

# Old News in the New Era Temporal Misalignments and Wounded History in Rehana Rossouw's *New Times*

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**Abstract** Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Freeman (2010), this study offers a contribution to the South African literary debate over historical progress and irregular temporalities by proposing an analysis of time and embodiment in Rehana Rossouw's second novel *New Times* (2017). The book, all centred around the themes of betrayal versus remembrance, tells the story of Ali, a young journalist trying to heal secret wounds in the year after South Africa's first democratic elections. While her identity is continuously questioned because of her male nickname, mixed slave heritage and uncertain sexuality, Ali starts her new job for the aptly-titled *The New Times* by uncovering the new government's first signs of corruption and blindness towards the AIDS plague. By investigating what is left of the colonial in the supposedly postcolonial era, Rossouw's novel offers a fresh addition to the strand of South African literature that dares to deconstruct the myth of Mandela and of Liberation Day, calling for a deeper understanding of the often fractured temporalities of political change.

**Keywords** Recursive temporalities. Melancholia. Embodiment. Post-apartheid literature. Rehana Rossouw. Elizabeth Freeman.



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Time as body and 'the times', or the sphere of official politics and national history, form a joint: the body and the state are, rather than mere metaphors for one another, mutually constructing.

(Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*, 2010)

"When you are oppressed and going nowhere you never rush", states the narrative voice in the first paragraph of *New Times* (2017), Rehana Rossouw's second novel and her first take at the emotionally charged time of South Africa's entrance into its democratic era.<sup>1</sup> A preoccupation with both time and 'the times' permeates the entire novel, which offers a brave interrogation of the complex relationship between past trauma and on-going change, on both historical and individual levels. The narrator's above-mentioned statement sets the 'temporal' tone for the story of Aaliyah/Ali Adams, a 27-year-old Coloured journalist who is eager to start her new job at the aptly-titled Capetonian newspaper *The New Times*, after four discouraging months of unemployment that befell her at the very moment of South Africa's most hopeful look at the future. While privately facing her own existential crisis and the general confusion around her male nickname (Ali) and uncertain sexuality, the protagonist gets back on her feet as a journalist by uncovering the new government's first signs of economic corruption and blindness towards the AIDS plague, something she feels particularly worried about because of the threat it poses to her HIV-positive friend and pro-treatment activist Munier. The novel is all centred around the risk of forgetting and the wounds inflicted by actual and potential betrayals, both in the public and in the private spheres. Ali's relationship with her best friend Sumaya is fraught with tension because of Sumaya's dismissal of their teenage love affair in favour of a more conventional heterosexual romance, and even Ali's 'older-brother figure' Lizo, an anti-apartheid fighter who has rapidly ascended to political power, somehow betrays her trust for the sake of the on-going electoral games. The protagonist's urgency to remember, on the other hand, has taken the unhealthy form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), so that the challenge to connect past, present, and future seems, for her and her fellow South Africans, anything but a pacified process.

As a brief assessment of its paratext proves, *New Times'* preoccupation with the temporal could not be more explicit. Time obsessively takes the scene in the novel's title as well as in the epigraph from

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<sup>1</sup> Rossouw's literary debut after a long career as a journalist arrived only two years earlier with *What Will People Say?* (2015). This first novel, set in a different part of Cape Town during the last years of the apartheid regime, was shortlisted for the Etisalat Prize for African Literature in 2016 and went on to win the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) prize for fiction in 2017. Its success set both critical and popular expectations high for Rossouw's following literary enterprise.

Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which the words "time", "age", "epoch", and "season" all recur twice – and in a two-fold articulation – in the space of a few lines:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. (Rossouw 2017)

The unresolved contradictions characterizing the times of historical change are also put centre stage in the novel's breath-taking opening paragraph, which explicitly focuses on a temporal misalignment:

African time strolls at a leisurely pace, meandering down a time zone that's several hours behind the rest of the globe, pausing to meet and greet everyone in its path as it makes its tardy way to the next appointment. It can be so very charming – when Bayete's Jabu Khanyile strolls onto a stage flicking his fly-whisk languidly, the crowd he kept waiting for hours forgives him in a heartbeat. It can also hold people back – when you are oppressed and going nowhere you never rush. (1)

