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Narrative Form and Palimpsestic Memory in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*

Abstract I: L'articolo esplora il romanzo di esordio di Namwali Serpell, *The Old Drift* (2019), attraverso la lente della 'memoria del palinsesto', individuando l'interconnessione tra memoria e migrazione. In primo luogo, si analizza il rapporto dialettico tra tempo eonico e alcuni elementi paratestuali che, nel tentativo di stabilire ordine e guidare il lettore, sembrano imitare ed evocare la stessa trama intricata del palinsesto. Quindi, si discute l'oscillazione tra narrazione extradiegetica e intradiegetica e l'uso del modello del romanzo multi-generazionale, mettendone in luce il carattere palinsestico in cui varie generazioni e storie diverse si intersecano, generando una spirale che rifrange le traiettorie multiple e invisibili del tempo.

Abstract II: This essay explores Namwali Serpell's debut novel *The Old Drift* (2019) through the lens of 'palimpsestic memory', contending that the novel articulates an interconnectedness between memory and migration. Firstly, I will investigate how the tension between aeonic temporality and some paratextual elements that attempt to install order and direct the reader's orientation mimic and resonate with the intricate motif of the palimpsest. Then, I will illustrate how the alternation between extradiegetic and intradiegetic narration and the format of the multigenerational novel contribute to create a palimpsestic tale where several generations and different stories are inextricably intertwined, generating a spiral pattern where the multiple and invisible trajectories of temporality are refracted and eventually converge.

Keywords: palimpsestic memory, migration, narrative form, postcolonial fiction, allegory.

With the publication of *The Old Drift* (2019), Zambian-American novelist Namwali Serpell (born in 1980) immediately aroused some critical attention. Her first short-story, "The Sack", won the prestigious Caine Prize for African Writing in 2015, for being "formally innovative, stylistically stunning, haunting and enigmatic in its effects" (n.p.), as remarked by Zoë Wicomb, Chair of the prize committee. In a similar vein, her debut novel displays energy and originality. Reviewing Serpell's *opera prima* in *The New York Times*, Salman Rushdie has praised the author's powerful contribution to the emergence of African women's writing, describing the novel as "an impressive book, ranging skilfully between historical and science fiction, shifting gears between political argument, psychological realism and rich fabulism" (n.p.).

As Rushdie's comment illustrates, the strength of *The Old Drift* lies in the kaleidoscopic variety of its narrative forms, refusing categorisation and thus blurring the borders among various literary genres, from epical myth to magic realism. In this respect, the novel engages with questions of memory and migration, specifically as it comes to grips with the physical and mental displacement of three families – one black, one white and one interracial – recounted mainly from the viewpoint of women. A multi-generational tale, *The Old Drift* tracks the dislocations of the three families between Europe (England and Italy) and South-East Africa (Zambia), spanning continents, generations and historical frictions. Yet, what appears at first sight to be a novel of colonial exploration soon turns out to be mainly a story of psychological exploration. The narrative is structured into three sequences: each section focuses on a single member from the three families and it zooms in on the same generation, while flashbacks recount events related to the families' ancestors. These multifocal chapters are only apparently the schematic articulation of a much more complex tale, since they are interspersed with italicised sections narrated by a choral "we", which presumably comes through the voice of a swarm of mosquitoes, thus lending a dramatic and lyrical quality to the story.

As the title indicates, *The Old Drift* is about an old ford over the Zambezi River that can be said to witness the painful passage of Zambia into nationhood against a background of struggles and displacements. A few miles away from the Victoria Falls, the crossing place becomes the settlement of colonial explorers working on the building of the Kariba Dam, a construction symbolically embodying the birth of a nation. One of the drifters, the English traveller Percy M. Clark, befriends an Italian hotelier, Pietro Gavuzzi, and comes into conflict with a local boy, N'gulube. These men are the forefathers of the three families in the novel. It is 1904 and the first chapter, narrated in the first person by Clark himself, provides the backbone of a polyphonic novel: from stories of loss and hope to meditations on the passage of time, the following generations of each family gradually converge. Following nine members of the families – Agnes, Thandiwe and Joseph for the family descending from Clark; Matha, Sylvia and Jacob, who belong to N'gulube's family; and Sibilla, Isabella and Naila, the descendants of the Italian Gavuzzis – *The Old Drift* spans more than one hundred years, recounting the transition from colonial Zambia towards a close imagined future, while connecting memory frictions with stories of migration.

