

(Re)drawing the limits of marginality: 'Whiteness', disability and queer sexuality in Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015)

Gibson Ncube PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Foreign Languages and Literature
University of Zimbabwe
Email: ncubegibson@yahoo.fr

Asante Lucy Mtenje PhD
Postdoctoral Fellow
Department of English
Stellenbosch University
Email: asantemtenje@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Petina Gappah's debut novel, *The Book of Memory* (2015), centres on the lives of two 'white' characters in post-independent Zimbabwe: Memory, the protagonist-narrator and a woman with albinism, and Lloyd, Memory's adoptive father and a white, closeted gay man. Both characters are rendered to the margins of Zimbabwean society. This paper analyses how Memory and Lloyd are brought together by their respective forms of marginalisation. Memory is a person with albinism and her whiteness is perceived as dirty and a contagion. On the other hand, Lloyd is a white, closeted gay man in Mugabe's homophobic Zimbabwe. Making use of Ann Cvetkovich's reading of trauma and Robert McRuer's concept of 'compulsory able-bodiedness', in this paper we argue that Gappah's novel depicts a refiguring of the marginalised body as one capable of agency and existence in its own right. In the process, such refiguring destabilises race and sexuality as social constructs.

Keywords: Petina Gappah, marginality, queer, sexuality, disability



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gibson Ncube is an Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Language and Literature at the University of Zimbabwe. He is also a Research Fellow at Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study. He has published on comparative literature, gender and queer studies as well as onomastics. His latest monograph, *La sexualité queer au Maghreb à travers la littérature*, was published in 2018 by L'Harmattan.

Asante Lucy Mtenje is an African Humanities Program postdoctoral fellow in the Department of English at Stellenbosch University. Her research interests are in gender and sexuality studies, popular culture, oral literature and Afro-diasporic literature.

Although the disabled self sits uneasily with the narrow construction of the abled self in contemporary society, so too do many other members of society, who are judged against equally pernicious standards of worth associated with the fully functioning self of contemporary society (Goodley 2013: 640).

Resistance to normativity is not purely negative or reactive or destructive; it is also positive and dynamic and creative. It is by resisting the discursive and institutional practices which, in their scattered and diffuse functioning, contribute to the operation of heteronormativity that queer identities can open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms (Halperin 1997: 66).

INTRODUCTION

She is not like any other black woman. She is a 'murungudunhu', "a black woman who is imbued with the whiteness of *murungu* (white woman), and therefore of privilege", but a privilege "of *dunhu* (nothing), of ridicule and fakery, a ghastly whiteness" (Gappah 2015: 10). Memory is a woman with albinism, "the condition that makes [her] black but not black, white but not white" (Gappah 2015: 5). Her path crosses with that of Lloyd Hendricks, a white Zimbabwean man who adopts her, educates her and offers her a life she would not have had, had she remained in the dusty township of Mufakose where she was born to a poor family. Lloyd is a single man who grapples with his sexuality. A closeted homosexual, Lloyd falls in love with a young black artist called Zenzo. Memory and Lloyd fall out when Memory also falls in love with the same young man. Memory exclaims that "it was grotesque to be love rivals with someone who stood in place of my father" (Gappah 2015: 197). In a fit of anger, she anonymously reports Lloyd's clandestine sexual activities to the police since same-sex practices in Zim-

abwe are criminalised. Yet, due to lack of evidence, Lloyd is not convicted. Their relationship is never the same after that incident. Years later, Memory finds Lloyd dead from autoerotic asphyxiation¹ and, in panic, she attempts to dispose of the body. She is caught by Lloyd's sister and is wrongly convicted of murder. The novel represents Memory's fragmented recollections of her past while she languishes in Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison. Memory's recollections, at once unreliable and selective, point to the problematics of subjective memory and its interpretation of what really happened. However, it is only through her recollections that Memory realises how she and Lloyd were both marginalised and how marginalisation brought them together: "If I had been mature enough, or had sufficient imagination, or generosity of spirit, I might have seen that Lloyd was as different to those around him as I was, that the fact of our difference bound us" (Gappah 2015: 197). The narrator's insistence on difference points to the constructedness of identities. This is highlighted in the quotations by Goodley and Halperin that epigraph this paper. Societies create standards which define and decide what they consider as norms or normalcy. Any identities or bodies that fail to meet these standards or deviate from these norms are deemed abnormal and therefore deviant and undesir-

