

# **‘Let me go back and recreate what I don’t know’: Locating Trans-national Memory Work in Contemporary Narrative**

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## **1. Introduction**

Recent scholarship has begun to chart the implications of changing conceptions of diaspora (see, e.g. Okpewho and Nzegwu; Pasura; Sigona et al.), as well as the impact of trans-national studies on a previously nationally oriented framework of memory studies and literary canons (see, e.g. Lie and Mahlke; De Cesari and Rigney). Within this context, the present article explores how the dynamics of transmission and reception of stories and histories born out of displacement and diaspora are ‘translated’ into contemporary cultural production, thus leaning on the etymological meaning of translation as a carrying or bearing across (cf. Trivedi), and Bhabha’s notion of translation as being the ‘performative nature of cultural communication’ (326).<sup>1</sup> In particular, my analysis focuses on representations of the past in so-called ‘second-generation’ narratives, and the implications of working through aspects of an identity heritage that may have been partially or wholly lost through a family history of migration or diaspora. How do subjects access this dislocated part of their identity, and which methods and strategies do they employ to re-produce or (re-)create it within their own stories?

To explore such instances of what I term ‘by proxy’ diasporic experiences, I offer a comparative case study of three novels written by authors with family heritage from the Horn of Africa who are all now resident and active in different national contexts and languages: Ubah Cristina Ali Farah (Italy/Belgium), Dinaw Mengestu (USA) and Nadifa Mohamed (UK). These three writers form part of a group of 1.5 or second generation of diasporic subjects from this region who are engaged in the field of cultural production, also including Maaza Mengiste (USA), Igiaba Scego (Italy), Diriye Osman (UK) and Sulaiman Addonia (UK/Belgium), as well as Fadumo Korn and Senait Mehari in Germany and many others in Finland, Sweden and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

1 Here, Michael Cronin’s related definition of the condition of the migrant as ‘the condition of a translated being’ is also useful to bear in mind (45).

2 Whilst the terminology of immigrant generations remains ambiguous and open to

My analysis focuses on the intergenerational passage of such diasporic memories and their mediation within more complex interrelated socio-cultural and identity frameworks. The family and the communication strategies and dynamics it embodies constitute a privileged lens for working through the past in migration histories, and as Aleida Assmann reminds us, the family unit itself allows the ‘transfer of embodied experience to the next generation’ (cited in Hirsch, *Postmemory* 32).<sup>3</sup> But whilst Assmann’s work is primarily connected to the transmission of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust from generation to generation, I seek to apply Marianne Hirsch’s related concept of ‘postmemory’ (see *Postmemory*) to the field of trans-national diaspora studies and to explore what I term the ‘by proxy’ experience of such mobility. Here, memory work is further complicated by a number of factors, as explained by Hirsch and Miller:

In the language of diaspora, originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply connected with other places, they are further *transformed* by the ravages of time, *transfigured* through the lens of loss and nostalgia, *constructed* in the process of the search. (3, emphasis added)

In this article I explore the implications of writing such family histories through the ‘translational’ lens of these three actions (transformation, transfiguration and construction), in which memories are also subject to processes of crystallisation, alteration and selection. Freud’s work on memory as a modality operating at the interface between history and fantasy is also of relevance here, as are the related psycho-dynamic processes of working-through, screen memory formation and transference.<sup>4</sup> Freud recognises that memories are not only mediated through representations, but are themselves subject to *imaginative* malleability, something that is essential to my argument. Memories are vital for the construction of a coherent narrative of self and family (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 229), and where these available narratives contain gaps or fissures, I argue that subjects enact new creative strategies in order to complete them. In a similar vein, when speaking of the afterlife of diasporic ruptures, Rothberg emphasises the ‘necessity of imagina-

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debate, the 1.5 generation label is usually taken to refer to those who migrate in childhood, and second generation as referring to those born in the new country.

- 3 The importance of the family in the field of memory transmission is also highlighted in Avishai Margalit’s distinction between ‘thick’, ethical relations (with family and loved ones, for example), and ‘thin’ ones (with strangers). See *The Ethics of Memory*.
- 4 The screen memory merges an early childhood memory and a later event in a dynamic of repression and phantasy that causes the memory itself to change. As Freud says, ‘I can assure you that people often construct such things unconsciously – almost like works of fiction. [...] There is in general no guarantee of the data produced by our memory’ (‘Screen Memories’ 314). See also Freud, ‘Further Recommendations’.

tive work that spans the abyss,' in which the loss or absence constituted by the victims of violence 'can be 'filled' or 'peopled' only by the imagination of those who come after' (*Multidirectional* 151).

A theoretical framework that goes beyond critical theory to reference cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis will therefore allow for a multi-dimensional analysis of this narrative process of re-inventing (family) memories which were previously rendered unavailable through processes of diaspora and related trauma. This kind of creative construction inhabits the interspace between memory and history – constructions which Mary Chamberlain has termed 'cultural templates,' or imaginative structures through which memory is recalled and recounted (182).<sup>5</sup> But given the trans-national nature of the texts under analysis, these imaginative structures also inhabit a cultural third space in which the losses or absences they reconfigure also perform as ruptures or elements of resistance to dominant discourses of globalised identity (see Bhabha 312, 321). Within my analysis, therefore, I seek to locate examples of the 'dynamic transfers' and 'remapping' that are central aspects of Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectionality and identify new instances of identification with and adaptations from past stories of colonisation, violence and diaspora which erupt through the narratives to expose the jagged edges of memories and identities of others (*Multidirectional* 5).

