

# THE PLACE OF “VICARIOUS MEMORIES” IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of apartheid memories within a contemporary dispensation. It argues that memories are an important constituent of a democracy which aspires towards social cohesion and social justice ideals. It examines how a group of post graduate students at a selected university make sense of remembering past atrocities, as vicarious witnesses. What emerges is a set of competitive responses to remembering the past. This implies that we have to work much harder at engaging with memories of the past in democratic spaces such as universities, as a way of working towards a fully inclusive national identity.

**Key words:** remembering, forgetting, apartheid past, university students, vicarious, memories

## INTRODUCTION

During apartheid, the state harnessed “solitary amnesia” as an ideological instrument to silence the oppressed majority. The outcome of this systemic repression was that the privileged remained socio politically oblivious to the struggles of the oppressed and the oppressed experienced the double trauma of being violated; as well as having to repress these violations. Both experiences are significant as they contributed to social divisions during that time and has to the potential to continue to do so if the status quo of memory repression is continued. During apartheid it served the ideological purposes of “divide and rule”, and this social stratification in terms of experiences and sharing contributed to a deeply divided apartheid South Africa. The questions that emerge are,

- To what extent does remembering and forgetting still feature in a post-apartheid context?
- To what extent does the silencing of memories and experiences still serve as a socially divisive device that reinforces historical violations?
- Why is it important to remember?
- What are the socio political implications of forgetting as we aspire towards a fully inclusive democracy?

This article aims to explore how remembering apartheid atrocities and injustices feature in contemporary discourses amongst a group of young students at a South African university.

The question that directs this analysis is, “how is the subject of memory spoken about and experienced differently in contemporary SA; and what are the implications of these discourses for social cohesion within a contemporary dispensation?”

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The outcome of Apartheid’s solitary amnesia is that we have repositories of painful memories that are bouncing against counter experiences and memories within a democratic space that is trying constitutionally obligated to equity, reparation and social cohesion. “Solitary amnesia”, in which a state systemically selects certain memories and represses others is criticised as a cowardly act that engenders guiltless memories (Tzanelli 2007, 254). It is this desire to remember as a form of validation of the experiences that were historically repressed, *Vis a Vis* the desire to forget what was not experienced that needs to be examined. The question is, to what extent does this social stratification continue in a new dispensation and what is the value of remembering and forgetting in this post conflict dispensation. These parallel memories and experiences of violent repression and un/witting oblivion to the experiences of others continues to haunt SA and attempts at social cohesion.

## **MEMORY AND HISTORY AS PART OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP**

Not all memories are recalled by those who have experienced events, sometimes as in some post conflict societies as contemporary SA, memories are recalled by second generation citizens. These memories or “non-participant narratives”, which the narrator has not experienced is significant in they represent the institutionalisation of a shared group identity and its concomitant discourses (Achugar 2007, 523). These memories can also be referred to as “Vicarious memories”, which are memories that have not been witnessed first-hand but have been handed down (Palmberger 2006, 531). Integral to these memories is the deep emotional impact that they carry despite the recaller/s not having experienced it first-hand (Palmberger 2006, 531; Bohlin 1998, 182). Vicarious memories are usually painful and disturbing (Palmberger 2006, 531). These memories are invaluable for groups in a society, particularly those who have been in/directly affected by it; and are inextricably related to wider social contexts and narratives (Palmberger 2006, 531).

Memories, though located in the past persist relentlessly into the present and in so doing merge temporalities of the past and the present (Zelizer 1995, 215). Integral to the identity of

any citizen, especially in post-conflict societies, is the need to remember the past and to take responsibility for that past as an ethical imperative (Booth 1999, 249; Bevernage 2012, 3).

