"Speak, Mnemosyne": Genre Performance and Metagenre in Petina Gappah's Memoir-Novel *The Book of Memory*

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This article is the first entry in a debate on "'Speak, Mnemosyne': Genre Performance and Metagenre in Petina Gappah's Memoir-Novel *The Book of Memory*" ([http://www.connotations.de/debate/genre-perfomance-and-metagenre-in_gappahs-memoir-novel-the-book-of memory](#)). If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to [editors@connotations.de](#).

Abstract

This article contends that the genre of the memoir-novel is inherently metageneric in purpose and design, arguing that it combines the novel's aesthetic and thematic diversity with the memoir's confessional self-reflection in order to produce self-referential comments on the characteristics of both genres, while simultaneously drawing attention to its own, hybrid form. Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015) is a memoir-novel that exemplifies several forms of metagenre. The analysis identifies the novel's foregrounding of its own production as a story, its confessional qualities, the self-reflexive and retrospective construction of memories, and the implementation of telling names as a convention of other genres as explicit forms of metagenre; implicit forms include inter- and transtextual references to Greek mythology, to the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, and to different cultural narratives. Among the implicit forms, there is also the protagonist's suggestion that her narration of her own story is based on unreliable memories, which undermines her credibility and hence deviates from the genre convention of the memoir-novel. Gappah's novel moreover contains examples of implicit metagenre that are transformed into explicit forms: it foregrounds the status of progressive myths as cultural narratives in order to subvert them, and it stages genre conventions of the memoir-novel as motifs. Both conversions are transpositions that have the potential to substantiate as well as undermine the subjective, confessional quality of the memoir-novel, suggesting a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of metagenre overall.

> We think we have some kind of privileged access to our own motives
> and intentions. In fact we have no clear insight into what moves us to
> live as we do. The stories we tell ourselves are like the messages that
> appear on Ouija boards. If we are the authors of our lives, it is only in
> retrospect.
> (John Gray, *The Soul of the Marionette* 137)

1. Introduction

This article discusses Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015) as a memoir-novel, a genre whose inherently metageneric design and purpose combine the novel's aesthetic and thematic diversity with the memoir's confessional self-reflection in order to comment on the characteristics of both genres, while simultaneously drawing attention to its own, hybrid form.[1] The analysis identifies the novel's confessional qualities, its self-reflexive and retrospective construction of memories, its foregrounding of its own production as a story, and the implementation of telling names as a convention of other genres as explicit forms of metagenre. It will also draw attention to implicit forms, such as the novel's inter- and transtextual references to Greek mythology, the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, and different cultural narratives, as well as its deviation from genre conventions of the memoir-novel.[2] In addition, the article will argue how implicit metagenre becomes transformed into explicit forms in the novel when it foregrounds the status of progressive myths as cultural narratives and stages conventions of the memoir-novel, such as the genre's claim to present the protagonist's story truthfully, in self-reflexive ways as a motif of the imaginative (re)creation of memory. These conversions are transpositions that substantiate as well as undermine the subjective, confessional quality of the memoir-novel, suggesting a more comprehensive understanding of its genre-typical relations to other texts, and of the phenomenon of metagenre overall.[3]

In her discussion of the role of metagenre in academic learning, Janet Giltrow has argued that "meta-genres are atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations— atmospheres surrounding genres" (195). To identify a particular form as metagenre, its "context" and "use" must be considered, since "meta-

genres—like genres themselves—are situated expressions" (196). Drawing on this general proposition on the purposes of metagenre, Burkhard Niederhoff has rendered Giltrow's observations more specific by adding that the phenomenon represents "an awareness of the rules and conventions governing a particular text type such as a newsletter, a student essay or a medical report" (3), which can include references of a text to its own or to another genre (see 8). In literary scholarship, "the prefix *meta*" moreover needs to be understood as describing any form of "[s]elf-reflexiveness [...] where metalanguage and object language are the same" (4). In other words, the particular "atmosphere" (Giltrow 197) defined as the "context of use" (190) of metagenre would, in literary criticism, both call upon and provide critical (meta)language and terminology to comprehend object language, which may directly express self-reflexiveness or invoke it in indirect manner. With regard to literary genre, Niederhoff suggests distinguishing between explicit and implicit types of metagenre: whereas "[f]ully explicit examples are rare [... since they would] have to [literally] name a genre and draw a connection to the text itself" (8), implicit types of metagenre occur whenever "the genre status of a text is only suggested, not pointed out in [any] obvious and direct manner" (9). Implicit metagenre hence comprises common and established rhetorical and narrative strategies, such as "genre within genre," "transtextuality," and "the violation of genre norms" (12).[4]

Both metalanguage and object language, as well as explicit and implicit distinctions of metagenre, can be found in *The Book of Memory*, whose analysis in what follows is situated within a comprehension of atmosphere and context,[5] the subgenre of the memoir-novel, and Gappah's own formal and thematic concerns.[6] To begin with the last of these, Gappah's work has so far demonstrated a particular interest in the intersections of personal and national history, in the re-evaluation of colonialist and postcolonialist ideologies, and in reflecting on the production of historical and cultural knowledge in general. In spite of her professional background as a lawyer and expert on international

trade, Gappah's primary motivation for writing is her fascination with history:

> I'm a frustrated historian, which is probably clear from [*The Book of Memory*]. I'm interested in excavating the social histories of Zimbabwe. For instance, Zimbabwe was built on a very unjust system of racial segregation; I know that. But I also know that there were amazing stories of love across the races. And there were some really nasty white people in Zimbabwe. But there were white people like Peter Garlake, who lost his job because he argued that the Great Zimbabwe ruins were built by black people and not by Phoenicians.
>
> History's always distorted to suit a political purpose, but fiction can try to redress the balance. And those are the stories I'm interested in telling—the stories of everyday normal people, who even in this injustice still managed to find their humanity. (Gappah, "Petina Gappah on Zimbabwe" n.p.)

