

The Work of Nostalgia in Denis Hirson's *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)*

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“I remember Chappies bubble-gum with Did You Know? questions on the wrapper, and Wick’s which was thick and pink and covered in fine white powder” (Hirson, *King Kong* 122). So reads one of the statements that make up *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)*, Denis Hirson’s evocative literary archive of white childhood and youth in South Africa between the 1950s and 1970s. Chappies bubble-gum is in many ways emblematic of South African childhood, and so it is especially fitting that the cover of *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)* (hereafter referred to as *King Kong*) features a magnified yellow Chappies wrapper that frames a black and white photographic portrait of a young boy.¹ Like the gum whose wrapper when opened reveals a list of facts about the world, the book promises access to the world of the past through the litany of memories it contains. And like Chappies, *King Kong* offers a taste of childhood that South African book-buyers were eager to consume: the book was a remarkable commercial and critical success when it was published by Jacana in 2004. Much of this success is due, I argue, to its deft use of nostalgia, and, more particularly, nostalgic affect. In this paper, I use the case of *King Kong* to examine nostalgia as not simply a concern within literature, but also a feeling produced or evoked in reading, which may take on ethical, social or political significance, as well as value as a commodity. Consequently, the following discussion attends not only to the literary features of *King Kong* but also to those of its publication and reception in South Africa. Although the text itself offers a nuanced engagement with the complexities of memory after apartheid, the book’s success in a predominantly white literary market, in a society in which whiteness and nostalgia were, and continue to be, problematically entwined, reveals much about nostalgia’s operation, and ambivalent potential, in the post-apartheid literary and cultural field.

Before addressing the text directly, I would like to clarify my approach to nostalgia in this paper. A number of theorists have sought to distinguish between variations of the phenomenon, usually by categorising the degree of reflexivity involved or the kind of continuity a particular instance of nostalgia creates between past, present and future. Fred Davis's sociological study, *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979), and Svetlana Boym's widely cited *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) take this approach, and both seek to mitigate nostalgia's dubious reputation by making a case for its ethical and creative potential. The model I propose here adds to these accounts, but comes at the phenomenon from a different angle, focusing on the three semiotic levels at which nostalgia may operate at any one moment in a person, work of literature, or other cultural form. To understand that the kind of work nostalgia does, and indeed the kind of *thing* nostalgia is, depends on where and how it functions in experience enables us to disentangle its aesthetic features from its social, political or ethical uses.

The first level is the subjective experience of nostalgia, which I term *affective nostalgia*. This is the feeling of longing itself, which is usually triggered involuntarily, frequently associated with sensory stimulation (often smells, tastes, or sounds), and transient by nature. For example, Ato Quayson, echoing Proust's famous madeleine scene in *Swann's Way*, describes how to smell his childhood foods as an adult in London "is to be yanked back momentarily to a place that can never be properly reached" (133). The second level of nostalgia is when this affect serves the purpose of a narrative directed towards an end of return or restoration. This is *narrative nostalgia*. A more conscious activity, this might be a person's thought or declaration that "those were the good old days," or "I felt at home in the world during my childhood in a way that I don't now." Third-level nostalgia occurs when affective or narrative nostalgia is represented or embodied in some manner in order to serve some further purpose. This is *represented nostalgia*. It may be a book or film that evokes affective nostalgia or depicts a nostalgic narrative for commercial, creative or critical ends; it could also be a politician's attempt to drum up support by promising to reinstate a golden age supposedly located in the nation's history. This is the level at which nostalgia is

commodified. It is important to note that this schema does not suggest a linear or temporal progression between these levels: at any one moment, and in any one person or object, multiple orders of nostalgia operate simultaneously. A book, for example, might inspire affective or narrative nostalgia in a reader even as it functions at the third level as a complex, perhaps critical, literary engagement with nostalgia – and indeed, this is the case with *King Kong*, as I will show. This three-tiered model underlies my analysis below, and helps to elucidate the different dimensions of nostalgia’s operation within *King Kong* while attending to the complexity of their interaction.

Combining memoir and poetic form, *King Kong*, Hirson’s second book, comprises over 130 pages of brief statements of recollection. Set apart from one another on the page, each begins with the phrase “I remember,” and describes memories from the author’s childhood and youth in mid-twentieth-century Johannesburg. The book covers events of both private and national consequence – from Hirson’s first crush to the Sharpeville massacre – along with details of contemporary popular and consumer culture such as, “Jeremy Taylor singing: Ag pleez Daddy won’t you take us to the drive-in” (21). The litany form of the text draws direct inspiration from the French writer Georges Perec’s *Je me souviens (I Remember)* (1978), a book that documents life in France in the years following the Second World War using the same format. Perec was himself inspired by Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* series, the first of which appeared in 1970, which pioneered the “I remember” form to describe Brainard’s childhood and youth in 1950s America.