Engaging in remembering and forgetting goes beyond individual and neutral choices of recall. Memory is social by nature (Zelizer 1995, 215) and it is this relational component of memory that constitutes its power dynamic and regulatory dangers. The memories of a nation are characteristically competitive by nature, as different groups struggle to influence and mould these memories to shape their role and position in the present and future (Weldon 2009, 11). Indelibly present in the process of memory is the *politics of remembering* that is, who determines what is to be remembered and by whom – who gets to control the production and dissemination of these memories (Brendese 2014, 2). The silencing of memories are usually perpetrated by those who have control and power, and who have benefitted from the institutions that created the conditions for the suffering that were experienced in these memories (Edkins 2003, 5). Memory narratives that depict this suffering in its retelling therefore pose a problem for some citizens as it displaces the power and authority of those who have benefitted from this suffering (Edkins 2003, 5).

The power dynamic implicit in memory makes the forgetting of memories as significant as the remembrance of them (Palmberger 2006, 527). This is particularly pertinent in post conflict societies where what should be remembered and what should be forgotten becomes a site of struggle (Palmberger 2006, 527). Remembering and forgetting Apartheid atrocities and violations have become a site of struggle in contemporary SA politics. Implicit in past memories of post conflict societies are experiences of dehumanised human rights atrocities, which would serve previous benefitters of such a dispensation better if their complicity were silenced within a new dispensation that aspires towards social cohesion (Palmberger 2006, 527).

The dynamic between forgetting and memory is a crucial one as what is forgotten and what is remembered, and by whom, rests with those who hold the power in society. The struggle for painful memories to become part of the national discourse in post conflict societies is at the same time a struggle for a self-determination within an alternate dispensation. This is the case in SA as the historically disenfranchised fight for their place as citizens within a new dispensation, and the historically privileged fight to hold onto historical privileges and socio political spaces.

Although memories in their interpretations are subject to change the fact that it did happen and who perpetrated it cannot be refuted (Achugar 2007, 523). To refute these memories is at the same time to refute the suffering that was endured (Tzanelli 2007, 253). The “solitary amnesia” (Tzanelli 2007, 254) prevalent during apartheid was at the same time a disavowal of the suffering of the vast majority of South Africans; and to support the repression of these

memories within a contemporary context would be a reinforcement of those historical violations. Inherent in this repression, silencing and denial is the moral culpability that accompanies such acts of denial (Tzanelli 2007, 253). Foucault’s “limits and forms of *conservation*” highlight the discursive constraints of what is allowed to be remembered, what is declared to be silenced and who authors these silences (in Burchell, Colin and Miller 1991, 60). For Foucault, these silences, effacements of memories and the conditions that render them thus, are real events and not just abstract narratives or language practices (in Burchell et al. 1991, 59). What is forgotten and who determines what is forgotten are discursive practices that reinforce and or make power and impuissance and thus social control possible, and it is for this reason that discourses of forgetting are a matter of grave concern in post conflict societies. For Habermas such forgetting poses a serious challenge to democratic principles of criticality and ethical responsibility (cited in Tzanelli 2007, 254). It is thus important for any democracy to engage with these struggles if it aims to fulfil its ideals of social justice and work towards reparation.

## **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH**

This article emerges from a selection of essays that were written as a form of assessment for a citizenship education module that was taught to a group of post graduate students at a South African University. The module explored citizenship from the vantage point of memory and responsibility. What is significant about these students is that even though some of them have been born at the end of apartheid most of them are second generation South Africans, as they have not experienced the atrocities of apartheid personally. This experience of depicting a memory that was not experienced personally is referred to as “vicarious witnessing” (Hirsch 2008, 105) or “vicarious memory” (Palmberger 2006, 531). Twenty years after apartheid young South Africans are vicarious witnesses of apartheid atrocities.

Students were required to write an essay that explored the existential dilemma/s that they have and/or are experiencing as contemporary South Africa citizen with regard to their identities as an intentional/unintentional “bearers of the past”. This study looks specifically at what they said about the place of apartheid memories within a contemporary post conflict society.