Gappah's fascination with history also influences her interest in contemporary social and legal justice. In *The Book of Memory*, the portrayal of contemporary Zimbabwean society is fashioned as a "thick" cultural narrative, a "genre within [the] genre" of the novel that can be understood as an implicit and transtextual form of metagenre with which Gappah makes historical references meaningful.[7]

Another distinguishing feature of her writing that will be attended to in the metagenre context is Gappah's wry sense of humour. Oscillating between sarcasm and empathy, her prose mocks or laments social ills, hypocrisies, and institutional corruption in present-day Zimbabwe. Gappah's first book of fiction, the short-story collection *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009), was praised by South African Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee for its "scathing satire of Zimbabwe's ruling elite" and the "earthy comedy [that gives] sensitive accounts of the sufferings of humble victims of the regime" (cover endorsement). Another collection of stories, *Rotten Row* (2016), was influenced by German writer Ferdinand von Schirach's *Crime* (2012) and *Guilt* (2012), and by the broad coverage Zimbabwean media dedicates to crimes of various kinds, from felonies to minor transgressions.[8] Gappah's stories shed light on the Zimbabwean criminal justice system, which, she argues, "links everyone together, from the top politicians to the street vendors—it cuts across the

boundaries of race and class. So it was a theme that allowed me to build up a whole panorama of Zimbabwean society" (Gappah, "I want to write" n.p.). Her most recent work is the historical novel *Out of Darkness, Shining Light* (2019), which imagines the journey of the remains of Scottish explorer David Livingstone (1813-1873) that were carried from Central Africa to the East African coast to be shipped back to Britain. Gappah narrates this story from the perspectives of the African women and men who had been Livingstone's attendants and companions. *Out of Darkness, Shining Light* includes metafictional reflections on how history, historiography, and knowledge are produced, and whose contributions have come to be acknowledged in the process.[9]

Such considerations connect Gappah's work with both the emergence of the British memoir-novel in the long eighteenth century and major themes and forms of post-independence, contemporary Zimbabwean literature. To begin with the historical connection, Britain's "[e]arly novelists [had] tried to accommodate their [then] new genre to the forms of personal history, imitating biography, autobiography, collections of correspondence, or explicitly claiming, as [Henry Fielding's] *Tom Jones* does, the essential identity of novel and history" (Meyer Spacks 48). *The Book of Memory* is a memoir-novel, a genre that originated in the long eighteenth century and that is inherently "self-reflexive" as it "comments on the genre[s] it belongs to" (Niederhoff 2) in denomination and features. A memoir-novel "purports to be a 'true' autobiographical account but […] is wholly or mostly fictitious. Thus, [it is] a kind of literary convention or fictional device […] of which Daniel Defoe appears to have been the first practitioner with *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722)" (Cuddon 504). Popular throughout the eighteenth century, the genre reflects on the boundaries of fact and fiction by purpose and design and is, therefore, inherently metafictional: its "pseudo-autobiographical mode" (Baldick 150) relies on exhibiting convincingly the pretension that events, experiences, and sentiments are truthfully represented. In the Romantic period, the memoir-novel came to be used to make evident and complicate beliefs in the powers of the imagination, authorship, and the individual self while

also engaging with political, social, and legal concerns of the time. While Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) was a "popular satirical attack on what she perceived as the excesses of contemporary radical thought" (Perkins n.p.), William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) laments the pitfalls of confessional self-exploration: its protagonist claims that he wrote his "memoirs […] with the idea of vindicating my character" only to arrive at the conclusion that "I have now no character that I wish to vindicate" (434). Other Romantic memoir-novels feature a "narrator [who] is not, like [Defoe's] Crusoe, the central actor in the drama, but an observer merely," such as Thady Quirk in *Castle Rackrent* (1800) by Maria Edgeworth (Watson xvi).

Satire, confession, and the motif of an individual self who is drawn as an observer to their own identity and history also feature prominently in contemporary, post-independence Zimbabwean literature. Modern Zimbabwean classics such as Chenjerai Hove's *Bones* (1988), Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* (1993) and *Without a Name* (1994) have explored the entanglement of individual and collective narratives as an intersection of memory and history that frequently challenges the reliability and truthfulness of both. Marita, the protagonist of Hove's *Bones*, is also portrayed as an observer of her own (hi)story: "Constantly addressed and spoken about, she nevertheless does not belong to the group of the novel's narrators. She is omnipresent in the text, yet her voice is heard only through the voices of others. Although she dominates the narrated time, she is excluded from the time of telling" (Primorac, *Place of Tears* 90). Both Vera's and Hove's novels employ a narrative strategy that African-American Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has called "rememory," which describes the "continuous movement to and fro between past and present" (Tate 129) in the "effort to both remember and not know […] the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting" that comprehends memory as a "mutation of fact into fiction [and then into] folklore and then into nothing" (Morrison n.p.). It is this deliberate transposition of the cultural narrative, as a form of collective memory, into a fictional text that can not only be identified in Gappah's *The Book of Memory*, but also be defined as an explicit form of metagenre, when

the novel foregrounds the status of progressive myths as cultural narratives in order to subvert them. Satire and confession feature strongly in more recent works by Zimbabwean writers: the satirical attack on authoritarianism and political corruption in No Violet Bulawayo's *Glory* (2022) "explores what happens when an authoritarian regime implodes, […and] politics becomes a farce" (Mushakavanhu n.p.).[10] Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) portrays her main character's bitter struggle with legitimizing her own, cruel actions in a self-reflexive story about the pains of disappointed development, and is rendered in the style of biographical confession.[11]

Overall, Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* combines several of the characteristics of contemporary Zimbabwean writing that have also featured in the memoir-novel genre's early British history. Her novel also exemplifies what ultimately distinguishes the memoir-novel from its cousin genres[12] memoir, biography, and autobiography, including fictional biography, fictional metabiography, and fictional metaautobiography.[13] Other than these, the memoir-novel does not have to be concerned with what Ina Schabert described as "real-life orientation [and] the comprehension of real historical individuals by means of the sophisticated instruments of knowing and articulating knowledge that contemporary fiction offers" (4). While other forms of biographical writing seek to communicate factual claims by narrative and aesthetic means, the memoir-novel writes a fictional life and is therefore more concerned with the creative and imaginative instruments it uses. When such a "comprehension" refers to a distinctive convention of a particular genre, we are dealing with an example of metagenre. In addition to such instances of generic self-reflection, it is a characteristic of the memoir-novel to reflect on the concept of the memoir, as it pretends to give an autobiographical and truthful account of a life. In this way, and as illustrated by the confession of the narrator in *Caleb Williams* quoted above, and as shown in the following, in-depth analysis of Gappah's *The Book of Memory*, it can be argued that memoir-novels are always self-reflexive and, hence, inherently metageneric.