Memories of apartheid have in many ways been the fuel for Denis Hirson’s literary career. From his lyrical memoir, *The House Next Door to Africa* (1986), to his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Dancing and the Death on Lemon Street* (2011), Hirson has repeatedly returned to the South African past in writing. He has done so, moreover, through works that blur generic boundaries, combining aspects of life-writing, the novel and poetry to explore the intertwining of memory and fiction. Having left South Africa as a young man in 1973 and lived in France for over forty years, Hirson’s preoccupation with memory and literary homecoming has much to do with the spatial and temporal dislocation of being a

self-described “Long-Distance South African.”² South Africa is the locus of youth for him, and his memories of the place arguably have a special clarity or intensity because they have not been overlaid by subsequent years in the country. Hirson’s immediate motivation for writing *King Kong* was intensely personal. Revisiting his childhood was a means of mourning his father, through whom he had maintained a connection to South Africa: “my memories surfaced after my father died not only in my desire to remember him, but also because something of the bond between myself and South Africa had been shaken” (*White Scars* 147).

Despite such a private genesis, *King Kong* struck a collective chord when it was published in South Africa in 2004, where it proved so compelling for readers that it not only became a bestseller in the small local market but also inspired a number of creative imitations. The book touched, and also fed, a specific structure of feeling that was coming to prominence in the country. It appeared in the shifting South African memory-scape of the Mbeki years, as the triumphalism and enthusiasm of the “new” South Africa nation-building rhetoric had begun to wear thin, eroded by a growing sense of disenchantment and dread within the country about the unfolding of the post-apartheid moment. To understand *King Kong’s* resonance in this context, it is necessary first to examine how the book’s content and form work together especially effectively to evoke nostalgia in the reading of the text. I therefore begin my discussion by addressing each of these in turn – attending to the text as an example of represented nostalgia, in other words – before exploring how nostalgia is implicated in how the book was read and sold in South Africa.

Rediscovering the ordinary apartheid past

Nostalgia is by nature an intermediary phenomenon. It plays not only between past, present and future, but also public history and private memory, national narrative and the narratives of individuals and smaller groups. Nostalgic reminiscence frequently dwells on the sensory details of embodied experience, and so may be understood as a means of claiming and exploring an individual or collective identity and history not solely determined by the story

of the nation. In Jennifer Delisle's words, it is "a means of completing memory, . . . so that the individual does not become lost in a national narrative" (399). Likewise, post-apartheid nostalgic writing may be seen as a response, and a supplement, to the official post-apartheid narrative of "a past marked by conflict, injustice, oppression, and exploitation" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 5), which left little room for the ambiguities of ordinary life under apartheid for South Africans of all races.

King Kong's precursor, *Je me souviens*, presents 480 "little fragments of the everyday" (Perec qtd. in Adair 100) through which Perec explicitly sought to recover and preserve aspects of life in France after the War that would not be included in official histories because of their apparent inconsequentiality. Perec coined the word *l'infra-ordinaire* (the infra-ordinary, as opposed to the extraordinary) to refer to these common things, which form the texture of lived experience and, for him, most eloquently "speak of . . . what we are" ("Approaches" 177). As Hirson notes in *White Scars*, there is a clear resonance between Perec's infra-ordinary and Njabulo Ndebele's argument in the mid-1980s that it was "the ordinary day-to-day lives of people" that "constitute[d] the *very content* of the struggle" (156) against apartheid. Ndebele encouraged writers to pay heed to "the way people actually live" rather than fixating on the dehumanising and spectacular aspects of apartheid violence, stressing that attention to "complex ethical issues" of the everyday would be vital in creating a "new society . . . in South Africa" (156).

King Kong, like its year-mate Chris van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness & Mercy* (2004), is one of a number of South African books published since the early 2000s that explore the apartheid past from a highly personal perspective with lightness, even playfulness, rendering it more than simply the domain of trauma. In its content, *King Kong* is filled with details of the everyday, including nursery rhymes and songs, scenes from contemporary films, products and jingles, sports stars, and other South African cultural paraphernalia of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. Demonstrating that memory is, as Pierre Nora notes, "rooted in the concrete: in space, gesture, image, and object" (3), Hirson also focuses with particular precision on the somatic details of his childhood experience: "I remember leaving the marble

patch in a hurry at the end of big break, stamping dust out of my sandals and beating it out of the seat of my trousers, and the sound of marbles when you run with them”; and “I remember the sting of a wet tennis ball” (29, 11). Hirson has observed how such seemingly insignificant details of the past, when recalled, are “strangely, disproportionately alive,” for their “nature has not been blunted, shaped and reshaped” through habits of thought like more familiar memories (*White Scars* 149, 148). These simultaneously evoke a whole world of associated experiences, as I will explore below, and, as Deborah Seddon argues, provide new material and complexity to the well-rehearsed stories of apartheid that are so frequently “riddled with hagiography, amnesia, guilt, and dull repetition” (90).

