

The Memoir-Novel as Revisionist History: A Response to Katrin Berndt

ELENI COUNDOURIOTIS

Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate, Vol. 35 (2026): 103-112.

DOI: [10.25623/conn035-coundouriotis-1](https://doi.org/10.25623/conn035-coundouriotis-1)

This response is a contribution to the debate on “‘Speak, Mnemosyne’: Genre Performance and Metagenre in Petina Gappah’s Memoir-Novel *The Book of Memory*” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/genre-performance-and-metagenre-in-gappahs-memoir-novel-the-book-of-memory>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

Connotations - A Journal for Critical Debate (E-ISSN 2626-8183) by [the Connotations Society](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

Abstract

Katrin Berndt’s formalist analysis of Petina Gappah’s *The Book of Memory* emphasizes the text’s use of metagenre to convey the entanglement of memory with identity that shows both in constant transformation. This response to Berndt has two key aims. It extends Berndt’s analysis to explore how the novel provides historical insights about Zimbabwe that become available to the reader when the novel is read as metageneric. To do so, the response also situates Gappah’s novel more fully within the Zimbabwean literary tradition as well as in relation to contemporary trends in African writing, particularly novels that deploy innovative narrative techniques to engage with the historical past.

Katrin Berndt’s fine discussion of Zimbabwean novelist’s Petina Gappah’s *The Book of Memory* (2016) approaches the work as a memoir-novel: a fictionalized, subjective account of “real” events that capture the ways in which a traumatic past shapes the present. The memoir-novel is already a hybrid form but, according to Berndt, Gappah’s complex engagement with the narration of the real creates something more than a blend of two forms (memoir and fiction). As metagenre, *The Book*

of Memory offers an unstable narrative perspective of one and many. The self-reflexive narrator named Memory is both an individual and the reader's source of myth and the collective past. Moreover, the novel progressively complexifies our understanding of events by drawing from multiple and frequently competing genres of the real, including journalism, the epistolary, the prison memoir, and the Bildungsroman. For Berndt, metagenre becomes apparent through the text's "genre performance," which she investigates for its productive ambiguiting effects on the narration of memory (14).

My response addresses the problem of form to access the novel's historicity instead. The function of "metaization" referred to by Berndt as "genre performance" (14) allows us to see how the text folds into itself. Holding to a distinction between history and memory, I put the emphasis on how the novel's formal experimentation turns outwards to the historical real with new understanding. Indeed, metagenre as analyzed by Berndt, can sensitize us to Gappah's serious, historiographical effort: how to write history through the novel's malleable form and recalibrate the way in which Zimbabwe's story of liberation is told, alerting us to this history's status as an ongoing narrative project. Berndt draws attention to the novel's "foregrounding of its own production as a story" (2). Here I suggest history not as another form to add to the array of genres at play in the text but as a new understanding gained through reading a metageneric text.

In what follows, I place the novel more firmly within the context of contemporary African writing and Gappah's Zimbabwean literary context. Like many of her contemporaries among African women writers, Gappah participates in a twenty-first century resurgence of historical fiction on the continent. Works such as Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014), Narpali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019), Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019), and Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* (2023) represent the trend. In a similar mode, Gappah has contributed *Out of Darkness, Shining Light* (2019), her novel about the Africans who carried explorer David Livingstone's body to the coast after his death in 1873. By taking deeper dives into the past and narrating earlier episodes of the

colonial encounter than have been typical in postcolonial novels, contemporary writers are significantly expanding the historical frame of the African novel.

Gappah started out as a writer of social realism and moved into this new expanded form of historical fiction with *Out of Darkness, Shining Light. The Book of Memory*, the middle book out of the three Gappah has published so far, is key to understanding her turn to a more intense engagement with the past. At first glance, *The Book of Memory* fits more closely with the familiar social realism of the postcolonial novel. As a prison diary, it addresses the author's longstanding concern about the human rights of the incarcerated. Its ironic style extends the scathing social critique of Gappah's collection of short stories *An Elegy for East-erly* (2009), which focuses on the poverty of township life during the aughts when Robert Mugabe's policies brought extreme economic hardship. However, *The Book of Memory* deviates from social realism by obfuscating the narrative present in the confessional account of the protagonist, Memory.