In this essay, I seek to investigate the interplay between memory and migration in Serpell's novel and to this end I draw on Max Silverman's formulation of "palimpsestic memory" (2013), a conceptual configuration that captures the connections across time and space, insomuch as it privileges the use of multiperspectivity and multifocalisation, thus blurring spatial and temporal boundaries. Silverman's approach which is indebted to Michael Rothberg's model of "multidirectional memory" (2009), sees the palimpsest as a motif which well captures "the superposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialisation of time central to the work of memory" (Silverman 2013: 4). Silverman's notion of the palimpsest shares Rothberg's conceptualisation of "multidirectional memory" understood as an "open-ended assemblage" (Rothberg 2009: 528). Interestingly, the palimpsest mixes different ethnic, political and racial realities across history and geography while connecting "disparate elements through a play of similarity

and difference" (Silverman 2013: 4). In *The Old Drift*, Serpell explores the history of Zambia, intersecting collective and individual memories through a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. The novel then brings together colonialism and migration showing how the present is haunted by a past which is not immediately visible.

In the literary context, the term palimpsest is used to denote a document bearing visible signs of earlier traces, thereby describing narrative conflation of temporal layers, as in Hilda Doolittle's seminal novel *Palimpsest* (1926) where various historical periods are interconnected largely through the use of stream-of-consciousness. Unlike H. D.'s novel, however, *The Old Drift* resorts to the discursive construction of the palimpsest as a way to address the distinct nature of diasporic memory. In this respect, palimpsestic memory, as Silverman argues, serves as a vehicle of interconnection that transcends the mononational dimension by perceiving "history in a nonlinear way and memory as a hybrid and dynamic process across individuals and communities" (4). Serpell herself emphasises her aesthetic preoccupation with temporal conflation in an interview to the science fiction online journal *Big Echo*, where she acknowledges her attempt "to synthesize the very, very old with the very, very new" (n. p.). In so doing, the novel does seek to illuminate a specific experience of human migration by means of a palimpsestic overarching frame. The hybrid format of *The Old Drift*, with the fusion of historical realism, science-fiction, ecocriticism, magical realism and Afrofuturism[1], and the incorporation of Bantu words, brings the multi-layered structure of the narrative to the fore, through a generic flexibility that may be said to reproduce a multi-perspectival memory model. On the one hand, *The Old Drift* can be seen to draw on the literary legacy of the African historical novel, that "received a tremendous injection of energy from the historical phenomenon of decolonisation, which infused the novel with a sense of historical agency and a desire to contribute to the construction of viable postcolonial cultural identities for the new African nations" (Booker 2009: 141). From this perspective, the massive historical scale of the novel combines questions of politics, race, class and gender and it highlights the crucial role of the past in shaping Zambian cultural identity. On the other hand, elements of magic realism, such as the mosquitoes that take turns narrating the story with the main characters, contribute to materialise "an alternative universe in which fantastical elements are placed side by side with the real in a process of establishing equivalence between them" (Quayson 2009: 160). In terms of genre, as Stephen Slemon has remarked, postcolonialism and magic realism overlap because they remain "locked in a continuous dialectic with the 'other', a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences" (Slemon 1988: 11). Likewise, in Serpell's novel, this dialogism between postcolonial discourse and magic realism is manifested in the collision between memory and dreams, fragments of colonial irruption and the recuperation of myth-like elements which seek to retrieve what Slemon calls the "lost voices" (Slemon 1988: 16) of the past.

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[1] In "Black to the Future" Mark Dery introduces the term "Afrofuturism", describing it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 1994: 180).

In the following pages, I will demonstrate how Serpell's use of the multi-generational format is a clear manifestation of the migrants' attempts at embedding cultural, spatial, temporal and linguistic divergences, as in a palimpsest. In order to show that *The Old Drift* shares Silverman's model of palimpsestic memory, I will focus on how repetitions and echoes of the past tend to construct meaning, interlacing the memories of the various migrants that populate the novel. As the story unfolds, chronicling the lives of the following generations, it also shows the ever-changing geo-political boundaries of the world, establishing connections between the private lives of the characters and major historical events. Furthermore, as this essay illustrates, a certain generic instability, shuttling from realistic fiction to autobiographic memoires, and the combination of various historical threads, contribute to create a palimpsestic tale where several generations and different stories are inextricably intertwined. In short, from Percy M. Clark's real exploration of the area around the Victoria Falls in 1904 to the AIDS epidemic of the 1990s, from the collapse of the Italian Fascist regime in the mid-1940s to Zambia's struggle for independence in 1964 and its Afrofuturistic aerospace programme, the novel employs the multi-layered form of the palimpsest, highlighting the complex functioning of memory as an entanglement of invisible and parallel trajectories. Surprisingly, not only does *The Old Drift* explore the thread between memory and migration; it also opens up to the near future, by foreshadowing the revolutionary effects of technological progress and its significant impact on social life and on the human body.