This is the stated aim of Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009), which takes up Ndebele’s thesis most overtly, arguing for its post-apartheid relevance with specific reference to nostalgia. Through his focus on the nuances of the apartheid quotidian, Dlamini expressly seeks to “challenge facile accounts of black life under apartheid” (19) and so create the conditions under which alternative futures might be imagined beyond the set national script, which has tended to stress only suffering and heroic resistance. In terms of the levels of nostalgia I outlined above, this is a case of narrative nostalgia being used to serve a third-order end of critique. Of course, the nostalgias of black and coloured writers like Dlamini and Van Wyk differ from that of a white writer like Hirson, both in the life experiences that form their content, and in their political and ethical implications. White nostalgia, which is by far the most prevalent in post-apartheid writing, is especially at risk of endorsing a troubling amnesia and defending ongoing inequality, as I explore later in relation to *King Kong’s* reception.

Significantly, Hirson’s account in *King Kong* does not idealise the past, or elide the ethical, economic and political complexities (and complicities) of growing up as a privileged white child in apartheid South Africa. More so than most other white children of his generation, the author was intimately aware of South Africa’s fraught political climate. For nine years of his childhood, his father Baruch Hirson was imprisoned by the state for his anti-apartheid activities. Alongside the lighter, often wryly affectionate, content of childhood

games, jokes and urban legends, this socio-political and personal context is also the subject of Hirson's reminiscence: "I remember that we picked up a black woman who was walking down Louis Botha Avenue during a bus strike"; "I remember that the only thing I shared with boys at school about my father being in jail was the taboo of speaking about him. / I remember blank spaces in the newspaper and other publications to escape censorship" (16, 71–72).

If the Hirson family's political allegiance is always certain, the text is nonetheless clear-eyed about the insularity of white apartheid childhood, and its benefit from and complicity in apartheid's violent structures. As the author has noted in an interview, one of the questions that drives his writing is, "How do you reconcile the innocence of youth with the un-innocence of apartheid?" (Smith). This question might be rephrased: "How does the individual reconcile private memory with a knowledge of South African history?" *King Kong* explores the ambivalences of this question but, crucially, refuses to offer a solution, or resolution. Instead, through juxtaposition and association, the text maintains a tension between the experience of sheltered white childhood and the "un-innocence" of the system that protected it. Sometimes, the tension is created within one entry: "I remember my father at a friend[']s] house talking in an urgent hush about Sharpeville, and the peace and sunlight in the garden outside" (49). At other times, it is created by implicit connections between separate sentences, as the text itself mimics the connotative movement of memory. For instance, a description of "itchy bites that had to be scratched till the blood ran, and mosquito battlefields on the wall" is related through an implicit link of blood to the next entry, which describes "boxing matches for boys who had been fighting with each other" at Hirson's school (25). After a connected memory of mothers "screaming and stamping at the ring-side while their sons were in the middle of a boxing tournament," the theme of blood continues, but with an abrupt change of tone and scope, as the speaker recalls "the face of Dr. Verwoerd after David Pratt shot him at the Rand Easter Show" (25). In this way, the text interweaves the banal with the spectacular, and further draws an implicit association between the small everyday violence of schoolyard boxing in the 1960s and the larger

violence of the apartheid system. It is to this form, which enables such connections and dissonances, that I now turn.

Reflective nostalgia as literary form

Hirson has compared *King Kong's* form to pointillism (*King Kong* 134) or mosaic (Thurman 9), suggesting that in the collection (or recollection) of these snippets of the past, a complex portrait of an era might emerge. Like mosaic tiles, each statement is spaced apart from the others on the page, suggesting only loose associative connections between them, and requiring the reader to create his or her own network of meanings. Chris Thurman has suggested that the text's lack of clear chronology reflects the dislocation of Hirson's biography, and, by extension, South Africans' own disjointed relationships to the past (9). It may also, however, be read as a resistance to totalising the past by reducing it to a single, simple teleological continuity. Hirson's growing up provides an implicit narrative thread, and the text has recurring thematic concerns that include apartheid schooling, Hirson's Jewishness, and his father's opposition to and treatment by the apartheid state. Yet these create only thematic "lean trajectories" that wind through the book (Hirson, *We Walk Straight* 157), rather than a plot that offers the satisfaction of climax, denouement and resolution.