In the three texts under analysis, a key episode or interpretative lens is extracted that suggests how the family past can be re-inscribed via another history, thus connecting multidirectionality with the related notions of Jan Assmann's 'transportable shorthands' (111) and Andreas Huyssen's 'floating forms' (99). The act of borrowing from or adapting another(s) history lays bare the links between imperialism, colonialism, racism and diaspora, through an understanding of the implications of destabilising and re-mapping the contours of the human at various stages throughout history. This muddling of fixed or linear temporalities through new connectivities and relatedness in turn allows these new cultural encounters to perform a kind of 'boomerang effect' which permits us to return previously marginalised stories 'to a multidirectional archive of collective memory' (*Multidirectional* 65). In Dinaw Mengestu's *How to read the air* (2010), I use Alison Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory (*Prosthetic*) to explore how the protagonist re-inscribes a constructed sense of family history through his experience at an experiential site (the fictional colonial fort of Laconte in his adopted homeland of America). In Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) I suggest that the narrative focus on the embodied corporeality of the author's father suggests that such

5 This is similar to Eva Hoffman's characterization of second-generation subjects as a 'hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth' (*After Such Knowledge*, xv, emphasis added).

non-verbal marks of movement allow for a transfer of sensorial memory that establishes a re-connection with the past. This, recalling Bergson's concept of memory as stored bodily actions and Charlotte Delbo's notion of 'deep memory' (*Auschwitz*),<sup>6</sup> is analysed alongside a multidirectional framework of refugee stories that successfully captures Mohamed's father's trans-national identity (Rothberg, *Multidirectional*). This type of 'entangled' history (Nuttall) will also be located in Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's recent novel *Il comandante del fiume* (2014), where the transferential appropriation of the Nazi taboo by the black narrator-protagonist is seen to express his own sense of embodying the racialised other in Italian society.

I conclude that actual and 'by proxy' memories of the past can cross boundaries both in terms of space (through mobility) and time (through intergenerational transmission), in a dialectical motion of back and forth that encapsulates the diaspora experience itself.<sup>7</sup> This again speaks to Rothberg's description of the 'circular trajectory of the boomerang' (*Multidirectional* 65) in denoting the historical transmission of memory through comparative imagination, and allows memory to function as an active process of mediation, rather than a passive form which is itself open to mediating actions. Indeed, it is only by privileging an understanding of the narrative strategies used to bridge the gap within the interface between past, present and future in the articulation of identity that we can grasp the trans-national dimensions and impact of diaspora mobility on memory work, and thus privilege awareness of the multiple co-existence of different 'pasts' within any given national context. By ending my analysis with Ali Farah's text, and thus not only imagining a given past, but also a present future (i.e. not voicing the autobiographically-inspired narrative of the subject's parents, but that of her children), I want to add to Ella Shohat's formula of exploring 'how the past is translated and reinvented in function of diverse presents' (xvi), to include a consideration of its impact also on diverse and diversified *futures*, those 'interstitial' futures that precisely emerge 'in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present' (Bhabha 313).<sup>8</sup>

6 Similarly, Rothberg suggests the potential for locating trans-national memory in the local, 'starting from the intimate terrain of the body' ('Locating Transnational' 652).

7 'In a diaspora, cultural memories, identities, and practices do not flow simply or predictably from one generation to the next or from the homeland to the diasporic people, but paradoxically in both directions' (Landsberg 10).

8 And, as Erll says, the transcultural lens 'is a means to understand how from this history we derive certain patterns of thought that shape the way we see things in the present and *envisage the future*' (16, emphasis added).

## 2. Prosthetic Posturing in Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*

Although Landsberg's main focus in *Prosthetic Memory* is on the impact of mass culture and technology on the transmission of memory, her concern with how individuals 'might be affected by memories of events through which they did not live' (1) is central to my reading of Dinaw Mengestu's *How to Read the Air*.

(Prosthetic memory) emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or museum. In this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history [...] the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. (2)

In Mengestu's novel, we can witness a memorial process that is doubly 'prosthetic', in that the protagonist Jonas filters an imagined story involving his own parents through a trip to one such 'experiential site', which allows an entangled experience of both the American civil war as well as a re-creation of the fracture lines he envisages emerging in his parents' relationship before his birth. Indeed, Jonas's childhood is characterised by this inability to access or share in the construction of a set of familial memories, which were lost through the displacement his parents suffered and then silenced by the resultant scars of separation and strife. But, crucially, this lack is itself the impetus for the *creation* of the narrative, and explains the way the narrator has to construct a new, coherent version of the self, as well as his own familial history (often through false and devious means), as a coping strategy to make up for this missing genuinely 'real' and collectively reminisced psycho-narrative.

Mengestu, who was born in Addis Ababa in 1978, migrated to the United States with his family at the age of two. He is firmly situated, therefore, as an American writer, yet his stories still focus on the wounds of forced migration suffered by the Ethiopian characters that populate them. The effect of this two-track posturing is suggested in Landsberg's words, that 'the child immigrant must necessarily engage in a creative form of amnesia, constantly editing and negotiating the past, creating and taking on prosthetic memories in order to imagine himself or herself as one of "America's children"' (71). But, crucially, it also recalls Trivedi's characterisation of diasporic writers as 'cultural translators', who perform interpretative acts to broker their own hybrid identity status.

