

³³ Krog, 1998: 129 – 130, citing dr. Kaliski.

³⁴ Krog, 1998: 204.

³⁵ Krog, 1998: 49. This calls to memory the remark made by Adorno that any poetry written after Auschwitz would be barbaric.

between us but within [...]
You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you.³⁶

What both Miles and Krog have produced are texts that deconstruct the experience of violence and repression (usually, in master narratives depicted as a stock tale that only recognises the experience and anxiety of white South Africans and which denies the experience and memory of *all* the victims of physical, structural and systematic violence) as very complex issues with many layers. These are attempts, one could argue, of contributing to the process of collective memory formation in an effort to remain aloof and sensitive to the past.

History, literature and Education

It is with the imperative of remaining aloof and critical about versions of the past that one welcomes novels such as *Kroniek uit die Doofpot* by Miles and accounts such as *Country of My Skull* by Krog, where elements of the uncomplicated farm tradition are critically scrutinised, questioned, and deconstructed. Rigney suggests that the dust (probably caused by all of those jumping on the ‘collective memory’ band-wagon) around the notion of collective memory is slowly settling, which will allow us to see a more useful notion of the construct of collective memory: “(T)he multiple ways in which images of the past are communicated and shared among members of a community through political acts of remembrance and through publicly accessible discourses.”³⁷ These political acts of remembrance can already be seen in the way that the South African Education Department has been dealing with the subject History after 1994. However, I would like to argue that part of the publicly accessible discourse is not only the official versions of history (about which there probably never will be consensus, and perhaps this is a good thing: many stories will prevent one version to petrify into a repressive master narrative) but also those versions of the past that are accessible through literature.

³⁶ Krog, 1998: 278 – 279.

³⁷ Rigney forthcoming: 4.

If one would recognise that literature has the ability to represent the past in a complex and polyphonic way, it would make sense to include texts such as *Kroniek* and *Country* in the school curriculum. In this regard it is really worrying that in 2001 *Kroniek* (or rather, the English translation thereof) was judged to be not suited as text to be taught in literature classes in Gauteng by a committee of teachers who had to evaluate a selection of texts to be prescribed for learners.³⁸ In the summary report supplied by the Gauteng Department of Education (a compilation of the remarks made by the individual teachers) the text is commended for its “exploration of relevant socio-political patterns in South Africa” but the negative advice is motivated by arguments such as:

It is too long, lacks any humour and the language is too intricate. The plot is very complicated and hard to follow, and the ending is too abrupt. The theme of racism is easily identifiable. While many learners will be able to relate to it, the message is not conveyed in an enjoyable way. [...] On the issue of the soundness of the book’s values, evaluators were sharply divided. [...] (The division) represents a strong suspicion that the novel would be highly controversial in the classroom.³⁹

What this incident perhaps shows is how difficult it still is for the general South African public to come to terms with knowledge about issues related to the painful past and the subsequent inability to start facing them together, hence the warning that the novel might be too controversial to teach in the classroom.

Conclusion

In 2001 it was announced that Vlakplaas would be turned into a national centre of healing and reconciliation. Here, indigenous knowledge will be used for the cultivation of indigenous plants, herbs and trees used in traditional healing.⁴⁰ With this decision, taken by a committee representing the government and traditional healers, this specific farm as ‘lieu de mémoire’ of a horrific part of the South African past, gets ascribed with new meaning. The wounds left by the trauma of the violence committed by Vlakplaas death squad members are given the

³⁸ Isaacson, 15 April 2001.

³⁹ GDE, no date [2001?]: 111.

⁴⁰ Moshabela, 28 October 2001.

chance to be healed by this centre of reconciliation. This does not mean, however, that the scars of the wounds will be polished away and quietly forgotten. At some point in her narrative, Krog writes: “May my hand fall off if I write this.”⁴¹ The despair at the gross violations and all the pain caused seem to be simply too much. However, at the end of the text, she has no other choice, but to return to poetry and she concedes: “I want this hand of mine to write it. For us all.”⁴² Perhaps it is the task of literature, not to polish the scars away with pretty stories, but to keep investigating the wounds to check that inflammation and infection do not set in. Or, as Krog formulates it poetically: “because by a thousand stories I was scorched a new skin.”⁴³

Cathy Caruth has pointed out that literature can also be very instrumental in the fostering of a collective memory. She argues that:

we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which *one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another*, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the *encounter with another*, through the very possibility and surprise of *listening to another's wound*.⁴⁴

The task in South Africa is to make the polyphonic voices heard, not just the single powerful voice of the master story. In this way, the project of collective memory in South Africa might perhaps be successful. These stories, deconstructing the complicated notions of the farm, violence and power can, and should, contribute to the making of a collective memory in South Africa, a memory that does not support a repressive myth about the past, but allows for the different experiences to be recognised and remembered, and from which a process of healing can perhaps emerge. The past cannot be changed: “we can only remind each other of it.”⁴⁵ The challenge is to turn this reminding into a collective memory.

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⁴¹ Krog, 1998: 49.

⁴² Krog, 1998: 278.

⁴³ Krog, 1998: 279.

⁴⁴ Caruth, 1996: 8, emphasis MvdW.

⁴⁵ Miles 1991: 354, translation MvdW.

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Biography

Margriet van der Waal (1976) is currently busy with a Ph.D. at the Department of Comparative Literature, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, on the influence of political change on literature education in South Africa. She has written her M.A. thesis on cultural identity in South Africa with reference to *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee.