Defining Collective and Individual Memory in Lainy Malkani’s *Sugar, Sugar* and Jennifer Makumbi’s *Kintu*.

Abstract

This article explores the idea that memory exists in two distinct spheres: collective, and individual. But what is it that distinguishes the two, and how are they defined and differentiated in *Kintu* (2014) and *Sugar, Sugar* (2017)? Building on research that asserts the fallibility of individual memory and the power of collective memory to build convincing narratives, this article studies how characters in the two texts interact with these concepts, and how these interactions allow us to forge new ones. Ultimately, I expand upon Mark Strand’s concept of the ‘gift’, the meaning which collective memory provides to the present, using the texts to understand how this ‘gift’ might apply to individual memory, too.

Memory can be thought of as a foundation upon which the human condition builds. This article will explore memory largely in this vein; as a tool, something used with purpose. To do this, we must explore memory in two sub-categories: individual memory, that which exists only within a person’s mind; and collective memory, that which is shared across a culture or society. The two are separate, yet undeniably connected; the role each plays in the other is vital in understanding them, for neither can exist in isolation. Both play huge roles in Lainy Malkani’s collection of short stories *Sugar, Sugar* and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s Ugandan novel *Kintu*. The fundamentals of collective memory will be explored, including the idea that historical memory exists as an offshoot of the collective. The fundamental difference between the two, that I believe is linked to empathetic feeling and echoes the concept of ‘postmemory’1, will be examined using characters like Suubi from *Kintu* and specific stories from *Sugar, Sugar*, such as ‘The Berbice Chair’. Finally, I’ll use this basis to launch an examination of individual memory as its own entity, as a tool with its own uses, and present the idea that individual memory survives only as its emotional connection to the host does.

Collective memory has, as Martin J. Murray summarises it, “the power to simplify the past, constructing coherent stories of heroism and sacrifice, of trauma and loss”.2 In other words, collective memory builds a stronger narrative than might exist in an individual’s recollections: the latter is “a welter of conflicting images, confusing thoughts, and subjective remembrances”.3 This narrative that collective memory constructs is accepted as truth within the community it exists: it, as William Graham Sumner remarks, “selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also”.4 Here we find our first link between collective and individual memory. If this collective bias conflicts with an individual’s own memory, she may find herself separated from the community. Or, as is the case with Suubi in *Kintu*, she could begin to look for explanation for her own memories –

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3 Murray, *Commemorating and Forgetting*, p.11.
4 Murray, *Commemorating and Forgetting*, p.11.
in this case of Babirye, who is haunting her - through that of the collective. The explanation for Suubi’s madness offered to her via the Kintu curse, is, as Murray says, a narrative; it is a means of contextualising her own memory and the first steps to understanding and eventually overcoming it. As Susan A. Crane, engaging with the work of Mark Strand, proclaims: “whenever we think about history we are thinking in terms of commemoration [...] the ‘gift’ sent into the world so that the future might mourn”.⁵ Mourn, or, in Suubi’s case, learn. This ‘gift’ is at the heart of understanding collective memory. As Crane argues, it also necessitates the spawning of an offshoot, a subcategory of collective memory: historical memory. She explains: “the difference between collective memory and historical memory marks the separation between lived experience and the preservation of lived experience, its objectification”.⁶ I’d challenge this statement very slightly, in arguing that collective memory moves into historical memory only when the ‘gift’ it offers fails to be culturally relevant in contemporary society. This echoes tenets of Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory, which she defines as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before”.⁷ Hirsch argues that “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right,”⁸ – a testament to the emotive nature of the ‘gift’. This presents an interesting question about historical fiction such as Lainy Malkani’s *Sugar, Sugar*. By opening empathetic bridges between her characters, many of whom existed centuries ago, and her readers, Malkani is repurposing historical memory and offering a means by which its ‘gift’ might be socially relevant today, to those outside of postmemory’s typical circle of influence. ‘The Complaint’ might be the most obvious example of this, in which a merchant feels compelled to complain about the treatment of Indian immigrants in 1885 Durban. He directs his displeasure towards a man titled The Protector of Immigrants, who proves to be anything but. The parallels to modern society are obvious, and Malkani presents the story to ensure the reader’s empathy lies with the immigrants – the ‘gift’ is clear. By moving what may usually be referred to as objectified history back into the empathetic space, stories such as this can once again be classified as collective memory.