Here, the characteristic slowness of African time is directly associated with the very humane habit of acknowledging the presence of others (greeting everyone), a habit that is not shared, as Ali will discover, by the majority-white staff of *The New Times*. While South Africans' typically relaxed attitude will occasionally run the risk of hindering her work, Ali finds this temporal difference "charming". She later boasts that, during the unnerving times of Mandela's negotiations with the National Party and the consequent drafting of the new constitution, she "perfected the art [of waiting]" (1) and is now a "champion [in the] waiting game" (3). However, the novel's opening immediately complicates the notion of such captivating contrast between African and global time with a reminder of history's lasting wounds: the ghostly protagonist here is the injured historical subject, "oppressed and going nowhere", who cannot but remain 'stuck' in the folds of a painful time.

The temporal clash that inaugurates the narrative signals Rossouw's engagement of an issue that is central to postcolonial and decolonial thought: the critique of a conception of time and history shaped by Western philosophical traditions and yet deemed necessary to the rest of the world, if this wants to be counted in the number of the 'progressive countries'. As Walter Mignolo remarked, however, "modernity is not an ontological unfolding of history but the hegemonic narrative of Western civilization. So, there is no need to

be modern. Even better, it is urgent to delink from the dream that if you are not modern, you are out of history” (Mignolo 2011, 9). In order to point out the necessity of a decolonial perspective, or ‘border thinking’, Mignolo joins the number of scholars who have taken to the task the supposedly universal but actually Western-centric understanding of historical progress, that celebrates linearity and relegates all temporal differences to an alleged state of ‘pre-modernity’ and backwardness. This is particularly relevant to the South African context, in which the historical transition from the colonial phase to a supposedly ‘postcolonial’ one in the years between 1931 and 1961 never implied the democratization of society. The country proclaimed its independence from the United Kingdom at the very moment in which the Afrikaner government started hardening the regime of apartheid, so that the birth of the ‘modern’ Republic of South Africa cannot in any way be seen as the beginning of a more progressive phase (see Carusi 1990; McClintock 1995).<sup>2</sup> The ambiguous relationship between historical change and democracy was then further complicated in the most recent times of ‘liberated South Africa’, which Andrew Van der Vlies (2017) describes as characterized by a widespread “dis-appointment” – or ‘missed appointment’, in both the affective and the temporal sense – with the promises of the anti-apartheid Struggle.<sup>3</sup>

In more than one sense, *New Times* aligns itself with Mignolo’s critique. There are direct references in the novel to the political implications of an ‘African difference’ in temporal matters: “African Time is the ideology of the Movement; one of the pillars of their struggle” (Rossouw 2017, 160), Ali remarks while she waits for a meeting that ends up starting fifty-five minutes later than scheduled. However, the first cracks in the glossy narrative of ‘liberated South Africa’ also seem inherently connected to a political handling of time: Irfaan, the former anti-apartheid leader and current electoral candidate who is awaited for fifty-five minutes, seems to the narrator to be “enjoying the fruits of liberation while the almost one million voters in the Western Cape who voted for the Movement last year wait patiently for their freedom” (161). Moreover, the country’s sudden acceleration

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**2** McClintock has been particularly critical of the ideological dangers hidden behind the idea of a supposedly linear progress celebrated by the ‘post’ of the ‘postcolonial’. The situation of women, who tend to remain the target of structural violence across the temporal divide between the colonial and the postcolonial phases, is for her the most eloquent case in point (McClintock 1995, 11) – and one that resonates with Rossouw’s own description, in *New Times*, of an unconventional young woman’s life in the hopelessly patriarchal world of post-apartheid (and thus supposedly ‘liberated’) Bo-Kaap.

**3** In his critical appraisal of contemporary South African writing, which draws on (literary) affect theory, Van der Vlies examines in particular the feelings deriving from experiences of temporal disjuncture in the work of both well-known and emergent South African authors.

towards the much-coveted 'modern life' implies sinister losses that leave a bitter taste on the protagonist's tongue. *The Democrat*, the actively anti-apartheid weekly newspaper she has been working for during the last years of the Struggle, is shut down abruptly soon after the first democratic elections, because of the many lawsuits filed against it during the regime. Yet no newer outlet – and certainly not *The New Times* that now employs her – seems to be willing to take its place in advancing radical critique on the current state of affairs. The "modern" open-plan space and "matching" furniture (2) she finds at her new workplace are not accompanied by the same uncompromising commitment to speak truth to power nor by the same racially heterogeneous staff as she was used to at *The Democrat*.

