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Dealing with interwoven memories and histories: some perspectives in conversation with William Kentridge's *History of the Main Complaint*

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the notion of memory and history as interwoven phenomena. It was originally presented towards the end of a conference on “The Reformed Churches and the struggle for Justice in South Africa: Remembering 1960-1990.” The article highlights certain characteristics of the project in order to situate it within a broader project of memory-work. It then continues to discuss an artwork of William Kentridge, *History of the Main Complaint*, to illuminate various levels on which memory and history as interwoven phenomena might be understood. Finally, memory and history are discussed as being interwoven phenomena with regards to its crushing or curing abilities, temporality, topics it deals with, and those who remember.

INTRODUCTION

In his anecdotal reflection on the political transition in South Africa, *The Other Side of History* (2006), Frederik van Zyl Slabbert remarks: “One thing the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ South Africa have in common is a passion for inventing history. History is not seen as a dispassionate inquiry into what happened, but rather as a part of political mobilisation promoting some form of collective self-interest” (Slabbert, 2006:15). This remark, repeated in his conclusion, frames Slabbert’s sketch of the events that gave rise and led to South Africa’s political transition. In his account he does not claim to know or tell the *whole* or the *real* story. Rather, his explanation of events and his need to share it rests on his assertion that “significant parts of what has been, or is being invented” (15) are not the way he remembers certain events.¹ Slabbert’s book makes no claim to be conclusive, but it makes an important contribution to the ways South Africa’s past is remembered.

Slabbert’s anecdote and the topics discussed in it are a good example of the character of “memory work”² in South Africa: it is a work in progress; it is a testimony, in some instances an eyewitness report; it forms a part of the body of memory on important events in the history of South Africa. It highlights many of the important attributes of memory: memory is an active rather than a passive process. It is something that someone does. Memories are made

1 One is reminded of Margaret Macmillan words: “[memory] is a tricky business... We mistakenly think that memories are like carvings in stone; once done, they do not change. Nothing can be further from the truth. Memory is not only selective; it is malleable” (2009: 45).

2 “Memory work” is a term used by John Gillis in ‘Memory and identity: The history of a relationship’, in J.R. Gillis (ed.) *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994). He states that “memory work is, like any other kind of physical or mental labour, embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end” (3).

by memory-agents³ (of which Kodak is only one) – those who do the work of remembering. These agents do not live or remember in a vacuum, but in political spaces. Mieke Bal says it well in the introduction to *Acts of Memory* (1999): our memories are “the product of collective agency rather than the result of psychic or historical accident” (1999: vii). Memory - what we remember and what we make of those remembrances – “is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer, but something that you actually *perform*” (vii).

What does it mean to engage in memory work? How does taking memory seriously contribute to historical projects like the one embarked on during the said conference? On the one hand, it implies that we acknowledge the phenomenon of memory as a real and an important one. The relationship between memory and history is notorious for its difficulty to acknowledge one another as partners in knowing the past. However, Paul Ricoeur seems to have put this straight: “To put it bluntly, we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened *before* we declare that we remember it” (Ricoeur, 2004: 21).⁴ Memory is our only access to the past. Ricoeur’s starting point is that memory is capability – we can remember. On the other hand, however, our memories are also of a transient and delicate nature: open to abuse.⁵ As Andreas Huyssen puts it: “Human memory may well be an anthropological given, but closely tied as it is to the ways a culture constructs and lives its temporality, the forms memory will take are invariably contingent and subject to change” (Huyssen, 1995: 2).

Slabbert’s remark about myth-making alludes to this transient, delicate nature of memory. Contributions to the body of memory are seldom without politics: they serve an agenda; they are connected to identities and ideologies.⁶ As stated in the introduction of the book, *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa* (1998), “the debate about the processes of memory, and about how memory is created and inscribed” (Nuttal & Coetzee, 1998: 1) in post-apartheid South Africa is an on-going one. This means that we should be very aware of the fact that “we are as yet unable to judge which memories and way of remembering will come to dominate in South Africa in the future” (1). When we remember those days of the late 80’s and early 90’s in which South Africa’s future was negotiated (and of which Slabbert tells in his book), we ought to keep in mind that futures are not settled by a select political few. The negotiations continue, the role-players are innumerable, and the politics thereof are as complicated as ever as we struggle to find some form of consensus on the past and hope of figuring out a way forward. The challenge of memory work in South Africa is therefore

3 Herman Paul refers to the agents of memory as “memory managers”. See for example his article, “Religious Discourse Communities. Confessional Differentiation in Nineteenth-Century Dutch Protestantism.”