Thus far, the role of individual memory has only been briefly mentioned. If collective memory only remains pertinent if the ‘gift’ it offers does, then individual memory has its own rule of mortality. To uncover this rule, I’ll begin with an idea pertinent in our earlier discussion of collective memory, that of Murray: “Rather than focusing on the past, collective memory reconstructs it in the context of the present”.⁹ Presented in the works of Michelle Mattson, Pierre Nora believes this to be true of individual memory, too, noting that memory is “driven by the present [...] imbuing our lives with a continuity of meaning”.¹⁰ But what is the trigger that links the individual to their past, if the collective’s is the ‘gift’? The obvious answer is feeling. When a person is struggling with a complex emotion, memory

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⁶ Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory" p.1373.
⁷ Hirsch, *Postmemory.net*.
⁸ Hirsch, *Postmemory.net*.
serves as a tool to repackage that emotion, a means of working through it. Individual memory is imperfect, however, and malleable. Consider the idea that it is “the present that produces the past, through an effort of creative or analytical imagination”.\footnote{Goeffrey Cubitt, \textit{History and Memory}, 1st edn (Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 27.} If this is the case, an individual might see empathetic and emotional links between their present state and their memory where none exist. This may well be the case for Suubi in \textit{Kintu}. Her past appears to haunt her in the form of Babirye, linking personal childhood trauma to an old family curse. The buyer in ‘The Berbice Chair’ from \textit{Sugar, Sugar} presents another reading. He connects his own traumatic past to an antique chair he comes across in his present:

\begin{quote}
anger. Terror, sometimes, and sadness - a lot of sadness. [...] Nightmares, fires, the sickly-sweet smell of burning sugar, me pulling the mules along the side of the canal, clearing out the stables, riding horses, racing horses, my mother crying, my father fighting.\footnote{Lainy Malkani, \textit{Sugar, Sugar}, Amazon Kindle e-book (HopeRoad, 2017) chapter 1, location 120.}
\end{quote}

In both cases, I believe that an argument could be made for both the chair and Babirye being red herrings. Suubi must defeat the ghost in a ritual; the buyer must destroy the Berbice chair. But all that either character is ultimately doing is working through personal trauma, using memory as a tool to do so. Whether Suubi’s mental state is linked to the family curse becomes irrelevant if believing it does helps her to become well again. As Mattson says, “we call upon memories of the past to help us respond to demands of the present”.\footnote{Mattson, \textit{Mapping Morality}, p.13.} Here lies the ‘gift’ that individual memory offers to the individual: a key to unlock trauma in the present. As with collective memory, when that ‘gift’ is no longer relevant, neither is the memory; Babirye, Suubi having ‘exorcised’ her (though possibly having just come to terms with her ancestry and mental demons), is at peace.

The existence of collective and individual memory as tools is rooted in emotion, in empathetic feeling. This is hardly surprising; empathy is arguably the core of the human experience. What is more surprising is how workmanlike our relationship with memory can be. I’ve identified two ways in which individual and collective memory are used as tools in the present and therefore survive, but there are others; Nora’s, for example: “He sees memory as a function in society that transmitted values from generation to generation”.\footnote{Mattson, \textit{Mapping Morality}, p.13.} We might use the development of historical memory, a branch that is more objectifying and calculating, as proof that collective and individual memory survives only through empathy. \textit{Kintu} and \textit{Sugar, Sugar} are both texts with complex and nuanced relationships with memory, but they both contain characters and plots that interact with memory in an emotional manner, as a tool to combat issues in the present.
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