While Ali has perfected the art of waiting during the hectic times of South Africa's transition to democracy, the abruptness of change in the country's politics seems to have affected people's handling and availability of time more thoroughly than her fellow South Africans are willing to realize. For example, the much-awaited Rugby World Cup and consequent opening of South Africa to mass tourism have also taken away Ali's "right to arrive anytime" at her favourite restaurant in Bo-Kaap, while the neighbourhood is assailed by hordes of Australian and American visitors ready to queue for hours outside the spots recommended by the touristic brochures: "There's a bus parked outside the restaurant and a queue at the door. Our right to arrive anytime, sit anywhere, order anything on the menu and get it quick sharp has been temporarily suspended" (118). At the same time, the fact that the racist National Party has won Cape Town's provincial government even at the time of the first democratic elections makes for a disquieting contradiction right at the heart of the Rainbow Nation's hope for a glorious future. The local government building Ali has to pass on her way to work is a daily reminder for the protagonist of the "stinking tentacles" of the violent past that keeps threatening the cherished "beat [of] liberated South Africa" (213).

Yet, the clash between (South) African and global time, and between old and new states of affairs, is not the only temporal misalignment staged by Rossouw's novel. When the story begins, Ali is coming out of a depressing time of unemployment, which has drastically impacted her handling of time as well as her self-esteem. In the four months before starting her new job at *The New Times*, she has slept a minimum of twelve hours per day, and gets exhausted very soon when she is back at work. When she resumes her journalistic endeavour, she thus has to quickly discipline herself into hectic rhythms in order to best chase the truth in the stories she covers. While she hurries up with deadlines "pounding against [her] back" (255), the reluctant sources she contacts to have her information confirmed insist on asking for more time, evading her calls, and generally slowing her down, thus risking to jeopardize her explosive exclusives. "Dead-

lines aggravate me; especially the ones that creep up fast and force me to file my stories before I'm convinced there's nothing more I can do to improve them" (36), sighs the tormented protagonist in her first week back at work. However, while on the workplace she seems keen on embracing what Elizabeth Freeman termed "chrononormativity", or "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (Freeman 2010, 3), in her private life Ali increasingly experiences a fractured or arrested time. Soon into the narrative, the memories of a painful past start seizing her through flashbacks so vivid that she is forced to continually relive her past experiences. She gets thus stuck in a damaged, recursive temporality in which progress towards the future seems impossible, and real and metaphorical shadows threaten to swallow her into a dark emotional chaos. In other words, while Ali the journalist willingly adheres to the "hyperregulated time of industry" (Freeman 2010, 7), Aaliyah the woman with an unresolved private life is imprisoned in an unpredictable time in which painful memories "well up", "fast-forward", and generally trump linear narrative, all the while she feels the desperate need to "keep [her] mind on the present" (Rossouw 2017, 170).

Eloquently, the standard symbols of time measurement such as clocks and pendulums recur obsessively through Ali's flashbacks. In stark contrast with their count-down function in the deadline-rife workplace, in the private time of the subconscious they are repeatedly associated with the reassuring but endangered heartbeat of Ali's father, as she relives the last moments before his death. The semantic field of death and burial, as well as that of physical and psychological wounds, is increasingly intermingled in the novel with the act of intentional and unintentional remembering, a veritable "oozing pipeline of painful memories" (191). Death-tinged grief proliferates as Ali is forced by PTSD to re-experience the last, violent moments of the anti-apartheid struggle. She is especially haunted by the memories of the shooting of a 12-year-old African boy who stood next to her in a march, and by the paralyzing awareness of the tortures inflicted to her friend Lizo in the regime's prisons. The protagonist's reaction at these painful flashbacks is often to "bury [her] head" under the pillow and "dive down deep into the darkness" (190), as if to reiterate a virtual burial rite that can never be definitive nor put the dead at rest.