Mengestu's first novel, *Children of the Revolution* (2007) tells the story of Sepha Stephanos, an Ethiopian migrant in Washington, DC, who finds himself

stifled by the horrific memories of his family's persecution in their home country and his subsequent forced migration to the United States. Jonas, the protagonist of *How to Read the Air*, was born in the American Midwest, and after the collapse of his marriage to co-worker Angela, tries to retrace his parent's steps on a journey they made soon after their own arrival in the United States in order to make sense of his loneliness and crippling inertia, and to come to terms with the violence and silences which characterised his childhood. As Mengestu himself has said in a recent interview:

I knew that I wanted to write from the perspective of somebody imagining this family history that they have no real access to. So the book was very much about this process of imagination, the distance between one generation and the next, and the attempts to recreate the past and to write fiction out of that. Jonas, the character who's controlling the story, is so internally isolated, he's so walled off from his own past and sense of identity, that the only way he has of achieving any peace is through the process of, 'Let me go back and recreate what I don't know'. (Shulock, emphasis added)

What I am particularly interested in unpacking is the dynamic of narrative agency that follows Jonas's trip in the novel, his creation of false or fantasy narratives of the self and the family as a kind of 'defensive strategy', a series of screen memories, which is similar to Freud's famous concept of the *Familienroman*. Although the family romance is specifically described as the desire of the developing individual to liberate himself from the constraints of a family he finds unsatisfactory by imagining himself to be an orphan or adopted, and his real parents to be more noble than the foster family in which he is now growing up, the real focus of the dynamic itself is that of *narrative fantasy*. In the words of Marianne Hirsch:

The family romance is the story we tell ourselves about the social and psychological reality of the family in which we find ourselves and [...] reveals as indistinguishable the psychological subjective experience of family and the process of *narrative* [...] The family romance is a structure of *fantasy* – the imaginary construction of plots according to principles of wish fulfilment. The notion of family romance can thus accommodate the discrepancies between social reality and fantasy construction, which are basic to the experience and the institution of family. (*Mother/Daughter 9*, emphasis added)

This strategy of creating fantasy or false narratives and memories is something that infiltrates every strand of *How to Read the Air*. The first incident occurs as part of Jonas's job in a refugee centre where he is called upon to embellish asylum requests. Charged with inventing new histories for people, this becomes a paradigm for the narrative model Jonas will use to re-create

both his own story and that of his parents. Which is, as he says, building or touching up the stories, adding color in order to 'make them real' (Mengestu 26, 137), or to make them *seem* real at the very least.

The ability of narrative power and effect to decide the future of these refugees is something uneasy for the reader and in turn affords Jonas a sense of power and control which is equally ambiguous: 'if I didn't know for certain when they entered, I assigned them the narrative that I thought they deserved' (Mengestu 26). Trauma itself is not as important as the *narrative effect* of such trauma and this is something that seems to spill into the story itself. Furthermore, the narrator's own confession that 'lying comes naturally to me' (Mengestu 29) must surely have some effect both on the construction and the reception of the story itself. Storytelling is consistently used and abused in different ways and by all the characters in *How to Read the Air*. To give but one example, Jonas's wife Angela invents and re-invents the story of how her father left her and her mother, creating a pathological uncertainty that reveals a peculiar response to an obvious psychological wound.

There were already at least a half-dozen ways this imaginary father of hers had left. [...] He's been arrested multiple times for various petty crimes from which he never returned. Once he'd gone out for milk and vanished, for cigarettes on another occasion. (Mengestu 50)

Angela makes a self-conscious mockery of her past, turning a loss into a source of dark humour and confusion, but at the same time revealing something important. As an African American woman with no father, there is the danger of her scarred childhood becoming a commonplace, a story already heard, lacking its own distinct truth because of potentially lazy (mis-)readings of the situation:

I say I don't have a father and everyone thinks they know the whole story because they saw something like it on television or they read about it in a magazine. To them it's all just one story told over and over. Change the dates and the names but it's the same. Well that's not true. It's not the same story. (Mengestu 52)

This displays a similar dynamic of response to the worn familiarity of the asylum stories mentioned above, and also suggests how far tales within the novel are distorted by and towards the perceptions of their audiences.

It is this dynamic of fantasy or self-fiction that triggers Jonas's main tale of deception, and as his lies grow and develop, they start to consume Jonas's job, his marriage and his person. Mengestu has spoken of Jonas's lying both as a technique of protection and avoidance, but also 'as a way of rebuilding himself [...] using stories to reveal something integral about what (he doesn't) actually know' (La Force). But the process is in fact even more clearly delineated within

the narrative itself, as a dynamic of memory accumulation, followed by regret, and ultimately resolved by the possibility of imagination.

As babies and young children we know and understand only what is immediate and before us. We accumulate memories and in doing so begin to make our first tentative steps backward in time, to say things such as 'I remember when I was.' And from there our lives grow into multiple dimensions until eventually we learn to regret and finally to imagine. (Mengestu 103)

This sense of invention comes to a climax in Jonas's narrative re-enactment of the emblematic trip of his parents to the colonial fort of Laconte (perhaps inspired by the real-life Fort de Chartres in Illinois): the ongoing battle between the couple is effectively transposed onto the scars of past conflict traced upon the ruins of the fort itself, thus interweaving different layers and nuances of colonial and migratory presences, and mirroring the palimpsestic design of the story itself. This is seen particularly in Jonas's observation that the physical traces of the fort (its stones, and so on) have been 'picked off piece by piece by bored kids or scavengers of American history, who have carted away what little remains to homes and workshops where the past is minutely and painstakingly *recreated*' (Mengestu 140, emphasis added).