2. Strategies of Metagenre in *The Book of Memory*

2.1. The Narration of Memory as Genre Performance

The presence and significance of metagenre in Gappah's *The Book of Memory* is intricately connected with the concept of memory which looms large in the form of several (literal and figurative) meanings in the novel. To begin with, the title explicitly refers to the eponymous protagonist, a young woman named Memory, and announces the leit-motif, namely the presentation of (her) memory in the form of a coherent book, whose production is pursued, foregrounded, and self-reflexively discussed in the text. In this sense, "memory" is also a major convention of the particular subgenre of the text. Moreover, the title invokes an intertextual reference to (the books of) the Bible, suggesting a canonical authority that is at odds with the subjective significance of a personal memoir. With this implicit claim, the title also challenges the genre norms (see Niederhoff 11) of the memoir-novel.

In *The Book of Memory*, several properties of the memoir-novel can be identified in the novel's first sentences, which introduce the protagonist, two major elements of the plot, and the overall story development. Memory, a young Zimbabwean albinotic woman in Harare's high security Chikurubi prison, has been sentenced to death for the murder of her white adoptive father, Lloyd Hendricks, who bought her from her parents at the age of nine. She is prompted to narrate her life by a US-American activist-journalist, who has "made a career out of exposing miscarriages of justice" and is in Zimbabwe "to research a series of essays on our benighted justice system" (9). Memory relates her childhood and youth to this journalist because of the vague prospect that she might be granted a new trial that would acquit her:

> The story that you have asked me to tell you does not begin with the pitiful ugliness of Lloyd's death. It begins on a long-ago day in August when the sun seared my blistered face and I was nine years old and my father and mother sold me to a strange man. (1)

These sentences feature several conventions of the memoir-novel that draw attention to the genre: they make explicit the text's confessional quality, they emphasize the retrospective reconstruction of memory, and they include imaginative elements that characterize the first-person autodiegetic narrator. Memory's "blistered face" will soon be revealed to refer to her albinism, and the "sold me to a strange man" comment temporarily morphs into the internal focalization of Memory's younger, experiencing self to solicit sympathy for the child she was—and, consequently, for the imprisoned woman she, the narrating self, has become. This motivation is further clarified soon afterwards, when the narrator reveals that it actually "was a happy day for me" (1) because it was "really my mother" (1) she had reason to fear as a child, since her mother was emotionally unstable and occasionally violent. The initial confession that she was "sold to a strange man" thus assumes a new quality: what appeared to be the self-conscious perception of the nine-year-old girl transforms into an implied characterization of her mother and her parents' decision to give Memory away.

The inherent ambiguity of the self-reflexive, autodiegetic narrator is an often-discussed characteristic of Tsitsi Dangarembga's modern Zimbabwean classic, *Nervous Conditions* (1988). In this Bildungsroman, Dangarembga "skilfully manipulates the distinctions between narrated time and the time of narration" (Primorac, "Iron Butterflies" 102) in order to explore "the self-referential nature of the autobiographical mode" (Uwakweh 75). A much-lauded contribution to post-independence Zimbabwean literature, Dangarembga's continuous alternation between "the point of view of the adult, educated first-person narrator and that of her youthful, inexperienced narrated self" (Primorac, "Iron Butterflies" 102) has been regarded as

> a literary strategy [that marked] her attainment of voice in the Zimbabwean male-dominated literary arena. Voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action. Dangarembga illustrates this point in the status of Tambudzai as narrator or 'implied author' of *Nervous Conditions*. The narrator

> occupies an interpretive position, a perspective that is necessary for our appreciation of the new insights she acquires about her experience as female in a patriarchal and colonial society. (Uwakweh 75)

Gappah claims that *Nervous Conditions*, "the first novel in English by a black Zimbabwean woman […], had a profound effect on me. It shifted everything for me" (Gappah, Interview by Bongani Kona n.p.). As Uwakweh shows, Dangarembga's metageneric strategy, which draws attention to both the self-reflexive quality of the memoir and the Bildungsroman's distinguishing feature—narrating the youthful development of a character—assumes a highly political, liberational significance in the context of the first decade of post-independence Zimbabwe. About twenty years later, Gappah adopts this strategy, but she alters the meaning: in a double metaization, the production and (de)construction of memory itself is problematized, which suggests not liberation but disillusionment with the state of, and corruption within, present-day Zimbabwe.

Moreover, in Gappah's novel, the distinction between narrating and experiencing self also clearly responds to what the reader soon learns was encouragement from the activist-journalist: "The story that you have asked me to tell you." Her subsequent description of her father draws attention to her attempt to construct her memory truthfully: "My father is in a safari suit whose colour I can no longer remember. Or perhaps it wasn't a safari suit at all that he wore, and I have only put him in one because it is what all the men wore in those days" (1). The tenses of her retrospective reflection change several times here, from present indicative to present perfect to simple past, thereby stressing both the art of memory (production) and the narrating self's awareness of the possibly flawed credibility of her memory. Gappah, I would argue, "foreground[s the genre] conventions" of the memoir-novel, which relies on maintaining the trustworthiness of the fiction it presents, "by […] deviating from them" (Niederhoff 11).