4 Earlier in the same chapter Ricoeur writes: “And yet, we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it. Historiography itself, let us already say, will not succeed in setting aside the continually derided and continually reasserted conviction that the final referent of memory remains the past, whatever the pastness of the past may signify” (Ricoeur, 2004: 7).”

5 Ricoeur also deals with this characteristic of memory extensively. See *Memory, History, Forgetting* pp. 56-92.

6 See Vosloo’s contribution in this regard: Vosloo, Robert R. 2013. Remembering the role of the Reformed churches in the struggle for justice in South Africa (1960-1990): some remarks on the promise and pitfalls of memory and historiography in *NGTT* Deel 54, Sep/Des 2013 (<http://ngtt.journals.ac.za>). He explicates the relationship between memory and identity, memory and trauma, and, in a less direct way, memory and power.

also to come to grips with that past that is also ours.⁷ Although it may sound contradictory, acknowledging a past as conflicted as that of South Africa's as ours, asks of citizens to take some distance from themselves – indeed, to (re)claim their identities by (also) remembering others.

Another example of memory work in South Africa is a conference held by the University of Stellenbosch in May 2012 with the title, "The Reformed Churches and the struggle for Justice in South Africa: Remembering 1960-1990."⁸ During this conference, too, various participants grappled through and with their memories knowing that their own memories are inevitably met by the complexities of class, gender, power, and, especially, with the complexity of race. The conference, as an event with discussions between diverse groups of people, is an example of the process of negotiating the past and the way that remembering takes place in South Africa. Despite the attempts made to be inclusive and truthful during the event and even in planning it, it was not possible to tell the *whole* or the *real* story. However, the stories that were told do not only provide us with insight about the past. The way the past is understood and the meaning that is made out of this past, reveals a lot about the present, and possibly also the future that is hoped for.

Furthermore, this very act of remembering also served as an inscription of memory.⁹ A significant number of the conference-goers were people born in the late eighties and early nineties. Their memory of the reformed churches in South Africa and the struggle for justice between 1960 and 1990 is not a first-hand memory, but one being handed on to them. The memories that are passed on to a next generation necessarily influence the way they come to know the past, the way they make sense of themselves in the present, and shape the future they imagine.

That being said, memory activities ask to be scrutinised. Despite the dynamic, transient and malleable nature of memory, it has the responsibility to be truthful to the past. Philip Gardner gives an exemplary formulation of the dialectic between memory and truth:

"Under the attention of an open and honest interpreter, the past is never defenceless or helpless, for though the product of the historian's work always speaks to the significance of the past, it remains ever true that... 'the constitutive principle in doing history is pastness'. It is precisely because historians rigorously recognise the constitutive principle

7 See in this regard Vosloo's article *Reconfiguring Ecclesial identity: in conversation with Paul Ricoeur*. Under the heading "memory, history and identity" he stresses the point that "good history helps us to see that the past is *our* past." He draws on, what is known to be, Ricoeur's methodology of the "long route" – a method that welcomes hermeneutical detours that often runs through others. Ricoeur would argue that one can only know the self through others, a knowledge that also includes seeing the *self* as *other* (Cf Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*).

8 The proceedings of this conference will soon be published by SUN media as *Reformed Churches in South Africa and the Struggle for Justice: Remembering 1960-1990* (Eds. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel; Robert Vosloo) This article was originally presented as a paper during the concluding session of the conference.

9 "Memory and inscription" is the topic of some of the earliest intellectual discourses on memory, for example Plato's description of memory in the *Theaetetus* and his *Phaedrus* and Aristotle's *De memoriae et reminiscenciae* (*Of Memory and Recollection*). These foundational texts stress the inextricable connection between memory and the ways in which memory is inscribed or recorded. In both Ricoeur's *Memory, History and Forgetting* (2004) and Anne Whitehead's *Memory* (2009) detailed discussions of these texts are provided.

of pastness that the location of historical dialogue as logically operating only 'in the historian's own mind' does not amount to the kind of inevitable methodological defeat frequently announced by postmodernist scholarship" (Gardner, 2010: 67).