This fictional fort, posited to have been built by a certain Jean-Patrice Laconte in 1687 to protect the surrounding land for French colonial settlers and control the Native American dwellers is a 'less notable' (Mengestu 92) chapter of Midwestern history that recalls Rothberg's statement that 'many moments of cross-referencing or contact occur in [...] marginal moments' (*Multidirectional* 18). But the fortification metaphor runs a fault-line through the narrative: as a child Jonas builds 'dozens of forts in my bedroom, in corners around the house, and on a few occasions in the garage when either my mother or my father had left with the car with promises never to return' (Mengestu 125). These forts are perennially crooked and unstable, ever-increasing in size, constructed 'from pieces scavenged from the driveway and held together with tape of glue when I could find them' (Mengestu 125). They contain and protect nothing, yet for Jonas in the context of his tumultuous childhood they represent 'at least one sanctuary that could not be broached' (Mengestu 125). Yet when he arrives at Laconte, he performs the opposite operation, visually dismantling the existing fort ruins into the image of 'a small pile of building blocks, the kind a child would use to arrange towers and squares in the middle of a playpen' (Mengestu 126).

This imaginative modeling signals a kind of remapping of memory which in turn inserts Jonas's family past into a multidirectional, collective framework. As he says on arrival: 'I can say with confidence that we all shared this' (Mengestu 127). Because the site itself is a recreation of imperialism:

the fort's large stones 'are the first signs of modern warfare in America, and speak to the old European tendency to draw boundaries and solidify ownership' (Mengestu 140). Picking up on these traces of history, Jonas imagines his mother sensing that something tragic must have happened at Laconte. In fact the site witnessed a vicious battle and scenes of slaughter, and the prison inside was used to hold captured Tamora Indians, who were often tortured during their captivity. 'Their wrists were bound together for days at a time. They were hung upside down, beaten, flayed, and almost always starved. They died quickly from hunger or disease' (Mengestu 141). Without access to this information, Jonas's mother remains perplexed as to the possible origins of the fort's demise and the air of tragedy that hangs in the air, and tries to imagine various scenarios: a tornado, perhaps, or a famine.

The images came quickly but in the end fell short. The inhabitants of Fort Laconte, as she knew well enough, had all been European, and there was no stretch of her imagination that could allow her to conceive of hungry white faces, not in this day and age, or in any age for that matter. She was certain that even four hundred years ago the world would have conspired to prevent such a sight, and so she shaded in the faces, broadened out the lips and noses, and came up with a picture more suitable for a slow, hunger-pained death. (Mengestu 148)

Her dynamic memorial transfer thus neatly mirrors the palimpsestic construction of the text, and brings a personal past of migration into contact with a colonial history to form an imaginative trans-national nexus of multidirectionality. By connecting her own African past to the American present, Jonas's mother also embodies a non-hegemonic narrative standpoint that crucially makes a 'clear distinction between the familiar category of 'African American' and the unfamiliar concept of [...] telling a story that is African *and* American' (Varvogli 118).

*How to Read the Air* thus evokes the necessity for the creative appropriation of myths from the past (both familial and societal), in order to fill gaps in and make sense of the present on a micro as well as on a macro level. As Jonas says about his own compulsion to re-invent his father's story:

I needed a history more complete than the strangled bits that he had owned and passed on to me – the short brutal tale of having been trapped as a stowaway on a ship was all he had to explain himself. It made for such a tragic and bitter man, and as he got older it must have been even worse. I imagine the past died multiple times within him as his memory faded and whatever words he had left to describe it disappeared alongside. And so I continued with my father's story, knowing that I could make up the missing details as I went, just as I had once done for Bill and his brood of migrants at the center. (Mengestu 180)

What emerges here is the importance of narrative creation, even when it only succeeds in creating falsehood. Jonas thus falls into Gabriele Schwab's category of children who try to 'remember' the violent histories lived through by their parents, children who 'need to patch a history together they have never lived by using whatever props they can find – photographs and stories and letters but also, I would add, silences; grief, rage, despair, or sudden unexplainable shifts in moods handed down to them by those who bring them up' (14). He himself sees this process in his lies, the process of 'making something of myself [...] and even if that something was little more than an ever-growing lie, it was still something to which I could claim sole credit and responsibility' (Mengestu 219). It is, indeed, Jonas's *own* creation, a coherent construction of his self and his (family) story, something that can be re-created as many times as necessary or even desirable, since 'there is nothing so easily remade as our definitions of ourselves' (Mengestu 185). This leads us back to the enigmatic title of the novel, *How to Read the Air*, which seems to be a deliberate narrative construct of two convergent stories of imagined memories lost in the fissures of the diasporic process and re-elaborated through prosthetic posturing, and which results in 'the shared sense that you can get at the start and close of each season – the tumult and confusion that comes when the air holds the distinct memories of two different times at once' (Mengestu 122). This sense of time as *dense*, 'with overlapping possibilities and dangers' posits the 'present as a site of multidirectional memory' (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 80) and explains Mengestu's own self-description as 'American *and* African at *all points and times*' (La Force, emphasis added).