The repetition of the phrase "I remember" holds the separate fragments together and enables the text to gather momentum, creating an almost hypnotic incantatory effect that draws the reader into a sense of proximity to the past as the text moves quickly from one surface of a memory to another. At the same time, however, the repeated "I remember" also maintains distance between the remembered past and the present of reading and remembering, for it is an insistent reminder that memory is a narrative process taking place in the present. As a result, the temporality of reading becomes one in which the past and present are held in tension. This dissonance opens up space for creative, ironic, and even critical connections to be made between different temporalities. In this way, *King Kong* exhibits what Edward Said has termed a contrapuntal "awareness of simultaneous

dimensions,” which is the exile’s critical and creative power to keep multiple temporalities and locations (life in the new environment and the memory of the old) “vivid [and] actual” in experience (148). With such a perspective, the present and the remembered past become mutually transformative.

The text, I submit, presents an exemplary case of Boym’s concept of reflective nostalgia, which for Boym presents a redemptive form of a phenomenon that all too easily manifests in narratives of reactionary sentimentality, escapism or historical amnesia. For Boym, the reflective nostalgic has a complex understanding of the difference between representation and reality, along with the unreliability, though also creative possibilities, of memory. Instead of seeking to reconstruct the past and “patch up the memory gaps” (Boym 41), he or she refuses the temptation of resolution, which might see what is lost restored, or an uncomplicated line of continuity drawn between past and present. Put another way, the reflective nostalgic refuses the consolation of what I have called narrative nostalgia, preferring to explore the affect, the *algia* (ache), of nostalgia, “dwell[ing] on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging” (xviii). The account of the past that such reflection produces is “ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary” (50).

Moreover, because the text provides little in the way of overt commentary or analysis of Hirson’s memory fragments, it necessitates a particular kind of reader activity. In this sense, *King Kong* is what Roland Barthes would call a writerly text (5), in which readers must find their own constellations of meaning among many possibilities. Certainly, readers are always active participants in the interpretation of texts to some extent: they misread, part-read and extract from texts in the process of reading, adapting them to their own needs and desires even as they are affected by their ideological content. Molly Abel Travis describes readers as “both constructed and constructing” (6) in their reading practices. Yet, this kind of active interpretation is especially important for a writerly text like *King Kong*. In discussing *Je me souviens*, Gilbert Adair stresses that the text itself represents “the zero degree of nostalgia. Its ‘memories’ are rather seeds of memory planted by the author in tidily aligned rows to be cultivated by someone else” (101). “I remember” sentences, that is, provide small

triggers for memory; all but stripped of narrative and specific context, these snippets of popular culture and pedestrian details of life are animated by the reader to produce a “small, impalpable feeling of nostalgia,” which was an explicit aim of Perec’s (qtd. in Hirson, *White Scars* 140). But for the text to have its full effect, the reader must provide fertile ground for these seeds of memory to take root. As Susannah Radstone asks, “if we say that a novel or a film ‘is’ nostalgic, then who are we suggesting it is nostalgic ‘for’? For whom, that is, and in which circumstances, do ‘nostalgic’ texts become nostalgic? Is nostalgia, like a prescription lens, suited only to certain eyes?” (189). The work of nostalgia in the text cannot, in other words, be abstracted from the context of reading and reception.

In the case of *King Kong*, the text’s content, invested in the everyday and the personal, and its form, which is open to multiple possible interpretations and keeps the past tantalisingly proximate *and* distant to the present of reading, proved a particularly evocative, and comparatively profitable, nostalgic combination in the South African literary market of the early 2000s.

The book as a souvenir

What is crucial for the purpose of this discussion is that, as publishers see it, the buyers and readers of trade books in South Africa are mostly white and mostly middle class.³ Maggie Davey, the publisher at Jacana who bought the manuscript of *King Kong*, has gone so far as to describe the market as “resolutely . . . white middle class,” and, indeed, the overwhelming majority of readers who have commented on the book in public forums are from this demographic. Since 1994, this white minority has arguably been especially prone to nostalgia, fearing the decentring of whiteness in post-apartheid society and the loss of their attendant privileges, despite their continuing actual cultural and economic dominance.⁴ As Grant Farred noted in 1997, for many whites, the country, “for centuries the province of white dominance, now presents itself as an ‘unhomely’ space, a country rapidly becoming inhospitable to, if not uninhabitable by, its white occupants” (73). Given nostalgia’s etymological ties to homesickness, it is not surprising that it has been a persistent, if

awkward, presence among white South Africans trying to affirm their sense of belonging in the country. It has been particularly pervasive in white popular culture since the early 2000s, where it has proliferated in various cultural forms, from hit songs to YouTube videos and Facebook pages.⁵

Nevertheless, *King Kong's* idiosyncratic form was thought to pose a risk in the local market, where readers are perceived by publishers to “recoil” (Davey) from literature that looks experimental or poetic. Rather than being put off by the work’s unusual format, however, South African readers seem to have been enchanted by the text. The book became a local bestseller, selling over 6,000 copies in a market where sales of only 5,000 are required for bestseller status, and literary texts frequently sell only a few hundred copies.⁶ Hirson’s literary agent Isobel Dixon attributes *King Kong's* remarkable success to the affective power of the book for (white) South African readers:

I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)’s nostalgic content was so powerful that I think it won even readers who would not normally go for such an adventurous format. . . . They just saw a wonderful, poetic, resonant record that chimed with their own remembrance of Chappies bubble-gum, and going to the drive-in, and all those things. Of course, smuggled in among the nostalgia, are the hard-hitting, ironic, dark [memories], showing the injustice, the irony and the horror of apartheid alongside it all.