What can we possibly do to escape, or at least attempt to steer away from, the accusation of myth-making, of passionately inventing history for the sake of some form of (collective) self-interest? And if this is perhaps unavoidable, what do we need to keep in mind in order to be responsible in our invention of history and, with it, identities for the future?

One of the first things to be mindful of in our projects of memory work is suggested in the title of this paper: memories and histories are interwoven. The last session of the said conference was a panel reflection on exactly this question "How to deal with our interwoven memories and histories"? Therefore, in the remainder of this article I firstly discuss interwoven memories at the hand of an artwork of the South African artist, William Kentridge, in order to illustrate some aspects of the character of memories and our representation thereof. Then I make some suggestions of what we ought to keep in mind regarding interwoven memories and histories when we engage in memory work.

MEMORY: CRUSHER OR CURER?

In 1996 the South African artist, William Kentridge, produced a short film that brilliantly portrays the intricacy and ambiguity of memory: *History of the Main Complaint*. Through various strategies the film probes the question: does memory crush or does it cure?

In their article, "History as the main complaint: William Kentridge and the making of post-apartheid South Africa", Dubow and Rosengarten accurately describe the main narrative of the film. A full citation thereof fits our discussion:

"Soho Eckstein, Kentridge's allegorical figure of rapacious mining capital, lies dressed in a suit and tie in a hospital bed. He wears a respiratory mask, his eyes are closed, his body rasps for breath. X-ray images, MRI scan and heart monitor report on his interior: the patient's broken pelvis, vertebrae, bruised organs, intestines. Against the doleful strains of a Monteverdi madrigal erupts another soundtrack: the insistent beep of medical technology, the dull syncopations of a typewriter, telephone, ticker-tape machine – the accoutrements of Soho's life as an industrial empire builder – and the sizzle of electrical contact. A physician and his retinue of consultants prognosticate around the body. On the sonar screen, doubling as a car windscreen, Soho's insides metamorphose into a landscape. The scene cuts to Soho driving, his eyes reflected in the car's rear-view mirror, the road in front flanked by an avenue of pylons and thickening trees sketching the deep V perspective of spatial progression.

But at the same time that we are propelled forward, the unfolding scene rushes towards us as memory. The transaction of past and present, of retrospection and return, is abruptly interrupted. Forks of high-voltage current crack across the screen; they course through a Sunday roast, become electrodes that wrap around a toe that itself mutates into penis and testicles. Then a body abandoned on the roadside. This is the first of a series of anonymous figures injured, beaten to the ground by rifle butts, kicked about the torso.

The assaults are registered internally as red crosses on Soho's body scan. Windscreen wipers/ medical scanner dial move repeatedly back and forth to eradicate the marks. Suddenly, a

figure charges out of the darkness, hurtles into view, is momentarily held in the beam of the car headlights. The impact is brutal: the face is crushed, the windscreen shatters. Soho awakens to the crash. The collision is as much a matter of temporalities as it is of objects, bodies, images” (Dubow & Rosengarten, 2004: 673, 678).¹⁰

Speaking about his own film, Kentridge remarked: “Here’s a person who’s in a coma because of the weight of what he sees. The question is, is it going to kill him?” (Cited in Dubow & Rosengarten, 671). How this question, and the film itself, is relevant to our project is clear if we take into account the context in which Kentridge was commissioned to make this film. The film was a part of the “Faultlines” exhibition held in Cape Town in the winter of 1996 – the high season of truth and reconciliation in South Africa. This suggests that “the film, like the exhibition as a whole, was intended to address the issues of memory, truth and reconciliation” (Godby in Nuttal and Coetzee, 1998: 100) and it provides valuable insight with regards to memory and history as interwoven phenomena.