¹ Autoerotic asphyxiation (AEA) is the intentional restriction of oxygen to the brain for the purposes of sexual arousal. Daniel Cowell explains that "voluntary asphyxiation among children, preteens, and adolescents by hanging or other means of inducing hypoxia/anoxia to enhance sexual excitement is not uncommon and can lead to unintended death" (2009: 1319). Cowell concludes that "the momentary exhilaration that AEA provides often leads to a lifetime of shame, mystification, self-condemnation, self-isolation, and hopelessness that can end in suicide" (2009: 1324). This aptly captures Lloyd's situation as AEA ultimately leads to his accidental death. In addition to his homosexuality, Lloyd also has to deal with this psychosexual condition which in the end leads to his death and lands Memory in jail after she attempts to cover up this supposedly shameful secret that he had kept to himself.

able. Goodley points out that societies also construct maleficent standards of how bodies need to be used and how they should relate to other bodies. Able, and thus normal, bodies are those that are fully functional. As such, those bodies that fail to function fully are framed as disabled. Halperin on the other hand posits the potential in resisting such normativising standards. Gappah's novel presents protagonists who contest the binary system between normalcy and abnormalcy. Memory and Lloyd redefine the very nature in which identities are constructed and perceived. They do this by resisting discursive systems and paradigms that contribute to the operation of bodies and identities in a manner that is deemed normal. These are some of the issues that are discussed in Petina Gappah's debut novel aptly entitled *The Book of Memory* (2015).

An analysis of Memory and Lloyd reveals a fascinating interweaving of disability, queer and trauma studies. Mark Sherry explains that:

Both Disability Studies and Queer theory problematise the public and the private, the social and the biological, difference, stigma and deviance, and the construction of identities. Both challenge universalising norms that marginalise those who don't conform to hegemonic normalcy. And both engage with the lives of people who can experience high levels of discrimination, violence and intolerance (2004: 769).

As a result of her reflection on the past, Memory realises that she and Lloyd were both marginalised bodies: "I understand now why Lloyd adopted me. He was as different as I was and knew what it was to be different. I did not see that he lived in pain and fear" (Gappah 2015: 168). In a context where difference becomes a source of despair and ostracism, Lloyd, whose sexuality does not conform to heteronormative standards of the Zimbabwe

in Gappah's novel, empathises and identifies with the young Memory's marginalisation and the pain that comes from it. Such intersection between the disabled and the queer can be better understood through Ann Cvetkovich's reading of trauma and the "archive of feelings" that she argues is forged from "forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced" (2003: 8). Taking our cue from Cvetkovich, we further argue that the trauma that underlies Memory's narrative bears a resemblance to what Robert McRuer terms queer and crip cultures. It is our intention to show how Gappah's representation of a marginalised albino and a queer body reconfigures the marginal by means of voicing their experiences, and presenting them as capable of agency and existence in their own right.

Through the representation of marginalised bodies, Gappah's novel questions the epistemic foundations upon which compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer 2006: 1) is based. Compulsory able-bodiedness refers to a system that operates in tandem with compulsory heterosexuality. These two systems define what are deemed normal bodies. Dan Goodley explains that "the most successful heterosexual subject is one whose sexuality is not compromised by the 'disability' of being queer and the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by the 'queerness' of disability" (2013: 637). In the same vein, Paul Chappell argues that heteronormativity and able-bodiedness have played an important role in framing essentialist constructions of gender, sexuality and bodies that are deemed able (2015: 60). McRuer acknowledges that even though presently there is a visibility of queer and disabled bodies, "the flexible corporate strategies that currently undergird contemporary economics, politics, and culture invariably produce a world in which disability and queerness are subordinated or eliminated outright" (2006: 28-29). Bodies that fail to fit into the ambit of able-bodiedness are considered to be inferior to able-bodies. In Gappah's novel, the body

is important because it allows the protagonists to construct their identities. Memory and Lloyd's bodies are invested with social meanings which affect the way in which they view their social identities and also relate to other social beings.

In this paper, we initially examine the marginalisation and exclusion to which Memory is subjected due to her disability, after which we proceed to discuss Lloyd's struggle with his sexuality. In the process, we focus on how the two characters exhibit agency in the difficult contexts of marginalisation. We contend that the broaching of marginality is made possible by the interweaving of memory and trauma into the narrative process. In other words, it is through Memory's articulation of her life and that of her adopted father, Lloyd, that she unpacks the various layers of trauma, isolation and marginalisation. We will also demonstrate that Gappah's novel thereby destabilises the normative notions of race and sexuality, which emerge as social concepts that have to be perpetually (re)negotiated.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many fields of academic inquiry have tried to think through marginality. For the purposes of this paper, we will make use of crip theory² to