Although these students are about the same age, how they see themselves as South Africans within the context of a fractured past that was characterised by countless inhumane atrocities, is largely influenced by the diversity of their social profiles. I thus locate what the students say in their texts within a heteroglossic discursive space. Heteroglossia, means that words are never abstract, apolitical/ahistorical or asocial utterances but are always influenced

by different milieus which invariable ensure that such words are imbued with specific meanings that preclude other meanings (Bakhtin 1981, 428).

I am interested in what students say, how they understand their roles as intentional or unintentional bearers of the past. How their contexts influence these choices and experiences. Yet narratives and expressions are more than semantic patterns, they derive from and reflect thoughts and perspectives of the world. These meaning making frames that enable words to be imbued with particular meanings as opposed to others are what we could refer to as a discourse. McKinney (2007), looks at the difficulties that South African students experience in talking about race. She (McKinney 2007, 216) argues that, “...language, or expression, and lived experiences are intimately connected and that discourse is central in constructing identity and in constructing as well as reflecting social change.”

Given the discursive nature of this study it lends itself to a critical discourse analysis approach.

The students’ texts will be explored using a critical discourse analysis methodology that is informed by a Foucauldian and Bakhtian understanding of discourse.

What people say or write or do are not merely symbolic in an abstract/neutral linguistic sense, but are social actions (Fairclough 2003, 21–22; Butler 1997, 8). Amongst other things, texts can also be characterised as “social events” (Morgan 2010, 1; Fairclough 2003, 26–27).

As a discursive practice language is an “act” which has “consequences” (Butler 1997, 8). Morison, foregrounds language as a discursive practice which is able to do things to people, “Oppressive language ... does more than represent violence; it is violence” (1993 cited in Butler 1997, 6). By virtue of enabling or constraining social actions/power representations do not just become discursive spaces and sites of struggle for sense making, identity making and power struggles, they also perform certain acts and can injure people.

The way people make sense of their world/society has a direct impact on the shaping of that world/society. Engaging in social critique should therefore entail how people make sense of their world/society, and since such sense-making is discursive, engaging in a critique of any society should also entail critiquing the discourse/s that are prevalent in that discursive space (Fairclough 2013, 8).

A Foucauldian analysis is wary of any technicist /mechanical approach to understanding or interpreting discourses, and hence a rigid methodology with its concomitant set of principles procedures belies this approach (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2008, 91; Graham 2011, 663).

Engaging in discourse analysis entails identifying a “corpus of statements” (Arribas-Ayllon et al. 2008, 98). According to Arribas-Ayllon et al. (2008, 98) these “corpus of statements” could be identified by invoking the following question:

- “How is the same subject talked about differently?”

In this respect I examine how a group of students look at remembering SA’s apartheid past differently.

In analysing these essays, I selected a “corpus of statements” that reflected their histories such as whether they were born during or post-apartheid. I also selected statements that depicted how students felt about remembering the past as well as statements about “feeling responsible for apartheid/being bearers of the past”.

## RESULTS

The understanding of being either witting or unwitting bearers of the past is an issue that evoked deep emotional response amongst these students. The answers here were heteroglossic in that they were context dependent and reflected a diversity of contexts. How these young people experienced apartheid seems to have some influence on the extent to which they see themselves as bearers of the past. Although all of these students were born after apartheid or were quite young when apartheid was coming to its end, there still seems to be some kind of difference in how students perceive themselves as being bearers of the past.

Competing narratives emerge with regard to how students engage with the past and its memories. Two dominant discourses emerge from these narratives. These can be identified as “remembering” and “forgetting” the past.

## REMEMBERING AND TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

The process of moving on in the face of their experiences presents an existential dilemma for these students,

“The idea of Democratic South Africa requires an acceptance of each other, but somehow this idea and my ‘responsibility’ conflict and give rise to my existential dilemma. What am I to do, do I forget the past and accept all South Africans or do I not.”