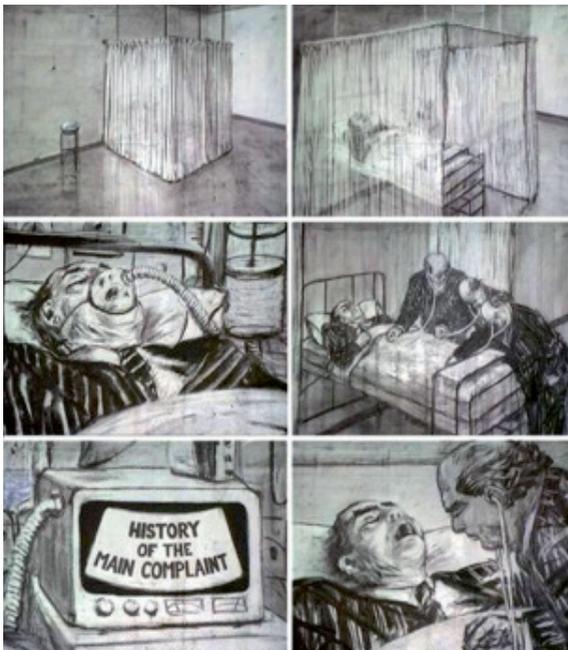


Figure 1: William Kentridge, drawings from *History of the Main Complaint* (1996)

The film is one of a series of nine animated short films that Kentridge made between 1989 and 2003 in which his expressionist lineage is clearly seen. The form of the film alludes to its content. In *History of the Main Complaint*, as with the entire series, he makes use of a technique that would become a feature of his work: the film itself is a series of successive charcoal drawings that is always made on the same sheet of paper – draw, erase and redraw. This is contrary to the traditional animation technique in which each movement is drawn on a separate sheet of paper. In this way what the viewer perceives and that which is presented

¹⁰ For another description of the film, see Godby in Nuttal & Coetzee, 1998: 100-105.

as film is in actual fact a series of still images photographed successively. Equally significant is the fact that each image keeps the traces of the previous drawings - a technique described by Kentridge as "stone-age". The result, as Lilian Tone describes in an exhibition brochure, is a "projected charcoal drawing where the line unfolds mysteriously on the screen, with a will of its own..." There is nothing predictable about it: as she states earlier in the brochure, the "allure of Kentridge's animations lies in their unequivocal reliance on the continuing present, in the uncanny sense of artistic creation and audience reception happening at once".

In the film Soho Eckstein's body is the vehicle of memory and "is made to carry within itself the trauma of recent history" (Godby in Nuttal & Coetzee, 1998: 100).



Figure 2: William Kentridge, screenshot from *History of the Main Complaint* (1996)

The viewers are drawn into an intricate interplay between past and present: we are confronted with the comatose Soho, we see inside his injured body, we witness his flashbacks. This gives us insight into the state that he is in, but the state is not static. We are not left with the image of a comatose body, but in the film we see a revival to his past (Dubow and Rosengarten, 2004: 688). However, neither the images of the present nor those of the past are free of fright. Kentridge's character, and with him the viewers, are confronted "not only by his own near-death in the crash, but also his own survival as crisis" (Dubow and Rosengarten, 2004: 688). Will his revival to the past cure him or crush him? Will he be able to live on in the face of his own survival and revival?

INTERWOVEN MEMORIES UNTANGLED

History of the Main Complaint is an artwork to be dealt with again and again. Without trying to give an encompassing interpretation thereof, I proceed to make a few remarks about dealing with interwoven memories in conversation with this film. The aim is to untangle the idea of interwoven memories and histories in order to provide a few possible markers with which to engage critically in our own recurrent remembering of the past.

By asking whether memories crush or cure, we have already touched on the first level at which

memories and histories are intertwined. Remembering is not an unambiguous activity or occurrence. It carries the possibility of different outcomes in itself.

Speaking about Elie Wiesel's work, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, Miroslav Volf refers to "the saving power of remembering suffered wrongs" (Volf, 2006: 19). The importance and necessity of remembering and even the ethical duty to remember are widely discussed. South Africa and its churches are in need of memory, as this conference and our participation in it have underscored. However, as Volf later states, our memories of wrongs suffered are also intertwined with other memories. "We recall many other kinds of things – stories from our childhood, adolescent dreams and disappointments, successes and failures in our work, the history of our ancestors or ethnic group, religious instruction, and more" (2006: 20).