² The term 'crip' is derived from the word 'cripple' and it was first used in this form by Robert McRuer to refer to a form of critical cultural analysis that "has been deployed to resist the contemporary spectacle of able-bodied heteronormativity" (2006: 2). 'Crip' theory developed alongside 'queer' theory to contest the definition of certain bodies as normal and others as abnormal. Departing from the largely pejorative nuances associated with the word 'cripple', 'crip' reflects the political reclaiming of disability and challenging discourses that pathologise and medicalise the lives, bodies and sexualities of the physically challenged. Julie Williams explains that "crip theory considers disability to be a viable identity variable to be recognised, acknowledged and celebrated. Crip theory also recognises the importance of the intersectionality of one's disability identity with all other identity variables. By doing so, crip theory acknowledges the historical exclusion of diverse

probe disability and queer theory³ to interpret the marginalisation of non-normative sexuality. 'Crip' and 'queer' as analytical constructs have centred on the opposition between bodies that are deemed 'normal' and those that are considered abnormal. Although initially imbued with negative and derogatory undertones, crip and queer have been reappropriated to complicate and challenge what Erving Goffman calls the stigmaphobic ways of thinking about identities and bodies (1963). Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson explains that "both terms are initially aggressive and have been used as terms of abuse and negative epithets" (2013: 413). However, she adds that "by claiming the power of the terms themselves and appropriating them, the perspective is reversed and the stigma embraced" (2013: 413).

Crip and queer theory have thus set out to deconstruct the epistemologies that define certain bodies and identities as normal and correct whilst casting others as abnormal and incorrect. According to McRuer, crip theory has "a similar contestatory relationship to dis-

groups within the disability community (e.g. persons of color, gay, lesbian, transgender) as a consequence of internalized oppression within the disability community" (n.p).

³ We use the term 'queer' to refer to "a repertoire of positions and theoretical perspectives that attempts to challenge all normative representations of sexuality and gender. As such, it sets out to dislodge systems and structures from their comfortable niches" (Schehr 1995: xii). 'Queer' rejects the notions of stable and fixed sexuality and gender, and heterosexuality as the norm. 'Queer' as identity, on the other hand, problematises hegemonic concepts of gender, sexuality, and desire by falling outside the ambit of commonly accepted heterosexuality. Although the term was originally derogatory and pejorative, in the past twenty years it has been reclaimed and given positive connotations by non-heterosexuals to represent their empowerment. Finally, as a critical praxis in literary analysis, 'queer' goes beyond the examination of "defiantly deviant" modes of being and questions how literary texts can reveal sexuality, mainly in its marginalised forms. 'Queer' thus "examines how literary texts are informed by sexuality and ultimately seeks to consider how traditional forms of gender and sexuality are undermined by the emergence of alternative modes of being" (Ncube 2016: 148).

ability studies and identity that queer theory has to LGBT studies and identity” (2006: 35). Both these fields of inquiry fundamentally critique the notions of normalcy and normativity. Understanding such contestations of the normative is a complex endeavour which “implicates a number of physical features that include race, class, sexuality as well as femaleness, as bodily privilege has generally been associated with the liberal individualism of heterosexual, healthy and suburban white males” (Meyer 2002: 168). In the same line of reasoning, Eli Clare contends that “gender reaches into disability; disability wraps around class; class strains against abuse; abuse snarls into sexuality; sexuality folds on top of race... everything finally piling into a single human body” (1999: 123). She adds that “to write about any aspect of identity, any aspect of the body, means writing about this entire maze” (1999: 123). These insights make clear that, when one delves into an analysis of the body and its various forms of deployment and compartment, it is imperative to examine the entanglement of the above-mentioned multifarious notions.

In our use of crip and queer theory, we underscore the need to rethink marginality in all its forms in a way that ultimately questions normalcy. Such rethinking seeks to offer a better understanding of lives and bodies that are stigmatised and marginalised by the cult of heteronormativity and able-bodiedness. We highlight that:

There are ‘other’ voices that are disfigured or compromised by their relation to the power structure and the signifying system” and that “this ‘otherness’ is not at all secondary. [Such decentring] has also expounded upon the differences in form and detail that an ‘other’ discourse might have, unique to itself and as valid as the forms of the dominant discourse. (Schehr 1995: viii)

Memory’s albinism and Lloyd’s homosexual-

ity should in no way be used to ostracise and banish these characters to the margins of their societies. Our argument will show that Petina Gappah uses the trope of whiteness to bring together the two marginalised characters. The merging of the two forms of marginality becomes a pivotal critical praxis that creates spaces that allow for the articulation of overlooked and discounted bodies, identities and subjectivities.