Having thus characterized her memories, and her own narration, as potentially untrustworthy, Memory recalls the very first words her adoptive father said to her: "Speak, Mnemosyne" (2). As the text will

reveal later, Lloyd Hendricks is a scholar of classical mythology and literature, and his imperative greeting likens Memory to the Greek titan goddess, daughter of Uranus (the sky) and Gaia (the earth), who became mother of the nine muses (see Irmscher 359). The reference gestures towards the importance of Greek mythology as an imaginative tradition, one of several forms of cultural memory appropriated in Gappah's novel. Moreover, the particular form of address includes an intertextual reference to the title of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical narrative, *Speak, Memory* (1951). The first sentence of his memoir also appears as epigraph in Gappah's novel.[14] This chain of pluricultural references invites the reader to consider the story of Memory in an associative context of the Russian-American author's famous memoir-novel *Lolita* (1955): it complies with the criterion of transtextual, implicit metagenre, which "invokes a genre by referring to a prototypical example of this genre" (Niederhoff 10). In this way, Gappah's readers are encouraged to ponder the nature of Memory's relationship with her adoptive father, and consequently the reason for the "pitiful ugliness" (1) of his death.

2.2. (Subverting) The Order of Memory

The opening strategies of metaization in the memoir-novel are representative of the text's engagement with metagenre, and of the genre's inherent ambiguity, which demands that biographical credibility be performed in a convincing manner. Another feature of implicit metagenre can be found in the structure of the novel: the titles of the three parts of *The Book of Memory* are named after the three places Memory inhabited. They begin with the address of her parents' house in Mufakose Township in Harare, where she lived until the age of nine; they continue with the home of her adoptive father in Umwinsidale, an upper-middle-class neighbourhood at the other end of the Zimbabwean capital where she spent the next nine years; and they conclude with Chikurubi prison, where she is held in the present-time of the

story. This structural design suggests a chronological story develop-
ment, yet the narrative order is not linear; "rememory" subverts the or-
der of memory, as the narrative is continuously disrupted and alter-
nates between Memory's present, analepses to different stages of her
childhood and youth, and self-reflexive contemplations on the con-
struction of memory, that is, her process of remembering. Disruptions
such as analepses are, of course, established strategies of both novel and
memoir with which the genres present (and manipulate the presenta-
tion of) story time. Gappah's novel employs them in a way that accen-
tuates their function as genre convention when she names the book's
three parts after local places of residence that only occasionally appear
as an actual setting. The flexibility of the genre convention becomes a
ruse with which the memoir-novel stages its imaginative, and non-lin-
ear, construction of the past. Moreover, Memory's first-person narra-
tion frequently undermines her own, autobiographical claim that she is
faithfully recounting her story: on various occasions, she self-con-
sciously interrupts her endeavours to relate her story in order to reflect
on her capacity to (re)create a reliable representation of her past.

> That is the thing about memory. Sometimes you come to understand the
> things you cannot possibly have known; they make sense and you rewrite the
> memory to make it coherent. (133)

> So I reflect on my life, to rework the events that brought me here, to rearrange
> and reimagine them in an endless cycle of what-ifs. (11)

> [A]s it turns out, writing this is not as simple as I had imagined. I had thought
> that when I sat down to write, it would be to tell a linear story with a proper
> beginning, an ending and a middle.
>   I did not realise the extent to which my current reality and random memo-
> ries would intrude into this narrative. (85)

These passages feature explicit references to various formal elements of
the memoir-novel and therefore qualify as instances of explicit meta-
genre (see Niederhoff 9): the narrator admits her desire to "rewrite the
memory to make it coherent," and to "rework," "rearrange and reimag-
ine" her life in the form of "a linear story" that follows the conventional

design supposedly demanded by the journalist who initiated the process. A consummate contrarian, the narrating self labels her "current reality and random memories" as inadvertently spoiling her efforts, thus disturbing the suspension of disbelief upon which the memoir-novel, like all fiction, relies. This exposure and disruption of its genre conventions adds an aspect of implicit metagenre as well.

The occasional insertion of what can be read as second-person narration employs the formal convention of point-of-view as an aspect of metagenre.[15] Memory's confession of her life story is rendered as an "overt address" to the US-American activist-journalist Melinda Carter, who never actually appears in the story and who, as one reviewer argued, "adds nothing to the plot, [and] is neither credible nor necessary" (Jaggi n.p.). That observation is correct when Carter is (re)viewed as a character. When read in the context of an analysis of metagenre, however, she serves to subvert the pretended truthfulness of the memoir-novel. Her implied presence appears to show Memory communicating with another person, while the protagonist and narrator is actually having a conversation with herself. Memory approaches her own experiences as if they were those of another in the attempt to make sense of them:

> It is always hard to remember the impression that things made on you when you were a child. It is easy to recast what you now know to how you first saw them, and to see them again with an adult's understanding. (69)

> [Y]our mind truly is the only thing you can control when you are in prison. Your emotions are the only thing you can call your own. (71)

This homodiegetic second-person narration becomes a self-reflexive confession only because the character Carter is indeed absent, silent, and "adds nothing to the plot" (Jaggi n.p.). Her function is to confuse the reader's understanding of who is addressed in these passages—and what the main agenda of the addressee might be. Does the protagonist long to confess to Carter, or to convince the justice system of her innocence? Or is Memory driven by another longing—for understanding, forgiveness, closure? The instances of second-person narration further

substantiate the difference between experiencing and narrating self, a "distancing" towards Memory's "actions, […] perceptions and impressions" (Fludernik 288). In *This Mournable Body* (2018), Dangarembga's sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, second-person narration is the main narrative perspective, where it arguably "tell[s] a forbidden truth, taking the difficult story away from the 'I' in order to give it more authority" (Coundouriotis 449) and to lament "the permanent secondariness to which one is assigned after liberation" (447). Moreover, as a "situated expression" (Giltrow 196) in a memoir novel, these brief instances of effective second-person narrative betray an "awareness of the rules [that govern this] particular text type" (Niederhoff 3). The strategy is an example of metagenre in the sense that it makes a self-reflexive observation on the genre of the memoir-novel by delineating the process and struggle to represent events and experiences truthfully. Overall, *The Book of Memory* transforms genre performance into reflection on genre. Through metaization, aspects of the story draw attention to both their conventional and newly acquired function: title, headings, and point of view not only place protagonist and leitmotif centre-stage, but also invite reflections on the memoir-novel and its construction of (fictional) memory. As a character, Carter is merely a silent addressee; as a strategy of metagenre, the address announces a concealed, second ambition behind the protagonist's confession: that Memory is searching for a truth that had been misconstrued by her memories, while also seeking forgiveness for what she can remember.