Are we, when dealing with our conflicted, violent and unjust past, allowing enough room for memories that differ in their character? Is the outcome of our memory work predetermined, or are we open to what it may confront us with, and ask of us? Are we willing to allow the memories of pain, humiliation, discrimination, violence, and injustice to exist along with happy and fond memories? Do we need all these memories in order to survive our past and overcome the crisis of our survival?¹¹ Do we need some more than others? Are we willing to make room for the fact that fond memories and hurtful memories live with each other, next to other, inside each other? Furthermore, are all emotions stirred through memory equally legitimate, or are there those that should rather not be felt, let alone mentioned? Are we ready and capable to deal with the fact that our memories are conflicted and in conflict, and that they may continue to arise conflict between people?

To repeat the question stated above: does memory only cure, or does it also crush? Or as Volf says it, is memory a shield or is it a sword?

Secondly, memory and history are intertwined with regards to temporality. Although our memories deal with the past, we recall them in the present, and the present is different from the past. Therefore we have to be aware of the fact that the past is past, and that our memories of the past are not the same thing as the past itself. Our memories live in the now and are often also shaped and changed by the present. Once the past gains a voice in the present through memories, it changes. As Miroslav Volf states, "when we remember the past, it is not only past; it breaks into the present and gains a new lease on life" (Volf, 2006: 21). Therefore, as Van Zyl Slabbert was quoted earlier, the history we invent is often somewhat different than what the past really was. Speaking about the past simultaneously includes different temporalities. It is impossible to predict, and perhaps not desirable to prescribe, the outcome of when these different temporalities meet. This meeting point of temporalities is strikingly portrayed by Kentridge when the wrist watch that the crash victim wears explodes due to the impact of the crash. This is also the point at which Soho Eckstein awakes from his coma. Dubow and Rosengarten give a striking analysis of these scenes:

"It should be remembered that when Soho drives into the landscape, he does not merely cover space; he is immersed in the densities of time. Likewise, when the anonymous figure hurtles into the car windscreen, it emerges not from surrounding space but from the thickets of an occluded time. It is, in other words, by means of an accident of

¹¹ The ways in which remembering and forgetting are interwoven phenomena is a very important and widely discussed topic that will not be addressed here. See Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Weinrich, *Lethé: The art and critique of forgetting*, Volf, *The End of Memory*.

discordant temporalities that Soho is resuscitated to the present: a re-animation that depends less on the mnemonic apprehension of a previous event than on the instant of living an unmediated relation with it. Indeed, in a graphic exemplification of this point, the image of Soho crashing into consciousness hinges on another image that immediately precedes it: on his arm the crash victim wears a wrist watch which explodes on impact” (Dubow and Rosengarten, 2004: 681).

In this sense, too, the interwoven temporalities of memory ask the question of crushing or curing. Who knows what will happen when the past meets us in the present through memory? Who knows whether we will survive the impact, whether it will shock us from a coma, cure us from the illnesses that time has made us suffer; whether it will crush us to the ground, or enliven us to a future of possibilities as we regain consciousness through our encounter with the past?

We also need to reckon with the future when we speak about the interwoven temporalities of memory and history. Bernard Lategan deals with the question of the future in history when he discusses T.N. Hanekom’s work, *Die liberale rigting in Suid-Afrika: ‘n kerkhistoriese studie*. In his discussion he asks *how* Hanekom typifies the “liberal movement” as a historian, and *what impact* this has on a next generation of theologians and their ability to answer the questions posed in their time (Lategan, 2003:104). From this historical inquiry Lategan concludes that our perception of the past has a decisive influence on our ability to think about the future (109). Therefore memory and history are also interwoven at a third temporal level: in relation to the future. Soho’s regaining of his consciousness may therefore also be “understood as an enlivening to history, or, more strongly, an enlivening by history” (Dubow and Rosengarten, 2004: 673). The fact that we are temporal beings, the fact that our existence in and through time is inseparable from our being, provides us with a future.

Thirdly, memory and history are interwoven with to the topics they address. In our conference we dealt with the issue of justice and Reformed churches in South Africa between 1960 and 1990. Impossible as it may sound, these markers are not inherent to South Africa’s past in itself. By using these concepts as markers in our memory work we put a specific frame around a specific period and link it to a specific geographical area. We look at 1960 to 1990 in South Africa as a site of struggle for justice where churches were present. When doing so, we identify with and contribute to numerous other similar projects of sense-making. We necessarily come to specific types of conclusions – not suspicious in themselves, but certainly not self-evident (even though they might seem so). If we take into account that we did this 22 years after 1990, in a context known as the outcome of this struggle but yet riddled with injustices, we may be tempted to ask what struggle towards what justice we have in mind with a topic like this. Periods from our past becomes entangled with concepts used to describe and define them. The question will be how this contributes to the way in which we make sense of the present.