TOO WHITE TO BE BLACK, NOT WHITE ENOUGH TO BE WHITE: THE CURSE OF ALBINISM

People with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa are a visible minority because of the way they stand out in communities which are predominantly black. This stands in opposition to Western societies, where people with albinism stand out less because of the pale-skinned population that makes the majority. Apart from such practical problems that people with albinism face, another problem that they encounter is “the stigmatisation and ostracism they face as a result of the web of myths surrounding the condition” (Baker, Lund, Nyathi and Taylor 2010: 170). The stigmatisation and marginalisation manifest themselves in various ways, including name calling such as *inkawu* (monkey in IsiZulu and IsiNdebele) and *napweri* (pigeon-peas in Chichewa). These terms reduce people with albinism to animals and objects, and divest them of their humanity.

The striking appearance of the body of the black albino has for centuries been a source of fascination and the subject of a plethora of misconceptions that manifest in stereotypes and myths which subsequently pervade popular culture (Baker 2008: 115). In her article “Writing over the illness: The Symbolic Representation of Albinism”, Charlotte Baker argues that “the Arts, film, fiction and the medium of comics are replete with albino figures that possess supernatural powers and

other qualities that serve to emphasise their abnormality; a trend that contributes to the difficulties faced by people with albinism, for it compounds the tendency of others to regard them as freaks of nature, or objects of morbid curiosity" (2008: 116). Gappah's representation of Memory as a complex human being capable of experiencing pain, love and hatred just like any other human being, reconfigures the pervasive representation of people with albinism as supernatural and freaks of nature.

The novel also registers the physical and emotional pain of being assigned the status of an outsider. Memory relates how the brutal sun blistered her albino skin, how she was mercilessly bullied by adults and children alike, and how, in order to eliminate the pain of being physically different, she wanted to crawl out of her own skin, "to disappear, to melt and only observe" (Gappah 2015: 51). Memory is born to a black couple in post-independent Zimbabwe. As a person with albinism in a black township, her pale skin makes her visible and vulnerable. The object of disdain and marginalisation, she is mocked for her whiteness which would normally make her categorically different from those who are black. Yet her whiteness is one emptied of privilege and humanity; it is an inferior and abhorred form of whiteness.

That in the township a difference in physical appearance signifies a defect, a deviation from the norm and is therefore a subject to ridicule is evident in how Sekuru Jonas treats Memory when he meets her in the street. Memory relates how

In a township, everything odd, particularly oddities of appearance, is remarked on. But in my case, even the people who looked odd, like Sekuru Jonas, who limped on his left leg and lived across the street and made man-yatera sandals at Siyaso, spat whenever he saw me. (Gappah 2015: 52)

Sekuru Jonas's behaviour exemplifies what

Tobin Siebers calls the ideology of ability. At its simplest, the ideology of ability refers to "the preference for able-bodiedness" (Siebers 2008: 8). At its most radical, on the other hand, it "defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons" (Siebers 2008: 8). Furthermore, in her explanation of the relationship between disability and what is perceived as the norm, Fiona Campbell asserts that ableism is composed of a system and web of dogmas and practices which produce a certain kind of standard self and corporeal representation which is portrayed as flawless (2009: 5). In Gappah's novel, this ideology of ability is reflected in discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards people considered to be disabled. Memory's physical difference makes her an odd phenomenon in the township. Sekuru Jonas, who ironically is also disabled and therefore perceived as oddity, even spits whenever he sees Memory and thus commits an (un)conscious but culturally inflected act usually performed when one sees something disgusting. In that way, Sekuru Jonas metaphorically inscribes notions of dirt, filth and contamination on Memory's body. Sekuru Jonas' spitting is also a counter response that arises out of the need to avoid getting contaminated by Memory's condition, which some people believe happens when one comes across a person with albinism (Baker, Lund, Nyathi and Taylor 2010: 174). Just like Memory, Sekuru Jonas is outside the norms of able-bodiedness. Yet, according to mythical understandings of certain disabilities, the difference between the two lies in the fact that Sekuru Jonas' disability could not be transferred to others in the way that Memory's condition could.

The supposed defect in Memory's skin means that she cannot be entirely black in spite of the fact she is born to a black family. At the same time, she cannot identify with white people either because her physical features are not Caucasian. This leaves Memory in a liminal space between blackness and whiteness.

Paradoxically, she is too white to be black and not white enough to be white.