“The apartheid era was a catastrophic time for our country, it left many people bruised and scarred for life particularly the black society. ... It is said that I am free but in all honestly I am a captive to the past, I am living in a world whereby the scars of apartheid define the person I am. ... the scars of the past and the continuous reminder of apartheid fear is instilled in me. I am free but my mind is still enslaved by the past.”

Deeply implicit in this recollection is the criticism of apartheid’s atrocities, and the reversibility of this past as it persists into contemporary South Africa. The discourse of the reversibility of

time runs deep among this group of students, as the pains and fears of the past persist into their present lives.

There is also a sense of taking ownership of the past and its atrocities despite not having being present during that time,

"Yes we have reconciled but I can never forget what happened, this is my past."

And another student reinforces this sense of ownership of a past experienced vicariously,

"I think the apartheid past belongs to me. The apartheid law still has a depraving effect on me."

This sense of ownership inserts a sense of group solidarity and timelessness in conceptions of pain and injustices as students will themselves to remember. This remembering it seems has no projected end,

"I feel as apartheid will forever be part of our lives whether we like it or not and it is transferred from generation to generation."

There is a sense in which the atrocities that were perpetrated upon loved ones by virtue of blood and a shared sense of identity are too deep to forget and move on. And though there is a definite inclination to move on the need to remember is deep.

Vicarious memories can be very poignant and in so doing speaks to deep seated emotions and concomitant responsibilities towards these events or people of the past, even though they have never been experienced first-hand. According to Climo, vicarious memories evoke, '... great personal and emotional commitment ...' (2002, 118). In a similar way, students feel a sense of responsibility to remember the past hardships of their loved ones,

"That is why my identity as an unintentional bearer of the past comes into play because I cannot be separated from the realities of my family, the reality that South African society still reeks of the brilliant system of Apartheid. I owe it to my people."

For these students living in a democracy does not obliterate the hardships that people experienced during the apartheid era. And neither, they seem to suggest, does a democracy guarantee the effacement of apartheid and its effects. Despite the fact that they want to move on and visualise a more democratic future, trust issues run deep. This lack of trust within a new dispensation is exacerbated by the residual effects of apartheid. They cannot leave the past

behind because they are still subject to racism in a new dispensation,

"It has been said so many times that apartheid is a thing of the past and it happened so many years ago but I feel as though we are still living in the old South Africa."

This student depicts these sentiments very clearly and poses a very insightful question regarding the timelessness of oppression, hardships and pain,

"Does living in a contemporary South Africa, mean that one should forget the past of black people?"

There is also a deep sense of appreciation for apartheid activists and an obligation to protect this hard earned freedom,

"I am responsible for Apartheid and I am grateful to each and every hero and heroine who fought against it, I have what I have now because of them. I feel I am responsible and I owe it to the people who fought for this freedom to respect it and never abuse it and live it responsibly."

The sense of responsibility for the past is underpinned by the moral dimensions that are carried forth by the desire to take ownership and to remember this past and its deeds that were not experienced directly. Although this student argues that he cannot take responsibility and feel guilty for the atrocities perpetrated at that time, his responsibility is to take ownership of this past and to keep these memories alive,

"What happened in the past was not my fault, I cannot take responsibility of what happened and I don't feel guilty about it. I have done nothing wrong and there was nothing I could do to avoid what happened. I was affected by what happened in the past, I have lost people who were close to my heart and some of them are still paralysed because of apartheid struggle. White racists, who believed that this country's laws should only favour white people, kill our brothers and sisters and those wound would never be healed. It was so painful when my uncles have to leave home because they were beaten by Ciskean policemen under L. L. Sebe, they have to stay in bushes without having something to eat. Yes we have reconciled but I can never forget what happened, this is my past."

This sense of seeking solidarity with a past of which they did not experience first-hand is significant.

"I think the apartheid past belongs to me."