### 3. Connective Histories: Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*

This sense of agency located in the re-creation of imagined past or parental memories is also a founding characteristic of Nadifa Mohamed's debut novel, *Black Mamba Boy*. Tracing the true story of the arduous journey her father, Jama, makes across East Africa and the Middle East as a child and young adult following the deaths of his parents (the period between 1935 and 1947), Mohamed is nonetheless open about the process of narrative 'embellishment' that she has employed in her own re-telling of events. As she says in the postscript to the novel: 'I had written his story, but also played with it; ruthlessly taking away his mother and foisting on him a big-haired, sharp-tongued Eritrean wife' (279). Her playful re-fashioning of this 'by proxy' past strays from the more passive aspects of postmemory, which emphasise the reception of 'inherited' memories, to fit with the more active mediating processes of 'imaginative investment, projection, and creation' that Hirsch

also describes (*Postmemory* 3).

But there is another aspect of agency to the embodied transmission of memory which is common to Mohamed, Mengestu and Ali Farah's work. As stated above, all three narratives employ the trope of multidirectionality to forge links with other stories, times, and places, including the present that the authors themselves inhabit. Indeed, as Rothberg states: 'It is by virtue of its nonhistorical nature that the power of the imagination to bridge the rupture, or "déchirement" internal to each culture [...] becomes a resource for multidirectional relation, that is, for narrative and linkage' (*Multidirectional* 149). Thus, whilst *Black Mamba Boy* interrogates the presence of an embodied and affective experience in the process of memory transmission (see Hirsch, *Postmemory* 33–4), this also feeds into an inquiry into the linguistic, cultural and memory practices of adjacence and proximity that further align the three texts. Indeed, the physicality of Mohamed's account is striking right from the incipit of the text. Introducing the journey that will take Jama from his native town of Hargeisa (then in British Somaliland) through Aden, Djibouti, Eritrea, Abyssinia, Sudan, Egypt and Palestine, en route to Wales and London, before his return to Africa, Mohamed focuses not on the geo-political axis of colonial occupations and World War Two that cut fault-lines into the tale, but the *corporeal* effects that they yield in her father's person. As she contemplates him as an old man in London in the present day, she can perceive the traces of history in her own vision of his body:

His oversized glasses perched on his bulbous nose, the flashing blue and white lights of the television dancing on the lenses, his ma'awis hitched up around his knees. To see his knees buckling under the weight of his thin body hurts me, but I respect those knees for walking across continents, for wading through the Red Sea. I will sing the song of those knees. (Mohamed 1)

Yet as we can anticipate from the repeated expression of subjectivity, Mohamed also goes on to emphasise her own role in the re-fashioning of this, her father's embodied story, in what we might term an endeavor to enact the transmission of a 'deep memory', a 'memory that preserves sensations, physical imprints [...] a memory of the senses' (Delbo 3). 'I am my father's griot, this is a hymn to him. I am telling you this story so that I can turn my father's *blood and bones*, and whatever magic his mother sewed under his skin, into *history*'<sup>9</sup> (Mohamed 1, emphasis added). The past here is 'sedimented' (Connerton 72) in the body, which can subsequently function as 'both the receptacle for and the transmitter of memory' (Landsberg 7) in a dynamic form of non-verbal translation.

9 This also recalls the subtitle of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*.

But as stated before, the agency that Mohamed acquires is also visible in her alignment of her father's 'migration' tale with other such adjacent histories. As fate would have it, Jama's long walk from Somaliland to Egypt culminates in his acceptance into the British Navy to work as a coal boy on the *Runnymede Park* on its voyage from Port Said to Haifa. Yet it soon transpires that the ship's mission has changed, and when they dock in Haifa they take on some of the thousands of passengers from the notorious 'Exodus 1947' steamship – Jewish refugees and survivors of the Nazi extermination camps in Europe now trying to force open the British immigration quotas into Palestine. Conditions on the ship are inhumane and often violent, and only serve to remind Jama of his own mistreatment in the Italian colonial army as an *askari* conscript: '(he) only had to look into the faces of the refugees to be sent back to his own nightmares, to feel again deep fear, despair and self-hate' (Mohamed 250). Jama forms a particular empathetic bond with a Polish refugee names Chaja, who serves as a mnemonic conduit for him to re-create a contemporary image of his dead mother. This is not due to any physical resemblance, but rather an affective response triggered by a shared position of disenfranchisement. 'She was heavy-set but made larger by the woolen coat she continued to wear in the heat, an infant slept at her breast, and something about her gave Jama a powerful sensation of Ambaro. It was as if his mother had been transplanted onto the ship' (Mohamed 243).

The laboured navigation of the refugee vessel around the Mediterranean also becomes a protracted and painful continuation of Jama's own trans-national 'migration' and is transformed into a sort of parable once it becomes aligned in the reader's imagination with both ancient paradigms and contemporary movements that are dominating much of the media and political discourse in Europe today.

The ship was a world propelled forward by Jama and the other Somali firemen, an ark with more than two of each, English, Irish, Scottish, Somali, Polish, Hungarian, German, Palestinian; the *Runnymede Park* carried them all on her back away from the Promised Land to an unknown shore. (Mohamed 245)

As is well known, the *Runnymede Park* docked at the French town of Port-de-Bouc for twenty-eight days in an attempt to persuade the refugees to disembark rather than be returned to Germany. During this period, Mohamed describes the boat as a 'floating Auschwitz' on which 'the sailors and soldiers fished, sunbathed, and swam in the Mediterranean in their free time, just as SS men had frolicked in the death camps' (Mohamed 247). The employment here of the 'floating' label not only recalls Huyssen's aforementioned memorial 'floating forms' (99) but is also suggestive of a shifting Jewish racial

status in relation to normative notions of whiteness and belonging that is emphasised by Robert Stam and Ella Shohat using precisely the same terms (2012, 154). The floating status of the boat itself allows for a suspension of racial geography that in turn encourages metaphorical and metonymic links between the Holocaust and colonialism, placing them on a historical continuum of racism and othering (2012, 157), yet also allows for the emergence of a counter-discourse of multidirectional solidarity.