Interestingly, however, some of the crucial memories haunting Ali – and the first ones to trigger her PTSD – are ones of a different, more private kind of trauma. These concern her short-lived and now 'buried' teen-age lesbian affair with her best friend and life-long neighbour Sumaya, in whom she had found solace in hard times, but from whom she had later been abruptly rejected. Under the threat of losing her friendship forever, Ali has reluctantly resigned herself to Sumaya's prohibition to ever mention their affair again. Yet, the protagonist is clearly uncomfortable with the idea of her secret love's

impending marriage and imminent moving to a faraway neighbourhood. The pain of rejection is itself articulated by the narrator as an instance of arrested temporality. Slowness, as she now recalls, had characterized her first experience of physical love with Sumaya: “She teaches me to wait while she takes her sweet time trailing her fingers and lips across my tummy, up my ribs and under my breasts. I learn that waiting has an explosive reward” (127). Rejection, on the other hand, has been so abrupt that ten years later Ali is still stuck in her impossible yearning and unable to understand why this has to be renounced forever.

Ali’s troubles in coming to terms with this unrequited love also leave her sexual identity blurred. “I’m ‘still’ [in love with Sumaya] but I’m not gay”, the protagonist thinks to herself at the beginning of the novel (128). And yet, her sexual orientation remains a troubling mystery even to herself. She rules out the possibility to ever mention her secret passion to the members of her patriarchal religious community. At the same time, however, she keeps probing the boundaries by asking Yunus, Munier’s gay friend and a Muslim spiritual leader, whether he is aware of Muslim lesbians living openly in the area. If her sexual identity remains ambiguous, Ali is sure that Sumaya is her only true love, while the unlikely and degrading sexual experiences she has had with men were only triggered by her frustration for her friend’s rejection. Moreover, her nickname Ali – a shortened version of her name but also a tribute to her father’s and her own myth Muhammad Ali – generates confusion about her gender, and prompts the protests of several colleagues who prefer the longer and more feminine Aaliyah. Her usual outfit, consisting of black jeans, long white *kurta* and Doc Martens boots, closely resembles the one sported by the neighbourhood boys, and is a world apart not only from Sumaya’s long dresses that “cove[r] as [they] clin[g] her shapely distractions” (118), but also from Munier’s cross-gender and hyper-feminine attire, often including wigs, mini-skirts, and red stilettos. In other words, while still unsure in terms of identification, Ali effectively queers everybody’s expectations about her gender and sexuality: she is what Freeman calls a “sexual dissident”.

Freeman is only one of a number of scholars who pointed out that the hegemonic heteronormative discourse has always represented anachronisms or arrested temporalities as deviance, “in order to displace the burden of the ahistorical onto others – queer subjects and people of colour, each equally stigmatized as ‘primitive’” (Rohy 2009, 129).<sup>4</sup> In particular, undermining the theoretical tenet of a ‘moderni-

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<sup>4</sup> A critique of normative time had already been advanced by feminist scholars in reference to the discrimination of women as political subjects. Kristeva (1981) has been among the first to distinguish the linear model of official history from the more irreg-

ty' supposedly distinguishing Western societies from the rest of the world, both Freeman (2010) and Dana Luciano (2007) commented on the temporal complications of the Western 'modern life' itself. They argued that it is precisely sexual dissidents that first and most often brought to evidence the signs of modernity's 'fractured' time, characterized by recursions and interruptions as opposed to the temporal continuum in which nineteenth-century society had been convinced to live. According to Freeman, sexual dissidents are thus often "figures for and bearers of new corporeal sensations, including those of a certain counterpoint between now and then, and of occasional disruptions to the sped-up and hyperregulated time of industry" (Freeman 2010, 7). In particular, the inability - or active refusal - to let go of past experiences is, for Freeman, a veritable "queer intempestivity":

[a] stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as a reappearance of bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) [which is] a hallmark of queer affect: a 'revolution' in the old sense of the word, as a turning back. (8)

Here Freeman merges queer studies and psychoanalytic theories of melancholia around the concept of an irregular but potentially 'revolutionary' time, that folds back onto itself in a subversive refusal to forget. Interestingly, she does not stop at reminding us that in all traumatic contexts "the mourning process bodies forth gendered subjects", and that the centrality of pain in Freudian understandings of melancholia led to a queer concept of futurity which is itself often "predicated upon injury" (11). On the contrary, Freeman also envisions a positive implication of such queer 'intempestivity'. This resides for her in the embodied, even erotic, presence of the chronically subversive subject, whose longings open up the possibility of a "momentary reorganization" of past events, and thus of a renewed encounter with history (14).