2.3. Naming, Satire, and the Metaization of Cultural Narratives

The implicit and explicit examples of metagenre in *The Book of Memory* analysed so far either refer to the particular genre of the text itself, the memoir-novel, or to one of the two genres that inspire it. In the following, I would like to discuss aptronyms as instances of metagenre that differ from these (the memoir and the novel), insofar as they represent a typical element of other literary and social text genres of both British

and Shona cultural traditions.[16] In established genres of British literature, such as the comedy of manners and the social realist novel, aptronyms are used "as a kind of label" that denotes "the nature and character of a person and/or their occupation. This is how names were originally acquired or bestowed" (Cuddon 51). Telling names often signify comic or moral types, especially of static, one-dimensional characters, and reflect a shared cultural knowledge that is communicated "with the aid of various symbolic media" that contribute to producing a (national or otherwise collective) group "identity as 'we'" (Assmann 175). Therefore, they must have a familiar and repetitive quality, for only then can they reflect on (and also mock and satirize) common cultural notions (as well as their corruption).

In *The Book of Memory*, aptronyms that can be understood as implicit metageneric references to British literary conventions are the first names of the female criminals that Memory meets in prison. Their names combine comic and moral significance in that they comment on the crimes for which these women have been convicted. For example, Memory's fellow inmate Verity serves time because she successfully applied for millions from a programme of the International Olympic Committee that is supposed to "fund athletes from small, poor nations" (23); Verity embezzled the money and spent it on her own, luxurious lifestyle. Her name reflects ironically on the fraud she committed, and also mocks the gullibility of those who fell for her scheme. Monalisa, another prisoner, carries the name of Leonardo DaVinci's painting (1503), which is famous for the mystery that surrounds the unknown woman portrayed in an idealized style, and whose subtle smile seems to gently mock those fascinated with the portrait. These motifs are evoked in the name of Memory's fellow inmate, who was convicted because "[s]he defrauded a European embassy of more than half a million euros" by pretending she had founded organisations to support girls:

> "Girl Children," she says, "are the easiest con in the world."
> [For t]here is apparently no easier way to raise money from donors than to present a child, female and barefoot, with a plea for money to ward off all the dreadful things that could happen to it […]. All that the embassy required of

grant recipients was that they produce quarterly reports of how the money was spent, and these she provided, complete with glowing pictures of Girl Children smiling for the cameras. (24)

The character name Monalisa serves several subversive functions: it satirizes idealizations of femininity and the romanticization of poverty, and it mocks donor-organizations' fascination with concerns such as "empowerment and awareness-raising" (24), goals whose successful implementation (or the failure to do so) are difficult to verify, since they are conveyed "in contemporary jargon devised to obscure rather than illumine" (James 117). Consequently, they present "an easy fraud for Monalisa to pull" (24): by presenting glossy images of smiling girls, Monalisa succeeds. After her release from prison, she becomes a consultant for European-funded aid projects (265), another opportunity, or so the text suggests, to turn European romanticizations into hard cash.

   The aptronyms Verity and Monalisa hark back to established British (literary) traditions and genres such as the comedy of manners. Moreover, their ironic use in the novel comments on another text form and cultural genre, which becomes implicitly subverted: progressive metanarratives such as the belief in the overall positive impact of developmental aid. Gappah views critically the work of international donors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs):

> I felt almost guilty about that because they [aid workers] are such an easy target—all these people who mean well but get it so awfully wrong! I am very cynical about the way Zimbabwe has become a project—it sometimes feels like the situation exists just so certain people can keep their jobs. Some of the wealthiest people in Zimbabwe work for NGOs—they earn more than doctors or teachers […]. One of the most abused job descriptions is that of "human rights defender"—we need to stop and ask, what is being defended, and what is not? […] The internationalisation of the crisis [in Zimbabwe] has distorted the ills of our society. (Gappah, "I want to write" n.p.)

The fraud schemes that are satirized in the telling names of Memory's fellow prison inmates represent an ontological shift and transposition in the sense that extratextual ideologies (and their social and economic

manifestations) are invested with a rhetorical element typical of comic genres.

The challenge of progressive metanarratives features also in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), which "shows how pain and poverty are mobilized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) not just to help the victims, but also to guarantee luxurious lifestyles for some of the workers of such organizations" (Isaac Ndlovu 117). In Gappah's novel, this critique defines the context of the only instance where the text explicitly "name[s the memoir] genre" (Niederhoff 8) rather than implicitly referring to one of its genre conventions. In the self-reflexive fashion that distinguishes the memoir-novel, but otherwise unrelated to the story, the protagonist mentions "the memoir of an American writer who always looks as though she is weighed down by both the thickness of her dreadlocks and the ponderousness of her prose" and whose work is referred to as an example of "the power of contrition" and the "human need for validation" (194). The "American writer" referred to here is not described (or identified) further in the text; her "memoir" appears to be driven by the sentimental, activist desire to have one's own virtue affirmed that informs the condescension towards those labelled *deserving*. The text mocks this conviction as an actually self-serving (and self-flattering) motivation behind progressive metanarratives.