The Palimpsest, the Paratext, and Temporal Disarray
From the very initial pages, the reader of *The Old Drift* is confronted with a schematic paratext which attempts to give order and shape. A family tree is provided in order to guide the reader through the intermingling of the narratorial voices. Also, the "Contents" section achieves a similar ordering function insomuch as it articulates the discourse-level of the novel, allowing the reader to visualise its multifocal narrative frame. *The Old Drift* is structured into three sections – "The Grandmothers" (Sibilla, Agnes, Matha), "The Mothers" (Sylvia, Isabella, Thandiwe), and "The Children" (Joseph, Jacob, Naila) – each divided, in their turn, into three chapters, entitled after the names of the nine characters. Thus, despite its patriarchal foundation, the novel's overarching organisation is quite matriarchal. Furthermore, these nine chapters are inscribed into a narrative frame where two other chapters, "The Falls" and "The Dam", respectively open and close the novel, acting as a prologue and an epilogue. As already alluded to before, "The Falls" is a sort of travel journal, narrated in the first person by Percy M. Clark, while "The Dam" is told in the third person by an external narrator[2]. Finally, each chapter is anticipated and followed by the short italicized chapters narrated by mosquitoes. These *"[t]hin troubadours, the bare ruinous choir, a chorus of gossipy mites"* (Serpell 2019b: 19) allegedly weave a "*worldly willy web*" (19), attempting to install a sequence of "*cause and effect*" (19) into a spiral-like story. By juxtaposing the onomatopoeic

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[2] In the "Acknowledgements", Serpell makes clear reference to Percy M. Clark's work, *The Autobiography of an Old Drifter* (1936), claiming that she has not tried to amend or replace his prejudicial language in the chapter, "all racism his" (Serpell 2019b: 564).

buzzes of the insects, testimonial accounts of the explorations of the environment and metanarrative incursions, these italicised chapters allegorically exemplify Serpell's fusion of historical chronicle and magical realism. While the genealogical tree entails memory, origin and a vertical proliferation of connections, Serpell's interruption of the linear structure of genealogy by means of horizontal lines can be said to exceed the boundaries of each family and eventually link the last generation of the three families. This is shown in the final interrelation among Joseph, Jacob and Naila, whose friendship, by the end of the novel, leads to the birth of a boy in 2024. Though no information is revealed in the novel about this mysterious birth, readers can find the unnamed child, called "a boy", in the family tree. The boy's birth thus represents the symbolic unifying point of connection of the three characters and, consequently, of the three families.

However, such a unifying role embodied by the mosquitoes' chorus and by the paratextual components of the novel is soon undermined by the epigraph, where an extract from Seamus Heaney's translation of Virgil's Book VI of *The Aeneid* (2016) is quoted. By paying homage to the Irish poet's last work, Serpell indirectly foregrounds the epic scale of her novel in a similar vein to Virgil's poem on the founding myth of ancient Rome. Interestingly, the epigraph features the Trojan hero while crossing the Lethe River, in search of the soul of his father Anchises. Before a "hovering multitude" (epigraph), Aeneas contemplates the river drifting "somnolently" and is bewildered by the flowing of water and people, inquiring about the identity of these souls. Aeneas is in the underworld and the Lethe is a metaphor for death: the river symbolises oblivion owing to its beneficial power of purifying the memory of the past, thus installing forgetfulness in those who drink from its waters. This disruptive force of the river symbolically embodies the unpredictable and unstable mechanisms of memory, its openness to change and revision, as in Silverman's model of the palimpsest. Recalling Walter Benjamin's idea of the "constellation"[3], which embodies the overlap between time and space, Silverman sees the palimpsest as a space that "creates correspondences between different elements so that the 'oppositions' between the fragment and the totality, past and present, here and elsewhere, and movement and stasis are not in fact oppositions but in permanent tension" (Silverman 26). The constellation forms an image where the fragments of memory not only entail a temporal dimension; rather, they acquire a figurative aspect or, in Benjamin's words, a *bildlich* nature that "bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded" (Benjamin 1999: 426). This figurative staging of memory is illustrated, for instance, in the episode when Percy M. Clark, at the very beginning of the novel, compares the Zambezi River to the Lethe. In the African river, "one plumb forgets the millstone the question of money ties around the neck in Merrie Old England" (Serpell 2019b: 15). Behind this juxtaposition lies the awareness that the African landscape has deeply changed Clark, specifically in respect of money. Clark's