Dixon’s assessment chimes with my own research into readers’ responses to the text. In the following, I quote examples from a collection of responses by both professional and lay readers, almost all of them white, found in print and online reviews by journalists, private letters written to Hirson, and blog posts and comments in other online forums. As these form an admittedly incomplete archive, and the evidence they provide is anecdotal, the conclusions I draw are tentative.

These responses suggest that it is affective nostalgia that was most immediately at work in readers’ experiences of *King Kong*. The pleasurable thrill of spontaneous recollection and the rediscovery of whole contexts seemingly lost to the past are evident across responses. One reviewer in the press describes “a rush of recognition” (Viall, “Memory” 16); a user on

the review website Goodreads exclaims that “Hirson’s memories will take you back in time so vividly that they will leave you breathless” (Patterson); and another reader in an anonymous letter to Hirson enthuses that “this brought back things I had completely forgotten.” Despite the private nature of much of Hirson’s recollection in *King Kong*, readers seem to have encountered the text as not so much the memoir of a particular individual as a vehicle through which to revisit their own childhoods. Reviewers point to the viral nature of this kind of memory exercise, noting that the text “triggers further memories” (Horler 13), and “[Hirson’s] memory sparks your own” (Botha 3). Fred de Vries observes that the book casts a kind of magic spell in the reading (“towerformule voor oë”) and becomes a means by which the reader as well as the writer digs up deeply buried images (“diep verborge beelde opdiep”) (5).

Through its affective (re)creation of the lost time of childhood, *King Kong* functions much like a souvenir or *aide-mémoire*. Speaking of the souvenir object, Susan Stewart argues that it serves a double purpose: “to authenticate a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” (139). The immediacy of the physical experience of the object, that is, provides the subject access to a memory that feels more real, more significant, than the present, for “[t]he present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. The referent is authenticity” (139). The sense of the real that Stewart attributes to the physical object is also something we see reflected in the experience of affective nostalgia through reading. In the case of *King Kong*, the object is an imagined one: it is the referent of the text, the lost world represented. For those who identify with the kinds of experiences the text recollects, reading immerses them, if only briefly, in a sense of affirming continuity between the past and the present, and, perhaps, enables them to feel the pleasure of longing for a world that is irretrievable. This is ultimately how affective nostalgia is transformed into narrative nostalgia. As Stewart notes, “the function of the souvenir proper is to create a continuous and personal narrative of the past” (140). There is also a profound sense of validation in perceiving one’s private experiences and memories – details

not usually found in print – to be mirrored in a text. According to Hirson, one man approached him after a reading to say: “You’ve remembered my life for me” (Viall, “Playful” 11).

The souvenir text as cultural commodity

Recognising the potential value of nostalgia and the souvenir text as a commodity in the predominantly white and nostalgia-prone book-buying market, Jacana capitalised on it very effectively through *King Kong’s* striking Chappies bubble-gum cover. According to Davey, “the Chappies wrapper really got everybody’s attention.” The book’s commercial success prompted Hirson and Jacana to produce a sequel the following year, *We Walk Straight So You Better Get Out The Way* (2005), this time clad in a red variant of the Chappies wrapper.

While selling *King Kong* by commodifying its nostalgic content, Jacana, like Dixon above, also sought to emphasise the text’s reflective engagement with memory by featuring a quotation from Antjie Krog in the centre of the front cover: “Extraordinary. This is unlike anything I have ever read . . . The form is as surprising as its subtle ability to tell the tales of our past.” This endorsement from Krog, whose *Country of My Skull* has in many ways been a benchmark among books by white writers that “tell the tales of our past,” validates *King Kong’s* approach to buyers or readers who would question the value of (white) nostalgia in the post-apartheid South African context, where nostalgia has remained acutely contentious in the public sphere. Despite (and sometimes because of) their popularity, overtly nostalgic cultural products have tended to be met with critical opprobrium rather than careful interrogation.⁷