I spent much of my life trying to be invisible. But I was never truly invisible. Even in London, or Sydney, where I should have blended in with everyone, the world's gaze came with a double take. On the surface, my skin looked like everyone else's, but seen closer, my features are very obviously not Caucasian. I could feel the puzzlement on the face as the mind tried to work out what was different. (Gappah 2015: 51)

Although Memory tries to escape the gaze of the world by trying to be obscure, she is not always successful because her different skin colour in a predominantly black community makes her stand out. Similarly, when she is among white people in Europe, she is unable to pass for white because of her physiognomy that subjects her to further objectification. This confirms Baker's observation that "just as albino skin is open to damage from the sun, it becomes vulnerable to the gaze of others and therefore the albino individual is rendered open to their judgment and to imposition of identity from without" (2008: 117).

The colour of the skin plays an important role in the way Memory perceives herself in relation to others and what she defines as beautiful. Even though she is very conspicuous, she considers herself to be invisible as many people around her fail to see her beyond her skin. Dan Goodley posits in this regard that "disabled bodies risk becoming dis-embodied because of constructions around them that threaten to create a total invisibility of the disabled individual" (2013: 635). It is apparent that Memory conflates being invisible due to albinism with being disregarded. She is evidently not invisible, be it in Zimbabwe or overseas. However, because of her skin colour, people choose not to give her the attention that she desires. Memory explains that, in addi-

tion to being virtually invisible, her skin also compels her to view herself as ugly compared to her sister and mother whose light skin, in Memory's view, epitomise real beauty:

My mother had a smooth, light caramel complexion that was almost the same colour as her feet. Joyi looked like her, but it seemed to me that, in me, my mother's skin had lightened to the point of disappearance. The lightness of skin that made my mother and my sister beautiful had been bleached to the point of distortion in me. (Gappah 2015: 56)

Living in post-colonial Zimbabwe, Memory internalises colourism, i.e. skin colour stratification which is usually governed by a hierarchy. In that respect, colourism is similar to racism, which "prizes light skin over dark skin, and European facial features and body shapes over African features and body shapes" (Harris 2008: 54). She equates her mother's and sister's light skin with beauty since, in her mind, it is the lightness of one's skin that makes one beautiful. Thus in Memory's view, her disability renders her inferior to the desired pigmented skin of the other family members.

Not any less importantly, the metaphor of bleaching to which Memory turns to describe her body offers further proof in support of our argument about the interconnectedness of "abnormal whiteness" and (lack of) beauty. Bleaching as invoked by Memory highlights the whiteness of her skin, a tone which is whiter than the preferred lightness of her family members. Moreover, if we bear in mind that bleach is not only a whitening agent but also a cleaning agent, we understand that the version of whiteness embodied by Memory's mother and sister is the type of whiteness that is associated with cleanliness. Yet in Memory's body this whiteness appears to be in excess, which turns her body into a defect one.

Therefore, bleaching at once reveals Memory's self-perception as somebody who is

contaminated by the condition of albinism and her desire to be made clean from that condition. Here, the condition of albinism is associated with being stained and by extension being ugly. The act of cleaning is also imagined by Memory to be directly related to the concept of beauty vis-à-vis lightness/whiteness since the trace of lightness in one's skin denotes the absence of blackness which is itself considered a sign of ugliness. Memory's self-perception is inflected by societal conventions of what is considered beautiful and normal. In most underprivileged societies where illiteracy is rife, like the township of Gappah's novel, conditions such as Memory's albinism are interpreted by means of superstitious modes of thinking and knowledge. Because the condition of albinism is not easily understood, the plausible explanation is that a person with the condition is cursed and/or is paying for the sins committed by their parents. Memory internalises this belief. She laments that hers "was not an illness, but a curse" (Gappah 2015: 102). By its very nature, a curse is intended to invoke a supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment on someone. Memory interprets her condition as a curse and not an illness because of the implications of having that condition which to her appears as punishment and a cause of psychological harm to her psyche. For example, apart from the feeling of alienation and the constant ridicule she faces from her peers, Memory always has to wear a hat in the sun to protect her skin from blistering. This means that she cannot stay out in the sun and play like her peers. Furthermore, hers is not an illness but a curse because illness implies that the affliction will normally be treated within a specific amount of time. But for Memory, her condition is one that she can never recover from. The curse is literally permanently inscribed on her body. This description of her disability as a curse attests to what Goodley describes as the "medicalised and psychologised hegemonies of disability that sited disability as a personal tragedy, biological deficiency and psychical trauma" (2013: 634). Memory's feeling of

exclusion further causes self-loathing which is intensified by her mother's neglect and her father's lavishing immoderate levels of sympathy. Memory explains how she would have accepted to assume any other form of disability if it meant she could have some melanin in her skin: "I would have taken Whizi's eyes, and Lavinia's limp, and added to it Nhau's scar and Drunken's speech, only to have some colour in my skin" (Gappah 2015: 56). Compared to her "curse" all these other "oddities" are much better off for her condition presents her with many inhibitions that affect her when she tries to live a life similar to others.