Memory grapples not only with the unavoidability of incomplete or inaccurate recall but also with a nagging awareness that her understanding might have gotten it all wrong. These doubts about her interpretation of events—their meaning rather than how they happened—is important for Gappah's historical intervention which emphasizes the need to rethink received narratives. Filtered through feelings of guilt and shame that distort her recall, Memory's account underscores the importance of revising her story. But it is only possible to reassess the past after an account of it has already been made. Memory's narration, thus, layers versions of the past creating the novel's echoey effect and generic instability. Treating the metagenetic effects as a performative aspect of Memory's narration, Berndt leaves open the possibility that the historical can be retrieved from the seams connecting different discursive echoes. Instead of being univocal and authoritative, history (through fiction) exposes the different registers in which we experience and subsequently recollect real events.

Identity is important in the novel. Social preconceptions about difference determine the characters' story arcs. Memory's albinism casts her

as a pariah in the African community, propelling her to Lloyd (her white adoptive father). The stigma of homosexuality keeps Lloyd closeted, and Memory is complicit in shaming him before she comes to understand him more fully. The determinism of social prejudice registers the real in the novel as a collective awareness that individuals cannot transcend. Berndt notes that Gappah offers a “de-individualized memoir” signaled by the protagonist’s depersonalized name (19). The name Memory is not only depersonalized but collective as it refers to the communal belief in vengeful spirits (*ngozi* in Shona) that are impossible to expiate. By giving Memory her name, the mother indexed her daughter’s identity to a family curse and predicted fatalistically that she could not outrun the legacy of murder that haunts the family. Although not *ngozi* herself, Memory must wrangle with one for life.

Ngozi has an additional historical resonance in the novel. It is a literary reference as these vengeful spirits appear frequently in the fiction about Zimbabwe’s wars of liberation, the country’s nationalist literature. The intertextuality of *The Book of Memory* with war fiction adds a dimension of “implicit metagenre” (Berndt 3), placing the novel as a bridge between Zimbabwe’s war literature (a form of fiction dominant between 1980-2006 with the publication of Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not* functioning as a capstone) and the new treatment of the past discussed above. In the war novels, *ngozi* haunt those who killed, especially if they participated in atrocities (Coundouriotis 190). The malevolent spirits also become a means of depicting post-traumatic stress. The origin of the curse in Memory’s family is from “a very long time ago [...] long before there was a war of liberation” (Gappah, *Memory* 250). The temporal distancing insinuates the connection between *ngozi* and the “war of liberation” into the range of associations at play in the novel. To mention *ngozi* in such a deliberately atemporal way is at once to claim and disclaim it as part of the legacy of a violent history. Memory struggles with this pattern of signification throughout her account, in turn claiming and disclaiming certain truths based on their established associations.

In *The Book of Memory*, Gappah explores the syncretism of a traditional belief system with modern psychology that unlocks the mystery of Memory's mother's murderous behavior (she commits infanticide and threatens her husband under the delusion that he is ngozi) without removing or solving its devastating effects. Lloyd plays a crucial role in expanding Memory's father's understanding of what is happening to her mother. He explains that Memory's mother suffered from a mental illness and needed care. Thus, Lloyd guided Memory's father away from the terror and self-blame of the curse towards a rational explanation that empowered his ability to care for his family. Although this intervention did not prevent the double suicide of Memory's parents, it set up the conditions for Memory and her sister Joy to be aided by Lloyd. These details, revealed late in the novel, contribute to Memory's recalibrated understanding of the past. The key to Gappah's revisionist anticolonial narrative, therefore, rests in part on her recalibration of the characters' understanding of each other.