Freeman's meditation on irregular time and melancholia, or the refusal to relegate a pivotal experience to the past, is particularly relevant to the South African context, in which the collective trauma of apartheid has not been thoroughly nor definitively overcome, notwithstanding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s attempt at collective healing in the first years after the demise of the regime. It is no coincidence that explorations of memory and mourning - drawing on both literary and historical trauma studies (Caruth

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ular time of women's affective genealogies, while Rosi Braidotti (2011, 269) grounded her nomadic theory on the Deleuzian distinction between Chronos (the institutional time of "norms and protocols") and Aion (the time of "becoming and affirmative critical practice"). Interestingly, it is the latter that for Braidotti holds the most productive political value, because the specific sensibility of the minoritarian Aion "combines a strong historical memory with consciousness and the desire for resistance" (269).



1996; LaCapra 2001; Durrant 2004) – have flourished in South African literary criticism over the last twenty years. Expanding on the seminal works on mourning by Mengel and Borzaga (2012) and on melancholic fiction by Samuelson (2007), some of the best recent perspectives on South Africa’s culture elect melancholia theories – rather than mourning ones alone – as key tools to interpret the current developments in the country’s public discourse (Truscott 2011; Hansen 2012; Demir 2019). Demir, in particular, recently suggested that the concept of “post-apartheid melancholia” is crucial to contemporary South African literature, as it explains the tendency on the part of most local writers to refuse the TRC-induced national narrative of a quick and thorough recovery from the past. For Demir,

if one reads post-TRC novels against the larger framework of a nationwide process of mourning and attempts at closure, the concept of melancholia can be seen as a powerful counter-narrative in order to keep the past alive. (2019, 6)

Interestingly, issues of irregular temporality (“temporal attachments, present losses, and the impossibility of a present without the past”, 14) also inform Demir’s analysis, in the conviction that a Fanon-inspired optimistic hope to shift attention from the past to the future is “not yet discernible” in South African literature (14-15). Rossouw’s *New Times* can be usefully read through Demir’s “post-apartheid melancholia” lens: Ali’s (and her colleague Servaas’s) PTSD is not merely a pathological inability to let go of past pain, but rather an existential and political demand to keep remembering both public and private trauma and not to precipitate the closure of historical violence that has not been fully dealt with.

Unhealthy experiences of mourning are indeed an explicit theme of the novel, especially in reference to Ali’s strictly religious mother Amira, who has been suffering nervous breakdowns and chronic depression since the death of her husband and the punitive visit of her own family members.<sup>5</sup> More interestingly still, Ali’s deepest conscious interrogation of what a healthy and safe mourning should be is closely interwoven with an interrogation of time. “How long before it’s enough?”, she anxiously asks Yunus, while trying to untangle the Islamic concept of *ṣabr* (or perseverance through hardship) that should

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**5** The story of Amira’s disowning on the part of her family closely resembles the one of Rossouw’s own mother. In an early interview conducted by Julie Frederikse for her book *The Unbreakable Thread: Non-Racialism in South Africa* (1990), Rossouw explained how her mother had been rejected by her Indian Muslim family for marrying a Christian Coloured man, and how she and her siblings, who had grown up in a Coloured township and had always identified as Coloureds, had kept feeling discriminated by their maternal grandmother with respect to their Indian cousins (Frederikse, Rossouw 1987).

guide a good Muslim through the pain of a beloved's death. While Yunus reflects on her mother's and her own handling of loss, Ali keeps unwillingly cutting back and forth from present and past. She is thus suddenly forced to relive the scene of her father's death endlessly welling up in her subconscious, the memories of Amira's four-month-and-ten-day self-reclusion, her feelings of permanent desertion following her mother's withdrawal into depression, and the haunting fear of Munier's likely death in a near future, when he will develop full-blown AIDS ("How long will it take after Munier's gone?", Rossouw 2017, 188). Dickens's *Hard Times*, which she has started reading in previous chapters and summons up here, seems "right for the time" (188), meaning both the moment of crisis in her family's life, and the difficult, ambiguous times of the liberated but possibly straying country.