There is an intersection of class, race and identity when Memory is adopted by Lloyd. Lloyd's financial resources allow Memory to take better care of her skin and lead a better quality of life. Memory concludes:

I assumed a new identity. It helped that money also bought me good skin, courtesy of a dermatologist. [...] More than anything else, I felt an incredible sense of freedom: not from want but from scrutiny. I had not yet found home, but I found a place where I could belong. (Gappah 2015: 168)

Memory benefits from the privilege that is accorded to Lloyd as a white man in Zimbabwe. Due to uneven distribution of land and other resources in the colonial era, white Zimbabweans remained affluent, privileged and largely successful in economic terms even after the attainment of independence (Pilossof 2017: 95). Gappah's novel invokes this stark reality when Memory is adopted by Lloyd, a university academic who, together with his family and white friends, enjoys a luxurious life and is almost oblivious of the economic hardships caused by Mugabe's despotic regime. When Memory contrasts her life in Mufakose with the privileged life in the predominantly white suburbs, she poignantly observes that "we were poor without knowing it. We accepted the simple order of our lives in the ignorance

that richer lives were possible" (Gappah 2015: 168). Removed from a life of poverty and superstitious beliefs, Memory begins to live free from the world's discriminating gaze. In a way, she becomes "white" owing to Lloyd's money and her vicinity to white people during summer parties and at school. The new, clean white skin offers her a sense of belonging by allowing Memory to transcend not just her blackness but also the squalor that her blackness has hitherto meant in her life.

Thanks to Lloyd's generosity, Memory learns to accept herself as she is and not perceive herself as cursed, unlovable, unwanted or passive. In fact, the colour of Memory's skin is directly related to the way she perceives herself. Although her skin colour does not change, the quality of her skin, improved with the help of a dermatologist, leads Memory to develop a new self-perception and a new way of relating to others. In this particular environment where whiteness is prevalent, Memory is able to blend in especially with the improved quality of her skin unlike in her township where she was conspicuous because of having a white skin in a predominantly black community. Because she is able to achieve some kind of normalcy and therefore begins to feel like she belongs somewhere, she no longer feels invisible. She begins to see herself as a desiring and desirable woman. Her invisibility is especially effaced when Zenzo, a young artist from Bulawayo notices her and starts courting her. Because she is desired and desirable, her self-perception with regard to beauty, which is linked to ideas about normalcy, changes to a more positive one. She falls madly in love with Zenzo and they begin a romantic affair. Contrary to the myth that depicts disabled people as asexual, unable to sustain sexual relationships, childlike and in need of protection (Sait et al. 2009: 192), Gappah portrays Memory as a woman with sexual agency as she enjoys a sexual relationship with Zenzo which she later breaks off after she discovers Zenzo's betrayal. Here, the narrative disrupts normative assumptions about sexuality, sexu-

al pleasure and able-bodiedness. As McRuer and Anna Mollow note, "the sexuality of disabled people is typically depicted in terms of either tragic deficiency or freakish excess. Pity or fear, in other words, are the sensations most often associated with disabilities; more pleasurable sexual sensations are generally dissociated from disabled bodies and lives" (2012:1). Gappah's novel is therefore an attempt to reconfigure the common assumptions that associate perverted sexuality with disability by presenting romantic relationship that resembles any other "normal" heterosexual relationship.

QUEER MARGINALITY

Petina Gappah uses different shades of whiteness to link the lives of Lloyd and Memory. Before analysing Lloyd's sexuality in depth, it is important to briefly reflect on how non-normative sexuality is perceived in Zimbabwe. Homosexuality and all other non-normative sexualities are illegal in Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe, the former President of the country, on numerous occasions labelled lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals as worse than dogs and pigs (Philips 1997: 43). Gibson Ncube argues that "notwithstanding the numerous historical and anthropological studies that have shown that homosexuality existed before the arrival of Europeans, certain Afro-radical nationalists continue to assert that it is a foreign import" (2014: 481). Non-normative sexualities are thus framed as a "white man's disease" (Hoad 2007: 68). In the context in which non-normative sexualities are not only criminalised but also vilified, LGBT individuals are compelled to either live their sexualities in the closet or to deny them altogether.

The homophobia that non-normative sexualities are subjected to is alluded to by Memory in the novel when she states that:

I finally began to think about Lloyd's

life, about Tracey Collins, the woman in the photograph with the Farrah Fawcett hair and thin glasses, the woman who served as a protection to blind the world to what he was. I thought about what it meant to live in a country where you could never share such an essential part of yourself (Gappah 2015: 196).