Throughout the novel, Memory struggles to assess the meaning of Lloyd's intervention, and she falls into the pattern of claiming and disclaiming him. What needs to be sorted is the degree to which Lloyd is a factor of coloniality in the novel—an agent of the enduring, negative effects of colonialism—or something different. The blended family (biological and adoptive) represents the interracial bonds and fissures of a settler colony. Memory grew up believing that her father sold her to Lloyd, and equally, that Lloyd bought her from her father. This makes her a symbol of Zimbabwe. Memory's personal history maps onto the founding moment of British rule: the Rudd Concession of 1888 when King Lobengula was deceived into selling the mineral rights of Matabeleland to the British for £100 and 1,000 rifles. Here, we are reminded of Fredric Jameson's thesis that "All third-world texts are necessarily [...] national allegories." He adds:

Third-world texts, even those that are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (69)

For Jameson, the private and familial in third-world texts are “necessarily” and “always” an allegory of the nation. Memory’s understanding of how she came to be raised by Lloyd, however, turns out to be incorrect; she was not sold. Gappah thus provokes us to rethink the alignment between family and nation: who is family? Who are the members of the private sphere? Destabilizing family by expanding it to become a blended family, she asks what then is the makeup of the nation?

Throughout the novel, the relationship between adoptive parent and daughter is overshadowed by a sense of impropriety that is never substantiated. Lloyd, furthermore, proves unable to rescue Memory from her family’s association with violent crime. Despite his intervention, the generational curse seems to reassert itself, and Memory ends up on death row for murder—Lloyd’s murder, nonetheless—although she is innocent of the act. We might construe the historical insight offered by this denouement as a dismissal of Lloyd’s humanitarian impulse toward the albino child. Yet the novel’s twists and turns render such a conclusion beside the point. The truth lies deeper.

The novel sets up a reversal of savior roles instead: Memory hides Lloyd’s body and incriminates herself in his death to protect his reputation and dignity. Lloyd’s manner of death would have exposed his homosexuality, and Memory risks all to safeguard his privacy. Memory’s search for truth and a fuller understanding of Lloyd provide critical distance from the curse narrative which she then deploys performatively to obfuscate the details of Lloyd’s death. She acts her role as a victim of *ngozi* and assumes the public guilt of being a murderer. A socially familiar cause-and-effect narrative slips in and displaces the less acceptable but truer story. Memory is purportedly in control of this meaning-making although she has yet to prove this as she is writing a memoir in the hope of being exonerated. Through Memory’s predicament, Gappah shifts the people’s narrative of the liberation struggle to one of citizens against the state and its denial of individual freedoms.

In several instances, Gappah demonstrates how difficult it is to arrive at historical truths that are free of predetermining assumptions that

constrain their meaning. The American journalist Melinda, to whom Memory addresses her memoir, affords yet another frame within which to fit the facts. Here Memory figures as a wrongfully accused precarious subject (a woman social outcast) in an underdeveloped and unfree country. Melinda, acting as a human rights advocate, raises awareness of Memory's persecution. But the novel's generic contours shift some more as the reader knows this human rights frame is wrong or, at best, only partially true because it obscures the real meaning of Memory's actions made to protect LGBTQ rights. What we need instead is the story of a complex, historically anchored, interracial familial relationship that suffers the harm of extreme homophobia. Gappah amplifies the intersection of intimate and national histories through the setting of Memory's narration: the women's prison brings to light the life stories of women from varied backgrounds all punished for their intimate histories. Here Gappah is nodding to Bessie Head's short story "The Collector of Treasures" (1977), which takes place in a women's prison where all the incarcerated have killed their abusive husbands. This allusion (a feature of implicit metagenre) evokes Head—a South African exile in Botswana—as a precursor who spoke out against the misogyny of nationalist liberation movements and explored in her writing how intimate and political domains flow into each other.

The father-daughter story of Lloyd and Memory ends on the note of regret, forgiveness, love, and greater understanding. Guilty of once rejecting Lloyd and humiliating him with her disgust, Memory matured to understand him, and more importantly, to align herself with him in solidarity. Gappah's purpose is to break the national narrative free from the constraints of liberation war tropes and offer a different family story to stand in for the nation.