In fact, *King Kong’s* commercial and critical success has much to do with its delicate combination of affective nostalgia and the apartheid past in a context in which memory is so highly charged. As Davey suggested, *King Kong* “did speak to a nostalgia of a whiteness that wasn’t all criminalised.” The text’s depiction of both anodyne and troubling aspects of life under apartheid, the brevity and personal focus of its memory statements, and its lack of explicit analysis created a space for white readers to engage with their private pasts without

feeling restricted by the post-apartheid public narrative; space, that is, to remember without guilt. “Your book has taken Jhb by storm,” reads a white reader’s postcard to Hirson, “Everyone is reclaiming their past through its pages.” The book’s mosaic form, which obliges the reader to chart his or her own interpretive path through the text, was experienced as liberating. Said one reviewer, “I savoured not just the memories but also Hirson’s way of reminding us of our country’s evils without didactics, of its beauty without making excuses” (Bartlett). Robert Berold, too, praised *King Kong’s* ethical complexity: “White South Africans, or white children at any rate, had a baffled innocence mixed in with their violence and racism, and it is this innocence that Hirson salvages so well” (11). Berold’s review emphasises that one of the strongest attractions of the book is that it seems to render nostalgia a legitimate means of engaging with the past, giving ordinary apartheid a human face, and so complicating simplistic narratives about the past: “For those (including the next generation of white kids) who are not sure if whites living under apartheid were human, this is a wonderful book to read” (11).

But the text’s evocation of affective nostalgia without didacticism has also made it open to reinforcing other kinds of nostalgic narratives; its lightness of touch is easily mistaken for lightness itself. Thus, it was also encountered, like the confectionary on its cover, as “an easily chewed and digested book; a light read for bedside nostalgia” (Botha 3). In the years following its publication, a number of white South African readers have produced their own personal memory texts in response. These include a series of YouTube video montages,⁸ as well as a number of blog posts in which writers have used the same form to create their own nostalgic litanies, which tend either to dwell on personal memories or details of consumer products and popular culture.⁹ Through these texts, readers have sought to include themselves actively in Hirson’s memory work and, perhaps, to prolong a feeling of nostalgic pleasure which is by nature transient.

In 2010, a blogger named Doc produced one of these, a website entitled “It’s 1970 Now,” which comprises two lengthy posts about the author’s childhood in 1970s South Africa, using the “I remember” form with the addition of images. Doc’s profile explains:

Most people my age were blissfully unaware of the South African political situation in the 70's. This blog hopes to capture that innocence and prod some memories of that era as well as serve as a record of ordinary things of those days. I was inspired by Denis Hirson's fabulous book "I remember...King Kong (the boxer)" and admit to pinching the style his book was written in.

Here, Doc affirms that the appeal of a nostalgic recollection project lies in its potent admixture of "innocence" and "ordinary things" through its "prod[ding]" (which I take to mean evoking) of memories. I would like, however, to focus on the implications of Doc's statement above that "[m]ost people my age were blissfully unaware of the South African political situation in the 70's." Such a declaration assumes a white audience that will identify with the experiences the blog recounts (Doc's profile picture and information indicate that he is a white man, born in 1964). In fact, the majority of South Africans of Doc's age, who were not of his race or class, would have been entirely aware of the country's oppressive political and economic structures through their direct impact on their lives. This kind of exonerating parochialism is, ultimately, one of the greatest risks of the kind of memory project undertaken in *King Kong*, despite the text's own foregrounding of its limited scope.

To return briefly to Stewart's discussion of the souvenir object, it is salient that she identifies an inwardness, a privacy, about the souvenir that enables a personal nostalgic reverie set in contrast to the vicissitudes of history: "Temporally, the souvenir moves history into private time" (138). The souvenir, that is, renders the demands of history and politics secondary to the individual's private, lived experience. It is plausible that at least part of *King Kong's* popularity is due to its feeding a desire among some middle-class white readers to reclaim a feeling of innocence about their past, as Doc suggests above. To do so would enable a withdrawal into pleasurable affect, and the reassurance of narrative nostalgia, as a means of shying away from the ugly feelings, like shame, that accompany the emotional and ethical entanglements and complexities of being with others in a South African present still contorted by the gross inequalities of the past.¹⁰

The work of sociologist Melissa Steyn and psychologist Derek Hook demonstrates that many white South African identities in the post-apartheid moment are characterised by

defensiveness, and a desire to avoid grappling with questions of complicity and continued benefit. Hook asserts that it “is not an exaggeration to speak of a psychic erasing of white memories of apartheid” (120). Using the levels of nostalgia I outlined earlier, this would be a case of the affective nostalgia evoked by the text serving the end of a consoling narrative nostalgia that has real ethical and political implications. We should stay ever mindful of Renato Rosaldo’s argument that imperialist nostalgia often uses “a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (108). Narrative nostalgia, that is, can function as wilful amnesia, allowing former oppressors to look back fondly at the past while masking their own culpability for the evils of colonisation with the language of innocence which comes so easily to nostalgic discourse. Used in this way, nostalgia works to defend and perpetuate uneven power relations in the present. Hook cautions that, “in post-conflict societies, we need remain vigilant regarding the lures of those defensive forms of memory which help us to forget” (192).