Significantly enhancing the British tradition of aptronyms that label characters in accordance with their comic and/or the moral function of satirizing social hypocrisies, the novel also features several telling names that are inspired by Shona naming practices, yet another shared cultural knowledge the novel draws on to appeal to a broader audience.[17] Shona names and naming conventions signify social, historical, and cultural attitudes in Zimbabwean society: they can denominate a person's social status and position within the family hierarchy, a (re)discovery of ancestral roots, or societal prejudice, for example towards marginalized groups such as "albinos" (cf. Makuyana 4).[18] As Charles Pfukwa has shown, the (originally oral) Shona tradition has as-

sumed more diversified functions in written forms such as contemporary auto/biographical writing in which, for example, fighters' guerrilla names adopted during the Second Chimurenga (1966-1979)[19] serve as "historical metaphors of the Self" (171). As such, they transcend both individual "self-authorization" identified with "western thought" and their traditional Shona function to "tell of the fortunes or the misfortunes of [a] family" when they become "a form of memory that memorialise[s] certain [historical] events" to serve as "allegor[ies] of the [story of the] nation" (Pfukwa 172). The significance of names and naming are a prominent motif in contemporary Zimbabwean literature as well, where authors equally employ them to highlight various aspects of Shona history and identity (cf. Chiwome 181).[20]

In an interview, Gappah has commented on the social and cultural significance of naming conventions in present-day Zimbabwe that have influenced her writing:

> They are real. My character, Memory, has a sister called Moreblessing, a brother called Gift. These are the kinds of names that Zimbabweans like—names that have positive qualities. Like Praise is a very popular name, Loveness is a very popular name. It's a confusion between happiness and love—so you have happiness, surely you must have Loveness.
>
> But they can also be negative names in the sense that you're trying to send out a negative message. You could have names like Hatred, you could have names that mean something like Suffering or Poverty. So names are not just names; names have real meaning, and they tend to tell the world about the circumstances of your parents at the time that you were born. (Gappah, "Sentenced to Death" n.p.)

In contrast to the ironic aptronyms of minor characters like Verity and Monalisa, which can be understood as metageneric gestures towards British literary genres, and the inter- and transtextual reference of the protagonist's name to Nabokov, Greek mythology, and the text's genre, Memory's name is also steeped in Shona naming practice: it indeed signifies the "circumstances of [her] parents at the time [she was] born" (s.a.). Her name and those of her siblings—Moreblessing, Gift, and Joy—reflect their parents' traditions in Shona culture, the meaning of

its naming practices in particular—and, not least, they are also intelligible in a global Anglophone context.

Only at the very end of the novel does Memory's sister Joy disclose the events that are commemorated in the protagonist's name. Their parents were haunted by memories that had traumatized their mother to the extent that she killed one of her children and attempted to drown Memory as well. Memory's mother was forced to marry a much older stranger at the age of thirteen in order to counteract the evil impact of a *ngozi* spirit that was threatening her family's prosperity.[21] Cosmological beliefs are another text genre of Shona culture that is implicitly located in the name of the protagonist. Through the name of Memory's mother, Moira, this narrative tradition is connected with Greek mythology, which features in the novel through many and recurrent intertextual references. Moira's name refers to the Greek goddesses of fate, yet ironically and tragically, Memory's mother is perhaps the character least in charge of her destiny: her attempts to regain control result only in further suffering. That she gave her daughter a name that communicates this ongoing, overwhelming, and eventually fatal, presence of the past in her life, and that of her family, fundamentally questions the narrative control of the protagonist of the memoir-novel to tell her own story. After all, and after the context of her name has been revealed, it can no longer be imagined as only her story, or as only hers to tell.

In other words, Memory's name is de-individualized and so undermines the key genre convention and understanding of the memoir-novel that a subjective truth exists, and that this truth can be recreated and confessed. Mamadou Ngom has identified a "collective edge" (45) to memory in Gappah's novel in which "the individual intertwines with the collective. Even though the act of remembering is purely individual, […] it is enacted in a social context with groups acting as cues. Remembering is not an isolated act. Instead, it is group-induced" (38). As the story unfolds, Memory learns about the evil spirits of Shona cosmology, but not as a child from her parents. When she attends a lecture given by her adoptive father, who, as a "professor of classical literature,

specialis[es] in filtering Greek tragedies through the African experi-
ence" (156), he elaborates on spiritual beliefs shared by several cultures:

> "In Shona mythology, you can propitiate a *ngozi* spirit in the same way that
> the Greeks poured libations before the Oracle at Delphi. A *ngozi* can be ap-
> peased with live animals and with a young girl to carry the children the mur-
> dered victim was unable to have." [...]

> "Oedipus was pursued by *ngozi*. [...] When we talk of fate, when we talk of a
> fatalistic vision of human experience, what we mean is that the most im-
> portant forces that shape human lives are out of human control." (220)

In its examination of both Shona and Greek spiritual beliefs, Gappah's
novel displays a form of metagenre that Lena Linne describes as an
"other-reflexive quality" (59). The meaningful inclusion of other, and
ontologically different, social and cultural text genres is a characteristic
feature of *The Book of Memory*, as my discussion of the text's critique of
progressive metanarratives has shown. Such references do not, how-
ever, treat the genres equally in the same way in which, for example,
Homeric epics are considered in their contemporary rewritings (see
Linne 60). Gappah employs individual elements of cultural narrative
genres (contemporary myths, spiritual beliefs) to further destabilize the
genre of her text: as the body of memories recreated by Memory grows,
her claim to know her story becomes increasingly qualified. Her life
and experiences, as recalled by her, are revealed to be the product of
the hidden stories and secrets of her family, and of her own projections.

2.4. Becoming Explicit: Genre Conventions as Motifs

A final strategy of explicit metaization in *The Book of Memory* that I
would like to discuss is the transformation of generic conventions into
central motifs that has already been observed as an implicit form in the
novel's use of aptronyms. Major characteristics of the memoir-novel
genre, such as the claim to present the protagonist's memories truth-
fully and the confessional motivation and style, become repeatedly

problematized topics and concerns in Gappah's work that are addressed in a self-reflexive manner. In other words, the novel establishes selected memories, as well as Memory's reflections on how to represent them truthfully, as recurrent themes and ideas that are shown to have shaped the protagonist's understanding of herself as much as her engagement with her environment. One of these pivotal memories is her belief that Lloyd Hendricks had bought her from her parents. The recollection, as argued above, introduces the story and emplots Memory as a potential victim of either her parents or Lloyd Hendricks. The protagonist returns to what appears to be the memory of the experiencing self at several occasions over the course of her confessional narrative, for example here, at the end of part two:

> [Lloyd] took something from his pocket. It was a large wad of green bills […]. He handed the money to my father, but it was my mother who reached out to take it. She took the money without counting it and stuffed it into her bra. (133)

This memory is the foundation upon which Memory builds her confession, connecting it with several other memories in order to reinforce and thus make sense of her own story. As the autodiegetic narrating self reveals, however, she has to resort to imaginative construction because