Although apartheid is officially over, the fears that it instilled in people during that time filters undeterred into a new dispensation. Although this student is aware of the imperative to move on he is fearful that by forgetting the past it could be repeated,



“I pledge myself never to forget the history of my South African people, both of the Whites, the Blacks, the coloureds, the Indians and everyone in between. I will write it in my heart, not as a record against anyone but for my own safety and the next generation’s sake. For in forgetting there is danger, that of repeating the mistakes of the past and to reverse the injustices that we ourselves declared as inhumane. I gladly accept the responsibility of being the guardian of this expensive freedom ....”

## FORGETTING AND MOVING ON

Another set of narratives construct an alternate set of discourses about the past. These students, who identify themselves as “white”, are adamant that they are not bearers of the past that they prefer to forget it and move on.

The latter group often describe their experiences of apartheid in terms of how they were brought up. Their experiences of apartheid/the apartheid era is politically neutral and alienated from the atrocities that were perpetrated at the time,

“I was raised in a very Afrikaans family where everyone attended church on Sundays and family is the most important thing. One could even say I was raised in a typical South African ‘boere’ family. I can however say this is the furthest thing from the truth. We stayed on a farm when I was younger, where we had many black labourers. To me however they were never the workers, they were family. My parents and the workers all worked very hard in the fields together and the women worked in the house. At night, we would all enjoy dinner together. My parents are very open-minded people and never judged people on their race, culture or sexual orientation; everyone was accepted.”

Theirs is not a vicarious recollection of painful memories, in so doing they differentiate themselves from the previous group. Although some recognise and acknowledge the atrocities of the past, they are anxious to move to a different time that leaves the past behind,

“The Apartheid past was a terrible time in South African history, but it is time to move on.”

For this group there are no memories of apartheid atrocities, either real or vicarious. There is an explicit rejection of any kind of obligation to remember the past. They see what happened in the past as a “talking point”, rhetorical at best and an albatross which they are being forced to carry,

“When I was the age of 4, Apartheid came to an end. I have no recollection of Apartheid, no images in my memory of a separation between colours, and absolutely no hand in the hardship people had to go through during the Apartheid years. The only images I have of that time, is what was shown to me thereafter, and the stories I have heard about it. I feel about Apartheid the way I feel about Germany under the rule of Hitler.”

“If I, as a South African, cannot critically think about being a ‘bearer of the past’, and I am not

allowed to question why I am burdened with the consequences of that past which I had no part in, does that make me a good citizen? Does complacency make a citizen good?”

“My main question to all South Africans is this: If South Africa did not have Apartheid, what would we have to talk about? What do we as South Africans have apart from Apartheid? ... How can we possibly ever move forward as a nation, if we keep looking back at what happened in the past. ... We cannot keep living in the past, if we have any hope of a better, brighter future. Things will never change in South Africa unless we actively decide to stop placing the label of Apartheid on ourselves. We are all equals and it is time we start treating each other as such.”

These students see time as discontinuous, in other words they see apartheid as a period which they were not born in and a dispensation which they did not perpetrate, and therefore one which is separate to the current dispensation. This discontinuity in time exculpates them of any moral obligation for remembrance or regret for the past,

“I was born in 1989 five years before apartheid in South Africa ended.”

“My friends feel the same as I do, well most of them do. Why must we be bearers of the past as we were not part of the apartheid era? I am a South African in post-apartheid.”

“I don’t want the apartheid past to belong to me but unfortunately it does.”

“Take apartheid away as a factor in South Africa then there is nothing to talk about. Apartheid is like South Africa’s identity. This frustrates me I would rather leave the past in the past. Every day I get reminded about the apartheid and why must I suffer for the things that happened in the past. The past boils down to will I have work one day and will my children have a future in South Africa? It feels like I am a victim of the past. This is the challenges associated with my identity in South Africa; the past still lives on in the present.”

“No I can’t move on if the past gets thrown into my face. ... I was five years old when apartheid ended. I can’t remember a thing about apartheid at that time, pictures and stories people speak about is all I know.”