Yet it would belie the text’s complex operation to dismiss its psychical or cultural memory work as serving only the purpose of white escapism or denial. First, the book’s affective power has not been limited to white, or even South African, readers. *King Kong’s* front matter features a quotation by Njabulo Ndebele, which reveals that, as he read the book, its poetic form created a “miracle of literary incantation” in which he was caught up, and through which he “began to enjoy the recall of memory through instantaneous vignettes of [his] own.”¹¹ Jonathan Jansen, too, published his own litany of memory in the Afrikaans newspaper *Beeld*, entitled “Kindertydse Herinneringe” (Childhood Memories), each line of which begins: “Ek onthou” (I remember). In the piece, Jansen acknowledges that he was inspired by “Denis Hirson se uitnemende boek” (Denis Hirson’s outstanding book) (12), though his recollected memories of childhood as a coloured boy differ from Hirson’s substantially. These responses suggest that *King Kong’s* incantatory form, its focus on sense experiences, and even that white space on the page, also invite and make room for

alternative experiences and subjectivities to be expressed. It is noteworthy, however, that I have found no responses to the text from black South African readers outside the academy.

Secondly, it is clear that readers who have reflected on their affective experiences with the text have also encountered uncanny (or unhomey) feelings: Richard Bartlett describes how “This style of remembering the physical through the mind of a young person conjures up romantic memories of a place that no longer exists, but Hirson’s memory method also makes ‘I Remember’ intensely political, agonisingly familiar, and one smiles, not out of humour, but from relief that it no longer exists.” The anxiety generated by the imperative to balance pleasurable feelings of nostalgia with the knowledge of the broader socio-political context of apartheid is palpable in other reviews in the press. Vivien Horler notes in her *Cape Argus* review that, “If you grew up then, it’s impossible to read this book without delight,” while emphasising the ambivalence of recollecting “the world of our childhoods” (13). “The past is truly another country for South Africa,” she states, adding, “Much of it was unspeakably evil – and yet it contained our youth” (13). Another reviewer describes a similar experience: “Die boek laat ’n mens nostalgies onthou. . . . Toe die lewe eenvoudiger en gelyktydig veel ingewikkelder was as nou. Toe ons jonk en ons land heeltemal anders was” (The book allows one to remember with nostalgia. . . . When life was simpler and at the same time more complicated than now. When we were young and our country was completely different) (Pakendorf).

Ross Truscott has argued that apartheid has been “unmournable” (Brock and Truscott 325) for white South Africans in post-apartheid public discourse. “[G]rieving the loss of apartheid is,” he notes, “precisely what white South Africans are not doing” (324), because to recognise the apartheid past as an object of grief is to forfeit participation in the post-apartheid nation, whose criterion of inclusion is the repudiation of this past. The consequence is that many whites have been stuck in a melancholic loop, unable to process the end of apartheid – or to recognise and address its continuing psychical and material consolations and privileges – and so unable to move wholly into, or find a home in, the post-apartheid present with their fellow citizens.¹² *King Kong’s* portrait of the apartheid past as an

entanglement of pleasure and innocence as well as violence and injustice may provide the very kind of object through which this complex loss may be recognised and processed. Put another way, in a post-apartheid context in which national belonging requires white South Africans to sever their sentimental ties to the past, the book provides room for private affection towards one's apartheid upbringing, and so, perhaps, the possibility of mourning its loss. In this way, a reflection on one's experience of affective nostalgia may ultimately orient one towards the future.

Conclusion

Through *Je me souviens*, Perec sought to create a nostalgic community of readers, describing his memory text as “like a trampoline to a kind of nostalgia, to a kind of sympathy. Sympathy between people who remember that some years ago when you took the underground in Paris they do [sic] a hole in your ticket” (“The Doing” 27). As Davis suggests, such nostalgic sympathy can form “the basis for deepening our sentimental ties to others and for reassuring us that we are not that strange after all” (43). This cohesion has a diachronic aspect, for, “at the most elemental level collective nostalgia acts to restore, at least temporarily, a sense of sociohistoric continuity with respect to that which had verged on being rendered discontinuous” (103–104). Part of the pleasure experienced by readers of *King Kong* comes, I would suggest, from a validating experience of belonging to a community of memory, or at least an imagined one, through the process of reading and identifying with the text.

Inevitably, the idea of such a community of memory in post-apartheid South Africa raises questions of inclusion and exclusion, especially given the probability that most readers of the book have been middle-class whites. Since everyday life in the South African past was so thoroughly racialised, yet nostalgic community relies on shared experiences and memories, the bonding it engenders risks solidifying static racial or group identities and reinforcing boundaries between them rather than fostering communication, community or hybridity across them. But this is one of the necessary risks of Hirson's project, which places so much trust in the reader to perform its critical work.