The interconnectedness and the recursive temporality of Ali's private trauma and South Africa's collective one - here acknowledged explicitly - are the keys to Rossouw's entire novel, in which a number of forgotten stories of violence (and sometimes redemption) are finally brought back to light. The story of Bruce Africa, the 12-year-old boy who died on Ali's lap for the wounds inflicted by a police shot probably directed at her, has been haunting the protagonist for years. It is indeed, to use Freeman's phrasing, a case of melancholia that "bodies forth gendered subjects", as the boy's bleeding to death over Ali's own body on the emergency room floor had climaxed into a violent outburst of her own menstrual blood, and in the shame of having to crawl amidst a crowd and out of the hospital literally and irremediably "drenched in blood" (248). Interestingly, such traumatic episode wells up in her memory while she is going through her current (painful) period in the narrative present. It is this physical experiential continuum that seemingly prompts her to act: she decides to photocopy and hang on her wall the clip of the newspaper story she had originally written on Bruce's death and the march's violent repression for *The Democrat*. With this instinctive gesture, she thus resolves to "keep him with [her] forever" (239) and induces her mother and grandmother to finally acknowledge her experience and speak openly about it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rossouw's insistence on the persistent relevance of past events is confirmed in an interview she gave to Jennifer Malec for the *Johannesburg Review of Books*. When Malec proposed that *New Times* could be seen as an experiment in "reverse speculative fiction" and that "as you can invent futures, [this] novel shows how we invent our past", Rossouw made clear that her intention was less directed at 'inventing' memories than it was at pointing out that the past cannot be silenced: "I wanted to show that the past is still haunting our present" (Malec, Rossouw 2018). Later in the interview, she gives the example of the Cape Malays' slave ancestry, which "has been virtually banished from present-day discourse. Many white South Africans frown on black people who dwell on the past, especially when we point out that the 'civilisation' they brought to this country was built on the inhumane forced dislocation and ownership of millions of human beings" (Rossouw in Malec, Rossouw 2018).

It is precisely this private reliving of pain at home and the complicated negotiation of her feelings with her “dysfunctional family” that allow Ali to realize what a productive, healthy collective mourning of the national trauma would be:

I will no longer do to [Bruce Africa] what I so detest when it’s turned on me – pretend that nothing happened. I will take responsibility for my guilt and find the strength to carry it. No more protecting myself to the boy’s detriment. His story, like Kristof’s, deserves to be heard and remembered. (239)

In other words, it is precisely what Freeman described as an “embodied chronical subversion” that allows Ali to bring her need for accountability and awareness of her co-responsibility to light. Even the feeling of irrepressible anger that is her most evident signal of distress at private and historical wrongs is itself made flesh in and out of her body, through the many references to the supernatural but very concretely embodied character of the Iblis: an exhilarating incarnation of the jinn representing both the Devil and a positive spirit in Islamic tradition. Every time Ali is struck by bouts of painful memories or feels overwhelmed by injustice, she feels her frustration solidify into a black-bodied beast with a long tail that clenches her spine and directs her movements as an exoskeleton. Interestingly, while she is often afraid of the jinn manifesting itself, in more than one case its arrival is actually instrumental in prompting her to fight back abuses. For example, when the National Party’s local spokesman Coen Conradie keeps hindering Ali’s work on the government’s corruption (as well as her physical movement), she relies on the Iblis to disarm him.

I summon up the Iblis and bring it up to play. Coen’s nostrils flare and his eyes go wide as the dark force rises. He can’t see it but can sense the malevolent attention fixed on his flesh. He takes a step back and reverses at speed as it stretches towards him. [...] The Iblis enjoys toying with its prey, a distraction I can use to my advantage. (213)

In other words, Ali’s embodied presence as a chronically subversive subject and the ‘incarnated’ version of her feelings work in the positive terms that Freeman associated with “queer intempestivity”: they allow a “momentary reorganization” of events that can open the way to a renewed encounter with history.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Rossouw herself has hinted to issues of embodiment in reference to her writing practice. In an interview with Tiah Beutement (2016), she stated: “[w]riting literature is a vastly different experience to journalism. My daily work is often formulaic – ensuring there are five W’s and an H in every story, that the lead sentence encapsulates the entire story, that it is in reported speech and that all the parties in-