Related to this is the tricky issue of periodization that Robert Vosloo (2013) referred to in his opening address when he commented on the period under discussion. This serves as a necessary reminder to remain watchful of the tendency to analyse and interpret in terms of “pre-” and “post-eras” as if our history-making has the ability to move towards fulfilment and closure. If anything, memory and history should assist us in sharpening our questions and recognising the way in which the past and its injustices remain present. In dealing with interwoven memories we can therefore do well to steer away from overtly normative claims concerning the past.

Fourthly and finally memories and histories are interwoven because we do not remember alone. This ought to be understood on, at least, two levels. On the one hand our identities are tightly tied to our memories. "We are much of what we remember about ourselves," writes Volf (2006:24). Stuart Hall puts it even more directly: "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past" (Hall quoted in Huyssen, 1995:1). On the other hand, identity is not merely a self-construction but also something that develops in relation to others. Therefore "in the way others perceive us, we are what others remember about us" (Volf, 2006:24). This emphasises the fact that we do not remember alone, and that our identities are therefore formed by the groups to which we belong.¹² Our own memories are embedded in a world peopled by others "who collectively contribute to the construction of memory and help determine the importance that the past hold for an individual in the present" (Prager quoted in Kirk, 2005:4). In South Africa in particular this dialectic is not unproblematic. Our divided past widens the gap between the way we remember ourselves and the way others remember us, and also with regard to the different aspects of the past that we actually have memories of. If it is therefore at all our aim to narrow the divide that the past has left between us, we need to remember ourselves but also allow others to remember us, and complete the gaps in our own memories. We are challenged to allow, what Eviater Zerubavel calls, "the existential fusion of our own personal biography with the history of the groups or communities to which we belong" (Zerubavel quoted in Kirk, 2005:4). Of course, given the South African past, this implies belonging to groups to which our ancestors did not regard themselves part of. In this way the still images of our memory comes to life, taking on new shapes, leaving different shadows, to form a dynamic history – memories that move and tell a multi-faceted story of which we become more and more a part.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on memory work is an important part of remembering our South African past. Creating a just, free and reconciled society today is dependent on the versions of the past that we create – on *how* we remember. To keep the balance between *a commitment to the truth of the past* and the reality of the *representational character of memory* is not an easy task, as the discussion on interwovenness in this article shows. Philip Gardner aptly keeps these two things together when he says that "historical accounts always carry the status of interpretation of real past events, rather than straightforward factual representations of them. In other words, historical accounts are recognised as not solely or directly the product of such events, but also of the agency and the imagination of the historian operating in his or her own distinctive historical, political and personal contexts" (2010:5). In his recent biography of the South African writer, JM Coetzee, Kannemeyer quotes a passage from Coetzee's inaugural lecture as a professor of the University of Cape Town in 1984 with the title "Truth in Autobiography" that expresses the same sentiment poetically:

"Telling the story of your life [...] is not only a matter of representing the past[,] but also a matter of representing the present in which you wrestle to explain to yourself what it was that *really* happened that day, beneath the surface (so to speak), and write down an explanation which may be full of gaps and evasions but at least gives a representation of the motion of your mind as you try to understand yourself. Indeed, the lies and evasions may be more interesting than the visit itself" (Kannemeyer, 2012:465)

¹² It was the French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, who first theorised the notion of "collective memory" in the early twentieth century. See Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* and *On Collective Memory*.

We learn much from our memories – not only things about the past, but also about the pain, hope, confusion, acquiescence, grudges, forgiveness and newly found meaning of the present, and the expectation of a future. In this paper the influential role of those who remember has been unpacked; on the one hand to sensitise regarding the complexity of history and memory based on its interwovenness, and on the other hand to incite this dynamic interplay called history. The struggle for and wonder of memory continues.

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KEY WORDS

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TREFWOORDE

Herinnering

Geskiedenis

Verweefde herinneringe

Onthou

Gereformeerde kerke

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