Notably, Memory acts in defense of Lloyd before she knows the full truth about the circumstances of her adoption. Her sister, Joy, finds her in prison and relays the contents of a letter written by their father in which he explains the facts of Lloyd's intervention in their lives. Thus Memory is freed from her hurtful assumption that her parents had sold her to Lloyd and learns that, in addition to giving their father the funds needed to educate Joy, Lloyd adopted Memory because, as a gay man

who was stigmatized for his sexuality, he identified with her difference. In his household and with the opportunities that he could provide her, he hoped Memory would be able to transcend the limitations of the prejudice against her albinism. In the same pattern of claiming and disclaiming, we are left with the ironic realization that Lloyd's homosexuality remained hidden (publicly disclaimed) and that he offered Memory a way to hide in plain sight and pass as white. The novel's wrangling with the past circles around these denials of identity until it exposes them both and invites us to confront their implications.

Moreover, the manner in which Memory receives this information is crucial for understanding Gappah's historical purpose. Although the facts reshape Memory's understanding of both father figures, they are transmitted by members of her biological family, not by Lloyd. Lloyd never explains himself in the novel. The girls' father wrote the letter to Joy, which was then delivered to Joy by a sympathetic policeman who brought the news of her parents' drowning. Decades later, Joy relates the content of the letter to Memory. The personal transmission of a family history avoids fitting the story into the frame of a colonial history. It restores the African father in the eyes of his children and carefully circumscribes Lloyd's role to show his personal reasons as a gay man for wanting to bring up Memory.

The novel's message of tolerance urges a more discriminating assessment of the past. It posits a complex national story for Zimbabwe distinct from the constraining Manichean aesthetic of anticolonial fiction (see JanMohamed). Bigotry, patriarchy, and homophobia are the social ills that feed political violence. In addition, Lloyd's presence in the novel fits a wider pattern in the new fiction by African women whereby a white man is introduced in the plot to reset the relationship with Europe and then move on, leaving him behind. Aminatta Forna includes the psychologist Adrian in *The Memory of Love* (2010), her novel set after the Sierra Leonean civil war (1991-2002). Adrian is involved in a love triangle with a Sierra Leonian surgeon and his childhood love. He leaves Freetown and gives up his biological child for Kai, the surgeon, to raise. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays Richard in her novel of

the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007). Richard also becomes involved in a love triangle with two Igbo sisters, a set up that captures the British stance towards the warring parties in the civil war—the public's support for the Igbo cause and the British official backing of the federalist Nigerian forces in the war. Lloyd, Adrian, and Richard are instrumental in each novel's outcome and demonstrate that their authors see the need for plots with a more complex assemblage of actors with varied identities. Breaking through to a new historical imagination, the novels invite an examination of how history shapes identity. What Katrin Berndt calls "genre performance" in *The Book of Memory* illustrates the importance of voicing in grappling with the historical truth of complex identity formation.

University of Connecticut
Storrs

WORKS CITED

- Aboulela, Leila. *River Spirit*. New York: Grove, 2023.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007.
- Berndt, Katrin. "'Speak, Mnemosyne': Genre Performance and Metagenre in Petina Gappah's Memoir-Novel *The Book of Memory*." *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 34 (2025): 1–30. <http://www.connotations.de/debate/genre-performace-and-metagenre-in-gappahs-memoir-novel-the-book-of-memory>
- Coundouriotis, Eleni. *The People's Right to the Novel: War Fiction in the Postcolony*. New York: Fordham UP, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823262359>
- Dangaremba, Tsitsi. *The Book of Not*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
- Forna, Aminatta. *The Memory of Love*. New York: Atlantic Monthly P, 2010.
- Gappah, Petina. *The Book of Memory*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
- Gappah, Petina. *An Elegy for Easterly: Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
- Gappah, Petina. *Out of Darkness, Shining Light*. New York: Scribner, 2019.
- Head, Bessie. "The Collector of Treasures." *The Collector of Treasure and Other Botswana Village Tales*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1977. 87-103.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. *Manichean Aesthetics : The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1983.

Makumbi, Jennifer Nansubuga. *Kintu*. Oakland: Transit, 2017.

Mengiste, Maaza. *The Shadow King*. New York: Norton, 2019.

Serpell, Namwali. *The Old Drift*. New York: Hogarth, 2020.