In a context where non-normative sexuality is pathologised and criminalised, Lloyd has to mask his sexuality by passing as a heterosexual in order to protect himself from scrutiny and vilification from the world. The photograph of an old girlfriend who passed away some time back offers the perfect opportunity to divert any attention to his sexual orientation. The fact that Tracey is long dead and therefore cannot challenge Lloyd's performance as a heterosexual man further protects Lloyd's secret and accords him the space to mediate his sexuality by allowing him to freely be himself even though, paradoxically, he has to present himself as heterosexual. The fixed photograph of the woman, thus, sustains the illusion of an unquestionably heteronormative partnership that presumably characterises Lloyd's sexual identity.

A love triangle involving Lloyd, Zenzo and Memory leads to Lloyd's demise. Zenzo is a young artist who is either bisexual or engaging in same-sex activities for financial gain. When Memory catches Lloyd in flagrante delicto with Zenzo, she feels betrayed by both men, but especially by Lloyd: "I saw him as someone who had taken away everyone that I had loved. I forgot the privations of my earlier life; I disregarded everything he had ever given me. I saw only the wrong that he had done me. He had taken the one person who made me happy" (Gappah 2015: 197). In a fit of rage, she anonymously reports Lloyd's affair to the police. This outing of Lloyd's sexuality can be described with the help of Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire, in which Girard explains that humans have an inclina-

tion to imitate one another, wittingly or unwittingly. Girard posits that humans come to learn how and what to desire by miming the desires of others (1976: 7). In the case of *The Book of Memory*, Memory unconsciously models her desire to that of Lloyd when she falls in love with a man she considered a close friend of her adopted father. Upon discovering that Lloyd and Zenzo are lovers, she views the former as a rival: "It was grotesque to be rivals with someone who stood in the place of my father" (Gappah 2015: 197). In her mind, the rivalry is grotesque not only because it goes against the boundaries of rival normalcy in terms of age and familial link but more especially in terms of Lloyd's gender and his object of desire that corresponds with hers. Her love for Lloyd is radically transformed into hatred and she laments: "I hated Lloyd. He repulsed me. I felt contaminated by him. I could not make the imaginative leap that would have made me see how trapped he was, that could have made me see the lie he was constantly forced to live" (Gappah 2015: 196). Reminiscent of Tendai Huchu's character Vimbai in *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010) and her reaction when she discovers that Dumisani, her friend and love interest is gay, Memory's reaction exemplifies how deeply ingrained the socialization of homophobia is and how it blinds even those closest to queer persons from perceiving them beyond their sexuality. Memory is unable to identify with Lloyd's outsider status and she uses the term 'contaminated', the same adjective that had been used to describe her condition, to describe how she feels towards Lloyd. The given verb frames Lloyd's sexuality as sickness, pervasion and revolting abnormality.

Lloyd's grappling with his sexuality is linked to the way in which Memory handles his unusual death. Lloyd negotiates his sexuality from the margins of the homophobic and heteronormative society in which he lives. The fact that Memory refuses to openly acknowledge him as a gay man relegates Lloyd "to the margins of society and to the realm of the unspeakable and unutterable" (Ncube 2015: 42).

Lloyd's marginalisation finds its ultimate expression in his death. He is found by Memory having suffocated himself whilst watching a pornographic film: "When I found him, I did not understand immediately what I was looking at. The naked body, dressed only in yellow socks, the plastic bag around his face – but it made no sense to me then" (Gappah 2015: 225). Lloyd literally dies in the closet as he performs and fulfils his queer desires by engaging in autoerotic asphyxiation. What is particularly interesting in this scene is the way in which Memory is compelled to dignify, so to speak, the way in which Lloyd has died. This scene shows the power of normativity on bodies, even those that are dead. Normativity ensures that bodies present themselves in ways which do not destabilise what is deemed their correct deployment and performativity. When Memory finds him in the given state, she understands the kind of fears with which her adopted father was grappling in his life:

If I had been mature enough I could have seen how lonely he was, how terrifying it was to live in a country that did not accept you. Not even Lloyd's whiteness could have saved him from the stigma of homosexuality because it is a stigma that cuts across race and tribe and religion and class and sex and political beliefs and all the artificial divisions this country has erected to keep people apart (Gappah 2015: 197).