Jama approached the large lady one day, her daughters didn't run around anymore, just sat quietly next to her. He pressed a couple of chocolates into the mother's hand, she hid them in her bra and took Jama's hand, her large brown eyes read his palm while he tried to remember his words of Hebrew. 'Shalom!' Jama said.

'Shalom,' the woman replied, stroking the lines on his hand, she nodded her approval; she saw a good life in his hands.

Jama pointed to his chest and said, 'Jama.'

The woman held out her hand, 'Chaja.' (Mohamed 250–1)

Their affective affiliation as racialised others thus speaks to the potential for an alignment of black and Jewish histories and communities that fulfills Gilroy's call for 'a consolidation of culture lines rather than color lines': 'The recurrence of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial' (*Against Race* 1; 17).<sup>10</sup>

The *Runnymede Park* eventually docked in Hamburg and forced the disembarkation of its passengers – former camp prisoners and displaced persons – into the very same national arena of their recent atrocious suffering. This return in itself recalls Rothberg's engagement with Cesaire's notion of the *choc en retour*, in which the Holocaust survivors represent a sort of uncanny supplement or residue of an unsuccessfully repressed colonial violence, 'displaced versions of what has been avoided' hitherto (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 79). The *choc en retour* 'is meant to force an encounter between Europe and colonial histories in such a way that it becomes impossible for Europe to remain blind to its agency in the world' (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 81), an encounter that *Black Mamba Boy* accomplishes through the trans-national intertwining of extra- and intra-European stories of repression and mobility. Jama will make his own return to Africa from Britain at the end of the novel, unlike Mohamed's real-life father, who in the interview she conducts with

10 A similar empathetic bond is formed between Zoppe, the Somali askari protagonist of Igiaba Scego's 2015 novel *Adua*, and a Jewish family he meets in Rome in 1934. It is the vision of this family that sustains him during a vicious beating by Italian fascist troops and reminds him of his own family in Somalia (Scego 15).

him that concludes the paratextual material, states that he feels ‘English’, and peppers his speech (which she describes as ‘part Somali, part Yorkshire, part something else’) with colloquial British slang such as *innit* and Italian words like *finito* (Mohamed 5, 6). As a linguistic and cultural symbol and product of a colonial past, Mohamed’s father comes to illustrate a richly trans-national present that is reflected in a shared walk with his daughter through London’s Richmond Park:

In our matching anoraks, we watched bats fly awkwardly from nook to cranny, and listened to the feral Somali parakeets that hid in the park, saying ‘Maalin wanaagsan, Maalin wanaagsan, good day.’ With fugitive African birds chattering above our heads, and the red, fallow deer hiding in the long grass, we could almost have been in the Serengeti or back in the Miyi. (Mohamed 3)

Mohamed goes further still, in aligning her father’s experience not only with the Jewish diaspora post-war, but also with the contemporary waves of migration that continue to etch narratives of determination and desperation into society today:

And all around us the other vagabonds still pour in. Underneath lorries, stowed away in boats, falling out of the sky from jumbo jets [...] Whatever Pharaoh says, they will not be tied down, they will not be made slaves, they will make the whole world their promised land. (Mohamed 4)

In so doing, Mohamed fulfills Hirsch’s insistence on the importance of placing stories and histories, groups and individuals, in a relationship of proximity, something that is mirrored in certain Jewish responses to the current refugee crisis in Europe. Writing recently in *The Guardian*, Laura Janner-Klausner points out that:

For the Jewish people, for thousands of years a dispersed nation without guaranteed safety, the sight of the Calais ‘jungle’ camp on our doorstep is especially painful. We remember with gratitude the great deeds of the Kindertransport, and with hurt the rejection we have also known. What is the Jewish response to hearing that thousands are living in squalor just a few miles away? When we look across the English Channel, we see ourselves. (Janner-Klausner)

Janner-Klausner, a prominent rabbi whose family were affected by Nazi genocide in Lithuania, is vocal about the need for the postmemory generations not only to keep Holocaust memories alive, but to use them precisely to highlight other minority narratives that might otherwise be silenced. In Hirsch’s words, the emphasis that figures such as Janner-Klausner and Mohamed place on such connective histories ‘maps a future for memory studies beyond discrete

historical events [...] to transnational interconnections and intersections in a global space of remembrance' (*Postmemory* 247).

#### 4. Entangled Taboos: Ali Farah's *Il comandante del fiume*

A comparable dynamic that suggests the potential for an empathetic entanglement (Nuttall) of memories populates Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's 2014 novel *Il comandante del fiume* [The river chief]. This, Ali Farah's second novel, is told from the perspective of a Roman teenager Yabar, who was born in Mogadishu and migrated to Italy with his Somali parents as a child at the onset of the civil war in 1991. His own memories of Somalia are scarce, and filtered through his mother's reluctance to discuss the subsequent return of his father to the country to participate in the war, and the connected death of her brother, Yabar's uncle. These gaps and silences in Yabar's life narrative constitute a kind of identity *taboo*: he cannot ask his mother about them, and the climax of the novel comes when he is sent to London to stay with extended family and discovers the truth of his father's role in his uncle's death.