> Lloyd rarely talked openly about how I came to live with him. When he spoke of it at all, it was always in euphemisms. He spoke of "taking me in", of "giving me a home", the good-hearted rich man taking in the poor black child, the cheerful Cheeryble giving room and board to an ungrateful Dickensian orphan. (5)

Such intertextual references highlight Memory's translation of memories into meaningful, guiding motifs, and further illustrate her appropriation of genre conventions for the imaginative recreation of her personal story. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that her memories are truthful insofar as they show the child's actual perception and her

youthful attempt to make sense of her parents' actions; but they are unreliable as well because the adult Memory comes to know that Lloyd did not buy but did indeed adopt her, and that the money he gave her parents was meant to support her sister's school education. It is only the process of narratively reconstructing her story for the activist-journalist, which forces her to go through her recollections, that has her realize that

> I wanted to go back, to see where it was I made that fatal mistake. My mind keeps going back to that memory of seeing Lloyd hand over the bills, a false memory on which I have built the foundation of my life, or, to put it more accurately, a true memory from which I have made false assumptions. My utter conviction that my parents sold me rested only on that exchange of money.
>   I understand now why Lloyd adopted me. He was as different as I was. (261)

Memory here refers to Lloyd's homosexuality that had to be kept a secret, and of which she herself learns only shortly before his death. She confesses to not having been able to "make the imaginative leap that would have made me see how trapped he was, that could have made me see the lie he was constantly forced to live" (196). Her lack of compassion for him—furthered by Lloyd's affair with a man she was seeing as well—leads to her betrayal: she reports (what she calls) his "sodomy" to the police. Since she remains anonymous, and there is no evidence, Lloyd is released without further prosecution but dies later in an auto-erotic act.

> So this is what was in my mind then. He had been in this very police station all those years ago […] I had not killed him, but I had been cold and cruel to him. I had rejected him. I thought then about Lloyd, about why he had died the way he had. Was it because of me he had rejected all human touch? Was it the fear of discovery? (231)

The genre convention of the confessional motivation is staged here as a motif. There are, in fact, two confessions: the legal one Memory signs under threat at the police station and in which she declares herself

guilty of having murdered Lloyd, and her narrative confession that her actual guilt lies elsewhere—that she has betrayed a man who has shown her only kindness and care. In the words of Bakhtin,

> "Memory" in memoirs and autobiographies is of a special sort: it is memory of one's own contemporaneity and of one's own self. It is a de-heroizing memory […] without pre-existing chronological pattern, bounded only by the termini of a single personal life […]. (Bakhtin 24n2)

Memory's final recognition once again subverts the genre conventions of the memoir: while she indeed "de-heroizes her memory" when she admits to "[having] been obsessing over the moments, small in themselves, that brought me here" (268), it is precisely the acknowledgment of the boundaries of "[her] own contemporaneity" that allows her to transcend it. Having realized her flawed memory and the fatal mistake that may have contributed to the tragedy of Lloyd's death, Memory seeks refuge and consolation in the spiritual beliefs held by her parents, and learned from her adoptive father: not guilt, but the blame lies with the "*ngozi* reaching out from the past," because "[a]nything else is too horrible, the idea of a knowing hand directing all of this merely to put me in prison to learn a life-affirming lesson" (268). By calling upon a force beyond her control, Memory allows herself to find consolation, and to admit to herself that "what I had with Lloyd was love. […] He gave me an understanding that took me outside of myself, that there was a life beyond things; there was an existence that went on long after the self had gone" (269). Only by leaving behind her struggle to make sense of her recollections does Memory manage to find meaning.

3. Conclusion

The Book of Memory features many and various instances of explicit and implicit metagenre, and it subverts genre conventions in ways that can be comprehended with the critical tools of a metageneric analysis. The pluriformal, multi-layered significance of "memory" in Gappah's novel

draws attention to the story element and motif of "memory" as a genre convention that is addressed, challenged, and also located in other generic contexts, namely in cultural narratives from Shona cosmology to Greek mythology. The telling name of the protagonist can be understood as both affirming the categorization of *The Book of Memory* as a memoir-novel—since Memory self-reflects on sharing her memories in novelistic style—but also as challenging the genre's key convention, the performance of autobiographical truthfulness, for Memory is shown to be aware of—and draws attention to—"the unreliability of [her own] memory" (Ngom 53). In addition, the protagonist's name serves as an explicit metageneric comment on Greek mythology, and it invites inter- and transtextual readings by establishing implicit connections with the work of Vladimir Nabokov. The aptronyms of other, minor characters either connect with British literary traditions such as the comedy of manners, or with Shona naming conventions. Their use provides instances of metagenre when gesturing towards their genre origin(s), which simultaneously obscures monogeneric classification, since telling names in Gappah's novel are arguably steeped in more than one textual tradition.

As a memoir-novel, *The Book of Memory* self-consciously reflects on and foregrounds the contemporaneity of this genre's fictional memory and the terms of the life that is imaginatively created here. Its various strategies of metaization destabilize its genre, which has to provide a convincing pretension of truthfully represented events, experiences, and sentiments. Then again—who would not want to trust a self-avowed fiction?

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NOTES

[1]I would like to thank the participants of 16th International *Connotations* Symposium on "Metagenre" for their insightful questions and comments. In addition, I would like to thank Therese-Marie Meyer, Oliver Bock, Maxi Kinzel, and Andrew Wells for their feedback on an earlier version of this text. I am also and particularly grateful to the two anonymous peer-reviewers, whose attentive reading and insightful comments have been extremely helpful.

[2]According to Niederhoff, one form of "implicit metagenre is transtextual, which means that a text invokes a genre by referring to a prototypical example of this genre. In Jane Austen's *Emma*, for instance, the eponymous character quotes a well-known verse from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* […] [to imply] that matches at Hartfield are made in a harmonious manner under her benign and astute direction. Austen, however, indicates that the course of true love in *Emma* will be as chaotic and circuitous as in Shakespeare's play, and she also acknowledges the debt that her novels owe to the rich tradition of English stage comedy" (10).