Ali's need to save events and people from oblivion is, in fact, a choice of conscious temporal misalignment articulated in terms that appear similar to those Yunus had used to explain the concept of *ṣabr*. For Yunus, *ṣabr* has to do with choosing perseverance through difficult times and with warning against the forgetfulness that often accompanies abrupt changes. Going back to the times of the Struggle and to the elation that had followed Liberation Day, it first occurs to Ali that:

[t]here must be hundreds of thousands of people who died in the struggle like leaves dropping silently off trees; trampled into the mud when democracy arrived like a spring shower and we all went to dance in its sweetness. (239)

Here, the juxtaposed references to opposite seasons - the spring of Liberation and the autumn of those who died for it - add a further layer of meaning to Rossouw's interrogation of temporal misalignments. If spring is the time of the year that stimulates vegetal growth, the melancholic image of the autumnal leaves fallen from the trees and "trampled into the mud" points to an understanding of historical change that entangles the whole society in the folds of time but is not necessarily nor entirely innocent. By reminding us of the fragility of collective memory that parallels the fragility of shunned lives, the narrator here reiterates in metaphorical terms the novel's warning against the risk of forgetfulness.

The precariousness of lives falling down like dead leaves is moreover articulated through an instance of the recurrent vegetal metaphor that Rossouw uses to convey an image of growth - a supposedly 'linear' temporal process complicated by ethical conundrums. Several times through the novel the idea of an unstoppable but potentially dangerous growth is implied in the vegetal presence of the huge fig tree growing in the Adams family's yard. This is a tree "heavy with fruit and busy with birds" (64) that has been in its current spot since Ali's grandmother first arrived in the house. And yet, its voluminous presence is now turning into a danger for the neighbourhood, as its roots have started growing in the wrong place, i.e. quite eloquently, into the public drains. The city council's warning that the tree will soon have to be removed worries the Adams family deeply. Particularly Ali's mother, the character who is most painfully unable to let go of past grief, is almost obsessively drawn to the tree: she is used to staring for hours into its "dark heart" while performing her uninterrupted prayers with her *tasbeh* in her hands.

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involved get their say. With creative writing you use a completely different *set of muscles*, you write from the heart and not from the head (which is hugely difficult, I found)" (emphasis added).

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Yet, at the end of the novel, when the dreaded council workers have finally arrived to get rid of the tree, the family discovers that its removal has freed space for more light and for the coloured bougainvillea that Ali had planted behind it. Two branches of the beloved old fig have been left in the yard to support the new, blossoming plant. As the protagonist observes the new space created by the workers' intervention, she finally finds the mental ease to make a thorough appraisal of the country's and her own present condition. She starts by fantasizing about a potential journalistic take on her split and restless self – a self that is part “sulky grown woman”, part “hot shit reporter” (310). Quickly, however, she goes on to imagine the possibility of being “a reporter with an assignment to write the story of South Africa” (310). As the contradiction between the rhetoric of the Rainbow Nation and the first signs of entrenched corruption remains to be clarified, Ali concludes that “drawing a map to guide you to the future is no guarantee of success, a wheel or two may come off along the way” (311). In other words, directly acknowledging the connection between personal and collective responsibility allows her to probe an idea of future that risks growing out of a present in which rotten roots have not been taken care of.

Ali's remark is a statement about both individual and collective life, private and public wounds. As Freeman reflected in her meditation on a time that binds, “time as body and ‘the times’, or the sphere of official politics and national history, form a joint: the body and the state are, rather than mere metaphors for one another, mutually constructing” (Freeman 2010, 15). Ali's journey from unwillingly reliving the past to making an active, physical effort to remember it seems to also illuminate a path for the country. In expanding the strand of South African novels that question the myth of a linear, ever-progressing liberation (such as Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*), *New Times* investigates the transformative potential of embodied temporal misalignments. Letting personal and public histories to be relived through individual or collective bodies thus means bringing to healthy, lasting memory the events and traumas that engendered those bodies in the first place. Disrupting the productive daily routine and the nation's celebratory narrative in order to keep remembering past losses and honouring the space they produced proves indeed a positive instance of irregular temporalities. Collective time does not need to be linear to be progressive, and revolutions (in the political as well as the astronomical understanding) should imply the productive intempestivity of a future which always honours – by consciously embodying them – the meaningful scars of the past.

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