Critical to this position is the understanding of not being part of the apartheid regime and its machinations.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The question at this stage is, why is “remembering the past” spoken about so differently within a post-apartheid context? In other words why is this social division regarding remembering and forgetting apartheid so remnant of the social divisions of experiences during apartheid?

## **REMEMBERING THE PAST**

This discourse privileges the memories of apartheid. The persistence of memories and the merging of temporalities (Zelizer 1995, 215) emerge strongly in the discourses of remembering that vividly recalls and takes ownership of past sufferings. Even though these memories were

not directly experienced, much emotion and pain are visible in these recollections. Deep emotional feelings are usually accompanied through “vicarious witnessing” (Palmberger 2006, 531). Achugar (2007, 523) and Palmberger (2006, 531) extend the significance of such memories from the individual to the institutionalisation of a shared group identity and its sets of discourses. Apartheid memories within a post conflict South Africa thus represent not just an identity for some individuals but are integral to the identity, contexts and discourses of an entire group of people who experienced the atrocities of apartheid both directly and vicariously. Holding onto these memories is thus significant within a post-apartheid context as previously oppressed groups and historically privileged groups struggle for socio political inclusivity and power within this dispensation.

The vitality of discourses (Foucault 1972, 131; Bakhtin 1981, 292) and the struggles for power that is inherent in discourses (Foucault 1972; Bakhtin, 1981) needs to be recognised within all contexts, most especially post conflict contexts such as contemporary South Africa. Effacing apartheid memories from dominant discourses is a strategy that is used by those who once orchestrated these violations and benefitted from them, as remembering them displaces former power and privileges (Edkins 2003, 5). For those who identify themselves with the white identity imposed and constructed by apartheid, these memories challenge any aspirations to uncritical social cohesions and socio-political benefits that take liberal notions of equality into account. The “limits and forms of *conservation*” (Foucault in Burchell et al. 1991, 60) that is inherent in the remembering and forgetting of apartheid memories, are real events that serve to silence not just the memories of violations but also to continue to silence the violated.

## FORGETTING THE PAST

These students see the need to identify themselves according to apartheid constructed categories of “black and white”. Within the confines of these categories students who refer to themselves as white, articulated a discourse of forgetting the apartheid past. In mimicking the past these discourses emerge from particular milieus of apartheid experiences as separate and mutually exclusive. This hierarchy is worthy of notice as it reflects the differential divisions of the past and can thus be socio politically productive and constitutive in injurious ways.

The regulating of what should be remembered and what should be forgotten are significant discursive practices of exclusions and inclusions. By placing limits on apartheid memories such a discourse creates the conditions for prohibiting the discursive possibilities for self-determination of citizens who were once denied this right.

The antithesis of the rational, peaceful, future orientated, contemporary post conflict South African citizen is the irrational, emotional, troublesome, conflict ridden, apartheid past

saturated contemporary South African citizen. Within such a discursive space the history of the past and its representation in the memory of contemporary citizens assumes an irrational identity that is excluded from the now rational public citizenry. The effacing of apartheid memories through its dismissal as something that needs to be left behind if a peaceful and constructive future is to be considered speak into existence an abnormal, ungovernable and unwarranted object: black people and their problems as objects of discourse. In this way the reinforcement of people who were referred to as black, as objects to be controlled, is enabled by the discursive conditions set up by what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten about apartheid.