[3]The term "transposition" is employed here following the definition of Linda Hutcheon, who describes the adaptation of "an historical event or an actual person's life into a reimagined, fictional form" (17) as defined by an "ontological shift" (16). Clifford Geertz's semiotic understanding of culture that interprets acts of communication as (meaningfully constructed and hence literary) texts arguably has become the dominant approach to understanding culture in contemporary cultural studies (cf. Edgar 82-83; see also the inclusion of non-literary "texts" and selected genres as defined in cultural semiotics below).

[4]A detailed discussion of the typology and an illustration of the different subcategories of explicit and implicit metagenre can be found in Niederhoff 8-13.

[5]The terms "atmosphere" and "context" are used here as introduced by Giltrow (197, 196).

[6]An internationally acclaimed novelist and short-story writer, Petinah Gappah was born in Zambia (*1971) and raised in Southern Rhodesia / Zimbabwe. Gappah studied law at Cambridge, Graz, and the University of Zimbabwe and worked as an expert on trade law for the World Trade Organization before starting to write. She currently lives in Harare.

[7]For a conceptual outline of the literary-critical understanding of "thick description" in cultural anthropology, see Geertz (esp. 6-10 and 15-18).

[8]See Gappah, "I want to write" n.p. In an interview, Gappah mentioned that Schirach's "mind-blowing book of short stories based on his work as a criminal defence lawyer […] inspired me to do a series of stories about the causes and consequences of crime" (Gappah, Interview by Bongani Kona n.p.).

[9]In the context of the metagenre debate, the historical figure of David Livingstone in *Out of Darkness, Shining Light* provides another case of ontological transposition and transtextuality: his fictional presence in Gappah's novel can be defined as a "prototypical example" (Niederhoff 10) of the genres of both colonialist and postcolonialist narratives on nineteenth-century exploration and Victorian imperialism.

[10]Celebrated by reviewers such as Tinashe Mushakavanhu as an "instant Zimbabwean classic," *Glory* adapts motifs from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), "using characters who are horses, pigs, dogs, cows, cats, chickens, crocodiles, birds and butterflies" (n.p.); the political satire was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 2022.

[11]Rosemary Chikafa-Chipiro reads the painful "indifference to violence and abuse [and …] the aloofness in the narration and spectatorship of rape and its trauma" in *This Mournable Body* as drawing attention to a historical "conflation of the immediate post-independent period and the contemporary moment" (446).

[12]The metaphorical classification as "cousin genres" aims to highlight that memoir-novel and memoir are kin but differ in kind. Like a memoir-novel, a memoir features first-person narration with the claim to autobiographical status, as well as a confessional motivation and style. Unlike the memoir-novel, it actually is autobiographical. To further extend the metaphor, a sibling genre of the memoir-novel would be the epistolary novel: both novel genres are defined by the fictional pretension and performance of autobiographical narration.

[13]For a detailed discussion of self-reflexivity in literary forms of life-writing, see Nünning.

[14]"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (Nabokov 19).

[15]Monika Fludernik argues that a "true and proper instance of second-person narrative" requires a "*you* [… that is] no longer anchored to a virtual narratee, to a generalized 'you' that might appeal to the reader as an identificationary option: it exclusively refers to the protagonist" (283). *The Book of Memory* is, therefore, not a "second-person narrative" by definition but features, as this article aims to show, instances of second-person narration that qualify as a strategy of metagenre.

[16]In the context of this discussion, non-literary "texts" and selected genres (such as cultural naming practices) will be included as defined in cultural semiotics, which "regard as 'text' any ordered set of signs for which or through which people in a culture construct meaning, regardless of whether that set of signs manifests itself in day-to-day human relations, religious rituals, […] songs, novels, motion pictures, scholarly articles, and so on […]. Texts, regardless of the particular symbols through which they are expressed or through which writers discover their meaning, are woven out of the materials of multiple symbol systems" (Witte 269). Such texts and their "genres" are essential for "an understanding of writing" overall since they are social systems of "meaning-making [without which] a comprehensive or a culturally viable understanding of 'writing' or 'text'" cannot be achieved (240).

[17]In a recent essay, Gappah identifies with a declaration made by Ousmane Sembène (1923-2007), one of the founding figures of Francophone Senegalese literature and path-breaking film maker, who argued that "Africa is my audience, the west and the rest are markets" ("We are daring to invent the future," n.p.).

[18]Examples of the considerable variety of meanings that names can assume in contemporary Zimbabwean novels include Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, in which the names of several major characters denote their position and status within

the extended patriarchal family; Nevanji Madanhire's *If the Wind Blew* (1996), whose "female protagonist Isis discovers the origins of her first name in African mythology which initiates a re-invention—or re-self-determination—of her identity" (Berndt 66-67); and Tendai Huchu's *The Maestro, the Magistrate and the Mathematician* (2014), where the eponymous "maestro" is actually David, a white Zimbabwean man living in Edinburgh, who works in a supermarket and whose precarious socio-economic status is ironically reflected by his nickname.

[19]From 1966 to 1979, the Second Chimurenga or Zimbabwean war of liberation was fought between the Rhodesian Front Government and the Zimbabwean nationalist forces ZANLA and ZIPRA. The outbreak of the war followed the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by Prime Minister Ian Smith's white minority Rhodesian Front Government in 1965, "to pre-empt a possible move by the British who had been relinquishing control in neighboring colonies in favor of the indigenous blacks" (Chikuhwa 19).

[20]In fact, the longing for a name that would signify a character's, or an aspect of the nation's, identity has inspired several novel titles; examples include Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* (1994), Vivienne Ndlovu's *For Want of a Totem* (1997), and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013).

[21]In Shona cosmology, a *ngozi* is a concept that combines social, spiritual and legal norms; it is described as an "avenging spirit" that afflicts people as the result of a serious crime; for example, "to kill a fellow human being or commit suicide is to commit 'ngozi.' Once 'ngozi' is committed, it has to be recompensed in order for restorative justice to occur between individuals, families, and the community in general" (Musanga 778). For a detailed discussion of the *ngozi* in the context of cultural and collective memory, see Ngom (50n3).

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