While the question of nostalgia's social and political uses in the present remains an important one, the idea that literature ought to find a single story of the past that might perform some kind of national cohering work has progressively lost its purchase among writers.¹³ Eric Worby and Shireen Ally have argued that in the current South African affective landscape, which is permeated by disappointment, "the ideal of a 'one-time' of common memory – in which it would be decided whether and for whom the past under apartheid was 'good' or 'bad' – will need to be abandoned," and "the fantasy of a nationally reconciled future will inevitably have to give way to the heterogeneous and hetero-temporal politics of the present" (472). In its reflective, fragmentary and unresolved mediation between past and present, personal memory and public history, *King Kong* refuses the simplicity of such a totalising narrative, and rather embodies, and facilitates an engagement with, the heterogeneous and hetero-temporal present.

My concern in this paper has been to focus on not only the world of the book, but also the book in the world, and so to pursue a more complex understanding of nostalgia's value and work in culture. The case of *King Kong* illuminates the presence of nostalgia in the South African literary and cultural field at multiple levels: as an affect, as a personal or cultural narrative that may have both critical and comforting dimensions, and, in its represented form, also as a marketable commodity. I have argued that the text's content and form present a complex and reflective engagement with memory that foregrounds the fluid and often dissonant relationship between the past and present as well as individual memory and public history. Yet, I have also suggested that in the post-apartheid context in which *King Kong* appeared, the text found a ready audience and market of primarily white readers, some of whom have discovered in the book a souvenir through which to cherish their private nostalgic narratives about the past, and others a means of moving beyond it. If the uses to which the text has been put are ambivalent, this is in keeping with nostalgia's nature more generally, its capacity for both mourning and melancholia. It is telling that, although *King Kong* began as a work of mourning for his father, with the idea that the process of writing would be a kind of valediction to him and to South Africa, Hirson has gone on to write

another five books that in various ways continue to explore this memory terrain – that other country whose shadow still stretches into the present.

Notes

The author wishes to thank Denis Hirson for generously sharing the responses to *King Kong* that he has received from readers, and to express gratitude to Maggie Davey and Isobel Dixon for their invaluable insights offered in interviews.

¹ Chappies bubble-gum has been the market-leading bubble-gum in South Africa since the 1940s. The wrappers are striped in bright colours, and feature a series of “Did you know?” facts on the underside.

² Hirson coined the phrase in his poem of the same name in *The Heart in Exile* (10).

³ Van Rooyen 420–1 and the 2006 *National Survey into the Reading and Book Reading Behaviour of Adult South Africans* by TNS Research Surveys corroborate this conception of the market.

⁴ Steyn *Whiteness*, Mattes, Mbembe, and Truscott “National Melancholia.”

⁵ See Evans on nostalgic YouTube videos. “Who remembers the old Durban”

(<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Who-remembers-the-old-Durban/241806852513286>) provides a typical example of Facebook nostalgia.

⁶ *King Kong's* sales figures are courtesy of Jacana.

⁷ Controversies of various scales followed the success of Jo-Anne Richards’s *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* in 1996, Bok van Blerk’s 2005 song “De La Rey,” and Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* in 2009, all of which utilised nostalgia to different ends.

⁸ The first video may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3InWKGw1Nc>.

⁹ For example: Doc, Horak-Druiff, Haralambous. A number of readers have also written to Hirson with their own lists of “I remembers.”

¹⁰ See Nuttall, and Barnard, “Ugly Feelings.”

¹¹ The quotation is taken from a letter written by Ndebele to Hirson in 2005.

¹² See also Truscott, “National Melancholia.”

¹³ See Barnard, “Rewriting,” De Kock, and Irlam.

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Abstract

This paper examines the work of nostalgia in Denis Hirson's *I Remember King Kong (The Boxer)*, a poetic memoir of childhood that met with both critical acclaim and remarkable commercial success when it was published in South Africa in 2004. The book provides a telling case study of the multifaceted operation of nostalgia in literature and culture, which is explored in this paper as not only a concern within literature, but also an affect produced in the reading of literature, which may take on ethical, social or political significance as a personal or cultural narrative as well as value as a commodity. Accordingly, the discussion attends both to the literary features of *King Kong* and to its publication and reception in South Africa. It is argued that the text presents a reflective engagement with memory that foregrounds the fluid and often dissonant relationship between the past and present, individual memory and public history. Yet the reception of this book about white childhood in a predominantly white market, within a society in which white nostalgia is an especially vexed phenomenon, also foregrounds nostalgia's ambivalent potential for both critique and consolation in the post-apartheid literary and cultural field.

Bio

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Keywords

Denis Hirson, nostalgia, memory, reader response, reception, whiteness