Only after his death does Memory identify with Lloyd's loneliness which results from being marginalised because of being different. Like Memory who is "abnormal" because of her apparent skin difference and therefore devalued in her own community, Lloyd also exists at the margins of society because of his sexuality which deviates from what society considers as the norm. Like Memory, Lloyd feels alienated from his own community. Since he is denied the pleasure of being intimate with a partner he desires, he is secretly

forced to find solace and pleasure in other forms of sexual pleasure which do not involve human contact. This way, he is safe from rejection and neither can he be "outed" since he performs his queer sexuality in complete privacy without the judgemental gaze of others. Memory further points out that Lloyd's whiteness which normally accords him privilege in postcolonial Zimbabwe cannot exempt him from the stigma of homosexuality which is pathologised by the state, religious and cultural bodies; institutional practices "that constitute part of the norm-generating apparatuses that govern what Michel Foucault has conceptualised as 'regimes of truth' in the shaping and controlling of sexualities" (Mtenje 2016: 99). Memory also reflects on the kinds of questions that people could pose if they found a deceased body in the state in which Lloyd's is: "I did not want anyone, even strangers, to see him like that, or for his death to be a lurid headline in a newspaper, or the subject of titillating speculation on the news websites" (Gappah 2015: 226). To safeguard Lloyd's honour, Memory gives him an honourable death by shooting his lifeless body to give the impression that he was murdered. In this scene, Memory modifies Lloyd's 'disobedient' body by shooting his lifeless body. Death by murder, unlike death through autoerotic asphyxiation, does not challenge the long held ideas of how the body should stage its materiality.

Notwithstanding his marginalisation, Lloyd exhibits agency that allows him to fully embrace his queer identity. Although the clandestine activities that he has with different men may be read as a way of reinforcing his marginalisation, the closet can be viewed as an agentive space. Judith Butler calls the closet a "site of proliferative resignifications" (1993: 89) and, as such, the closet allows LGBT individuals to protect themselves from the "distorting stereotypes, [...] insulting scrutiny, [...] simple insult, [...] forcible interpretation of their bodily product" (Sedgwick 1990: 68). Even in such a constraining context, Lloyd has some agency left that enables him to redefine

to some extent normative gender and sexual identities. Such an agentic reappropriation of the closet allows for the marginalised body to resist the control imposed by the power structures in place. Despite the restrictions imposed on bodies and sexualities, there are still spaces that give individuals like Lloyd a possibility to live out their desires, however clandestinely. The character of Lloyd uses marginality to show that it is possible to lead a life in which he can fully perform his sexual identity. Even though he fails to come out of the closet, he is able to transform the marginal space of the closet into a generative space in which he constructs and lives out his difference.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have shown how Petina Gappah portrays the generative potential of marginality through the characters of Memory and Lloyd. Both characters find solace in each other's company until Lloyd's marginal sexuality brings them apart. Through the trope of whiteness, Gappah manages to weave two stories of marginalised lives and bodies. *The Book of Memory* reveals and challenges racial, identity and sexual biases and stereotypes. We have argued that in spite of the marginalisation that the protagonists face, they are able to find agency that brings them some form of empowerment. Through her skilful handling of marginality, Gappah captures the complexities of living in a post-independent Zimbabwe that is fraught with the issues related to race, gender and sexuality. Through the marginalised characters of Memory and Lloyd, Gappah's novel shows that able-bodiedness is a social construct which derives its authority through a binary framing of what bodies are and what they

are able to achieve. In the case of Memory, for example, she shows that her identity cannot be reduced to her skin condition only. She is in fact more than her albinism.

Memory understands that the marginality that she suffers as a person with albinism is in many respects comparable to Lloyd's marginalisation as a white gay man. What is interesting is that Memory becomes aware of Lloyd's suffering as a closeted gay man only at the moment of his death. She points out that "Lloyd was as different to those around him as I was, that the fact of our difference bound us" (Gappah 2015: 197). Such recognition of their diverse forms of difference allows Memory to realise that Lloyd adopted her because they were both different in their own ways. Although Memory and Lloyd suffer from different forms of marginalisation, the main difference is that Memory's marginalisation is based on what is more apparent than is the case for Lloyd. Memory's skin is the very first thing that people see about her. As for Lloyd, his sexual orientation is something that is more discreet and not easily discernible. Memory, as we have previously shown, struggles with her identity owing to her skin condition. Because of her marked body, she does not neatly fit into the black spaces of the township or the affluent white spaces he is introduced to following her adoption by Lloyd. As for Lloyd, he leads a closeted life and completely hides his sexual orientation from others. In spite of these differences, Memory and Lloyd's handling of their marginalisation can be read as a form of intervention in the essentialist notions of gender, sexuality and ability. Memory and Lloyd, in their different ways, complicate the monolithic conceptions of what it means to be able-bodied in social contexts where the norm revolves around blackness and heterosexuality.

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