In this way, the non-verbal acts of memorial transfer that Mohamed privileges through her re-telling of the language of her father's body are replaced in Ali Farah's text only by lost images. Excluded from the traditional channels of memory tradition, Yabar states: 'Io e mia mamma in casa non tenevamo ricordi – oggetti, immagini, giornali –, niente di niente' (Ali Farah 118). [My mother and I kept no mementos at home – objects, images, newspapers – absolutely nothing.]<sup>11</sup> Yabar's mother has even disposed of any existing photographs of his father, so he has no visual image of his physical presence that he can conjure up to aid the mnemonic process he so desires (Ali Farah 30). When he discovers some hidden passport photos of the two together, he tries to recompose his father's face, but the effect is unsuccessful and uncanny:

Mi ero messo in testa che dovevo comporre le nostre facce, per vederlo di nuovo, ma i pezzi non combaciavano tra loro e così il risultato appariva mostruoso, un occhio più grande, la bocca sul collo, la fronte troppo bassa. Non mi ricordavo più com'era fatto e ora quella era l'unica immagine che mi rimaneva di lui. (Ali Farah 135)

[I had got it in my head that I needed to recompose our faces, in order to see him again, but the pieces didn't fit together and the result was monstrous, one eye bigger than the other, his mouth on the neck, his forehead too low. I couldn't remember what he looked like, and now that was the only image I had left of him.]

11 All translations from this text are my own.

The subsequent loss of an already absent father mirrors the loss of Yabar's birth city Mogadishu that is now 'tutta distrutta' (Ali Farah 119) [completely destroyed], as well as the Somali tradition of oral memory transmission that has been irrevocably fractured through multiple waves of clan warfare and diasporic dispersal (Ali Farah, 100–1). This loss, articulated in various modes, is that very same loss that Rothberg posits as being situated at the origin of diaspora itself (*Multidirectional* 161). Yet Ali Farah shows how these lost memories can potentially be reclaimed in a series of active processes, in which traditions are replaced by hybrid forms of recomposition: Yabar's adopted aunt Rosa fills her own memory void of an Africa she never knew with the acquisition of mass made statues and amulets bought from Senegalese street vendors in Rome: 'tutte quelle 'cianfrusaglie,' come le chiama tua madre, mi riempivano di calore. Era come coltivare una parte di me alla quale non avevo avuto accesso prima' (Ali Farah 83). [All of those 'knick-knacks,' as your mother calls them, gave me a warm feeling. It was a way of cultivating a part of me that I hadn't previously been able to access.] Similarly, identification processes occur through a privileging of the possibilities of hybridity. Dismayed by a lack of visible black role models whilst growing up, Yabar becomes transfixed by the starring role played by Will Smith in the 1997 film *Men in Black*, and although no suitable merchandise dolls are available for him to buy, he and his mother perform a complicated operation that sees two other dolls fused and coloured with brown marker pen 'in modo che avesse la pelle dello stesso colore del mio eroe' (Ali Farah 86) [so that their skin was the same colour as my hero].

These processes of hybridised memory-making and affectively charged recuperation converge in one narrative episode, in which a 'trans-national' taboo is conflated – one might perhaps even say appropriated – in a multidirectional sense that gives Yabar back a sense of visible, linguistic and identity agency that is denied him through his status as a Black Italian. Yabar's status as outsider in his adopted country is emphasised throughout the narrative. When he is abused by passport officials in Rome, he states: 'Potrei tatuarmi il passaporto italiano sul petto e non smetterebbero comunque di farmi a pezzi, la lingua da una parte, le mani e gli occhi dall'altra' (Ali Farah 189). [I could tattoo my Italian passport on my chest and they still would not stop dissecting me into body parts, tongue on one side, hands and eyes on the other.] Aware that his language marks him as Italian, yet that this is at odds with his appearance, Yabar nonetheless rejects any sense of a fraternity with other migrants from the Horn of Africa that he meets in Rome. This contrast between his own perception of where he belongs and other people's is something that Ali Farah marks through an emphasis on pronouns, a local bus driver referring to Yabar in the plural *voi* [you], which marks him as

part of a group of (perceived ignorant) foreign others, whereas the other black teenagers he meets include him 'tra di noi' [among us] (Ali Farah 113, emphasis added). His failure to progress at school is compounded with his sense of rejection from the Italian community of his native city, through a careful repetition of the same word, 'respinto' [rejected] (Ali Farah 44), and Yabar's ultimate response to this rejection is to vocally reappropriate the 'taboo' of his Black body through voicing the Nazi greeting 'Heil!'.

He explains that his linguistic performance of this taboo originates after he realised he has attended the 'Giorno della Memoria' [Day of Memory], to mark the liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet troops on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1945, for twelve years in a row. It seems that his frustration stems from a sense of injustice at competing memories of trauma: where are *his* memories located on such a day, and where in general are there signs of any national commemoration of the Italian colonial presence in the Horn of Africa? '(N)on ne vogliono sapere niente di noi [...]' 'Che vuoi dire? Noi in che senso?' 'Noi cresciuti qui, figli di genitori eritrei, etiopi, somali, le ex colonie insomma. Gli italiani manco sanno che esistiamo.' (Ali Farah 145) ['They don't want to know anything about us.' 'What do you mean? Us who?' 'Us who grew up here, children of Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali parents, from the ex-colonies, basically. Italians don't even know that we exist.']. These second-generation migrants from former Italian colonies thus feel themselves to be caught in a trap that suspends them between the twin poles of invisibility (as people) / and visibility (through skin colour). This tension comes to a climax in an argument Yabar has with his 'sister' Sissi, the daughter of a mixed-race Somali-Italian friend of his mother, who – from the privileged vantage point of an accepted physical appearance (Sissi is blonde, with grey eyes), cannot bring herself to understand the difference between the two:

Sissi non capiva, o non voleva capire, che non basta l'amore fraterno per fare un colore, perché il colore è quello che vedono gli altri, non è quello che vedi tu, che senti tu, e nessuna favola, nessuna canzone, nessuna amicizia può cambiare il colore che vedono gli altri. È per questo che io posso dire 'heil!' mentre Sissi non può neppure pronunciarlo. Per me 'heil!' non è un tabù, perché sono io stesso il tabù, ed è il mio colore, qui, in questa città, lungo il fiume, a essere un tabù. (Ali Farah 37)

[Sissi did not understand, or did not want to understand, that sibling love is not enough to make a colour, because your colour is what other people see, not what you see, not what you feel, and no fairy tale, no song, no friendship can change the colour that the others see. That's why I can say 'heil!' whilst Sissi cannot. For me 'heil!' is not a taboo, because I myself am the taboo, and that taboo is my colour, here, in this city, by this river.]

Yabar appropriates this forceful cultural taboo that embodies notions of hatred and exclusion within the term 'heil', in a search for agency, for a viable declarative expression of what he reads as his own 'foreign' taboo presence in the city of Rome: 'quella parola può essere un tabù per gli altri, ma non può esserlo per me' [that word may be a taboo for others, but it cannot be one for me] (Ali Farah 201). He therefore enacts the sort of 'grafting' of pain that Kaja Silverman has termed a 'heteropathic' process of identification, 'a way of aligning the not-me with the me,' since 'through discursively implanted memories the subject can participate in the desires, struggles and sufferings of the other' (cited in Hirsch, *Postmemory* 85).

Indeed, as Michael Rothberg demonstrates, the confrontation of different histories does not have to, necessarily, lead to a competition between victims, nor the erasure of one set of histories or memories by another (*Multidirectional*). And similarly, Paul Gilroy has written on how his childhood 'included the incomprehensible mystery of the Nazi genocide' to which he returned 'compulsively like a painful wobbly tooth': 'I struggled with the realisation that their suffering was somehow connected with the ideas of 'race' that bounded my own world with the threat of violence' (*Against Race* 4). Caryl Phillips takes this proximity further in his own work, as Rothberg himself points out: 'metonymic identification is both enabled and made necessary by the deficit of representations of black suffering in the England of (his) youth' (*Multidirectional* 156):

'The bloody excesses of colonialism, the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage were not on the curriculum, and certainly not on the television screen. As a result I vicariously channeled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience.' (Phillips, cited in Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 156)

These examples show how Rothberg's dynamic of multidirectionality offers the potential for mutual enablement and productive dialogue, and might ultimately lead to 'new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice' (*Multidirectional* 5). And this is exactly what Ali Farah, Mohamed and Mengestu all enact in turn in their own texts. By aligning, even entangling, their own transcribed, 'by proxy' familial narratives with wider collective and transnational memories of colonisation, conflict and the Holocaust through reference to specific sites, bodies and words, they 'subject them to negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing' (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 3), a process that is in itself creative and points to a potential platform for the articulation of an intercultural identity. As Yabar says in the conclusion of *Il comandante del fiume*: 'La storia di una persona è molto più complessa del colore della sua pelle.

Ognuno di noi ha qualcosa di diverso dentro, gli occhi da soli non bastano, si fermano all'apparenza, non vanno in profondità' (Ali Farah 203) [A person's history is much more complex than the colour of their skin. Everyone has something different inside, and eyes alone are not enough, they rest on the surface and don't scale someone's depths].

Yabar's interiority, his 'double consciousness' that allows him to straddle both an insider and an outsider position (Rothberg, *Multidirectional* 129) within the European context, is where Ali Farah suggests his own counter-discourse can be situated, a form of translational disruption that is performed by his own linking of cultural and racial taboos. Indeed, his journey to London and discovery of his Somali family and the wider community there, still painfully fractured along clan lines that he cannot relate to, makes Yabar realise that his true family is not biological and his real home is indeed situated in the complex cultural framework that Rome represents. This emphasis on the importance of encounters rather than origins recalls Paul Gilroy's insistence on privileging *routes* rather than *roots* (*Black Atlantic*), and recalls Astrid Erll's definition of 'travelling memory' as the 'incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms, and practices of memory, their continual 'travels' and ongoing transformations through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders' (11).

## **5. Conclusions**

A comparative reading of these three texts thus suggests that the gaps and fissures engendered by parental diasporic movement are not impediments to memory work, as may at first be imagined. Through the kinds of narrative re-creation we have witnessed by these three members of a group of 1.5 and second generation writers from the Horn of Africa, new agency is acquired in each case through productive narratives practices of embellishment, embodiment and entangled alignment that allow authors and texts alike to cross temporal and spatial boundaries in multiple and productive ways. I envisage the works of Dinaw Mengestu, Nadifa Mohamed and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah as forming part of one of Rothberg's 'new groups', which 'emerge in the very articulation of memory; they come into being in a dialogic space, in the contact (and sometimes conflict) between different narratives, images, and affective modes' ('Locating Transnational' 654). Their elaboration of diaspora stories through 'by proxy' processes may perhaps point the way to a new mode of conceptualising the trans-national in the field of memory studies today, as 'not a prosthesis for a national memory, but for another, reproductive and reparative temporality' (Feuchtwang 284).

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