Moving on from the past is a preferred response to memories of apartheid atrocities within this discourse. Central to this discourse is the imperative “to move on”, to move away from the traumas of the past and to create new national identity of inclusivity, consensus, peace and tolerance. This discourse reverts to conservative ways of perceiving the construction of national identities, in which the past is anathema to the building of a national identity. There is however an alternate more humanising way of reconciling past memories with the building of a national identity. Inherent in the construction of a collective national identity is an understanding of “moving on” that recognises memories and take into account historical pains and sufferings (Weldon 2009, 8). Such an approach acknowledges past hurts as an integral part of nation building. Tzanelli’s (2007, 253) argument of how the effacement of painful memories is at the same time a denial of the pain and suffering that was experienced challenges the moral dimensions that underpin these discourses of “moving on”. One of the predicates of nation building in South Africa is the recognition of how apartheid repressed and oppressed people in cruel and inhumane ways. Tzanelli’s (2007, 253) argument enables us to conclude that to dismiss the memories of these atrocities would be to also deny that these experiences were real. By denying the reality of these atrocities and the ensuing sufferings that were experienced, is to displace the identity of historically disadvantaged groups by not only closing spaces for reparation, but by denying these groups a real part of their identity and experiences of subjugation and pain. Butler refers to such a discursive practice as “discursive injuries” that not only enables one to be “put in one’s place” but that such allocated spaces “may be no place” (1997, 4). Once again historically displaced South Africans are being “put in their place”, and are being ontologically displaced by representatives of previous groups that held privilege and power.

Seeing apartheid South Africa and contemporary South Africa as two mutually exclusive periods invoke the Enlightenment notion of the irreversibility of time. Such discourses thus lack what Bevernage (2012, 14) refers to as an alternate “historical consciousness”, which petitions

that past memories of offence should not be forgotten.

## DISCOURSE AS DOMINATION

Integral to national building within a democracy are social justice issues of equity and equality. The power dynamic in memory and forgetting makes it a significant demonstration of social justice. Palmberger characterises forgetting and memories as sites of struggle in post conflict societies in which particular groups harness forgetting to benefit their own political agendas (2006, 527). Apartheid memories carries with it a deep discomfort for these young people who categorise themselves as white, hence their deep need to want to forget apartheid and its memories. Apartheid memories depict those categorised as white during apartheid in a morally displaced light. Effacing these memories from dominant discourses once again imbues the historically privileged with moral currency. What then are the consequences of such a discourse? Discourse is an action that has consequences (Butler 1997, 8). Effacing memories of injustices serves to once again oppress historically oppressed South Africans. An oppressive discourse is a violent act which is committed in its act of enunciation (Butler 1997, 6). The “solitary amnesia” that was used during apartheid is once again being invoked. It is in the declaration to forget the atrocities of apartheid and move on that the crime of domination and injury is once again perpetrated against historically oppressed South Africans. In this moment *differential difference* is once again invoked and social justice rejected.

Given the performative nature of discourses (Foucault 1972; Bakhtin 1981; Butler 1997) such discourses of forgetting in order to benefit the social position and image of a particular group of people incurs a violence upon those whose memories stand to be effaced.

The danger of the productive power within these kinds of discursive practices that aim to censure what should or should not be spoken about are that they “operate to make certain kinds of citizens possible and others impossible” (Butler 1997, 132). These socially pernicious discursive acts of including some and excluding others within any society especially post conflict ones are acts that all societies, particularly those previously marginalised groups who are vulnerable to such recurrences, need to be vigilant about. That it is currently being institutionalised in discourses about memory within the contemporary SA context with its constitutional promises of healing the injustices of the past and addressing issues of social justice, is a cause for concern. The repression of certain narratives and voices is not limited to what is *sayable* or *not sayable* in social contexts, but is part of a greater political agenda; it is about who is imbued with social power and who is deprived of that power (Butler 1997, 132).

The discourse of forgetting in contemporary South Africa is redolent of Foucault’s (1972, 25; Ball 2006, 48) notion of how discourses exclude and include through silences, not through

what is said, but through what is not said.

Remembering the past is always difficult, and more so in post conflict contexts, as previously divided citizens struggle for their place in more inclusive socio-political discourses. The desire to remember apartheid sufferings and violations is a profound experience for some and forms an indelible part of their identity both as individuals and as a group. The desire to forget the sufferings and violations of the past, constructs an alternate identity of a group of people who choose to silence this experience. In so doing the latter group displace the identities of the former group and their history of oppression which they (former group) argue, persists into the present. Such a scenario positions these two discourses at opposite ends of the continuum, and in so doing risks the construction of a diverse but coherent national identity.

The “politics of remembering” (Brendese 2014, 2) plays a significant role in the balancing of power and social justice as both historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups try and construct a national identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Remembering the past and disseminating these memories conflicts with the counter narratives of forgetting the past and silencing these memories. It is possible to remember the past and build an affirming and constructive democracy and national identity. Yet much work needs to be done to enable South Africans to engage with these different memories, in a way that is both respectful and liberating. Privileging the forgetting of the past in social institutions like, inter alia, universities, schools, and the media runs counter to democratic ideals of social justice and social responsibility that is integral for any democracy to sustain itself. Democracy is usually premised on the recognition and engagement of diversity, but this diversity should not just be limited to demographics but should also include the divergent ways that citizens engage with memory and temporality (Brendese 2014, 2). The transformation of Higher education curricula need to engage with such contentious issues, and foster such conversations as a norm and not as an isolated exception. This engagement with memories is important as memory has a social profile and is a source of power, authority and social control within society (Brendese 2014, 2; Weldon 2009, 11).

In as much as narratives of forgetting operate as powerful discourses in contemporary South Africa, South Africans have the power to “take up, contest or reject” (Foucault in Morgan 2010, 3) such discourses and political acts. Both Foucault (1972) and Bakhtin (1981) posit the constitutive and regulatory potential that is implicit in discourses, but they both also agree that discursive practices as sites of struggle, is as much dependent on agency as it is on domination.

This repressing of conflict is what Mouffe (2009) and Barolsky (2013) would argue cannot just be made to disappear because some would want them to but are essential to collective identity making and the fulfilment of significant democratic principles. This kind of engagement with conflict is what Barolsky (2013, 197–198) argues is missing within the

contemporary South African context. Such an engagement she argues is a predicate of a democracy, and our failure to take this into account, opens up dangerous potential for social control, inequality and further conflict and social fragmentation (Barolsky 2013, 197–198).

## CONCLUSION

In evoking the question of how young South Africans as vicarious witnesses of apartheid, view the role of the past in contemporary South Africa, several concerns emerged.

It is significant that historical divisions regarding apartheid experiences are still prevalent. These divisions are articulated in the discursive spaces and relations that characterise contemporary South Africa. There is a strong opposition to engaging with the differences and conflicts that characterise South Africa as a post conflict context. Such discourses are diametrically opposed to other discourses that express a need to engage with past conflicts, injustices and traumas that persist into the present. The hegemony of discourses of forgetting, which is supported by policy narratives of peace and consensus, presages a danger for constitutional ideals of social justice and transformation in South Africa. Such discourses reinforce historically discursive practices of oppression, suppression and structural violence. Memories of trauma are important in post conflict contexts as they contribute to the reconstruction of group identities that were once cruelly displaced, and in so doing enables the regaining of place and space in a society in which they were once excluded. That historically oppressed groups through discursive practices of *remembering*, are once again being *dis-membered* (excluded) from a society which is being *re-membered* (post-apartheid, inclusive South Africa) within a democratic constitutional context is a cause for concern if not alarm. Such a context calls into question the legitimacy of such a democracy and its visions for social justice.

It is clear that serious engage with remembering and forgetting the past needs to be part of our democratic project within a contemporary South African context. As social institutions universities and their curricula have an important role to play in initiating such conversations and engagements within the classroom. Engaging with the past therefore cannot be a once off event,

“It seems that South Africa still remains a deeply divided country and a more united South Africa where differences are celebrated and not just tolerated, must still emerge. ... Therefore, it remains necessary for South Africans to know their past and frequently talk to one another about past events and the future, so that the people of this country can understand one another better and make concerted efforts to reconcile a divided country” (Oelofse and Oosthuysen 2014, 272).

Engaging with the past, especially competing memories is a complex process but is integral for the building of a sustainable democracy.

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