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[3] As Silverman himself claims, his model of the palimpsest is reminiscent of Benjamin's idea of memory as "constellation", entailing an "overlapping of spatio-temporal sites in which personal and collective memory and the conscious and the unconscious collide" (26). Benjamin understands the relationship between past and present as a dialectic overlay that "comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (Benjamin 1999: 426).

dependence on money in his native country signals the capitalist logic that lies at the heart of imperialism. And yet, his adventures as a pioneer in the Zambian veld, in contact with a world where "fortune flipped lives as the storm flips the leaves" (9), leads Clark to a change of attitude towards money, indicating how colonialism may be a tricky business. Allegorically, in the same way as the Lethe induces drowsiness and oblivion, so the Zambezi brings about change, disclosing the transformative power of colonialism. Furthermore, the Zambezi river recalls the Lethe owing to their common symbolism of death: close to the African river, a cemetery remembers the corpses of the migrants who had moved to present-day Zambia for the construction of the Kariba Dam. The old drift of the Zambezi is then a "memory place" and its earth retains the traces of human history, acting as a figurative construction where various layers of time and space are intertwined.

With its peculiarly disjointed temporality, palimpsestic memory stretches the boundaries of time, allowing for a patterning of past and present where the latter reveals traces of the first. This temporal disarray is reflected in the narrative structure of *The Old Drift*. Whereas the chapters narrated by the nine characters chronicle the major events of their families diachronically, the choral "we" addresses the reader by using the present simple, commenting on the stories of the single characters and giving voice to the Zambian wild natural environment: "*we are Nature's great superfluity.* […] *We pollinate little and feed very few, no predator needs us to live.* […] *We are an asterisk to Nature, a flaw, a digression, a footnote if ever there was one*" (431). This is how the chorus talks to an anonymous "you", by bridging the gap between individual stories and their atemporal essence. The use of the present tense evokes the spectral presence of the past whose chronological frontiers continue to emerge in the present. It should be noted that the uncanny voice of the mosquitoes materialises this resurrection of the past through fragments: the effect the chorus produces is one of immediacy that refuses the idea of the past as a "closed" moment, envisioning it, instead, as open and in transition. These voices, similar to "*Russian dolls of metamorphosis, each phase of us [them] hatched from the previous*" (261), thematise, for example, the metamorphic nature of human life, from one generation to the other. Also, they epitomise the very palimpsestic format of the novel, its generative capacity of constructing narratives, mimicking the insects' evolution from "*egg to larva, the comma-shaped pupa, then the winged and wobbly imago*" (261). The delicate and complex process of development of the mosquitoes echoes the generational transformations that affect the three families, while also illustrating the multi-layered structure of the novel.

The novel juxtaposes linear and circular time, a combination that lends a magic realist quality to the narrative. As a multi-generational novel, it follows a chronological structure with a progression from the birth to the maturity of the various family members, as well as the transition from colonialism towards independence in Zambia. However, this linear flow of time is continuously interspersed with forms of circular and eternal time, typical of legends and fairy tales. While each chapter is indicated with a precise year and bears references to certain historical events – the Italian Partisan resistance in Sibilla's chapter, Zambian Independence in Agnes' chapter, the space programs of the 1960s in Matha's chapter – thus symbolising the material conception of time, the negation of chronological time is enacted in

various ways, from subjective time to evolutionary time. What this disarrayed temporality conveys is the repetition of similar patterns, such as greed for power, generational conflicts, prejudice and the search for care. One of the effects of this palimpsestic layout is the sense of interconnectedness between people and places despite the differences they share.

Each character lives in a specific moment and in a given place but also belongs to a larger multi-generational pattern, their actions having ramifications across time and space. Moments of special insight recur when some characters share traces that tend to converge as in a palimpsest. Sylvia, the first of "The Mothers" the reader encounters, lives in a sort of atemporal dimension. "Deprived of human voices" (204), as a baby she makes friends with her shadow, thereby creating a kind of double version of herself. Born to Matha Mwamba, an African woman without a husband, Sylvia grows up in Kalingalinga, Lusaka's overpopulated suburban neighbourhood close to the airport. In this modest house on the outskirts of the Zambian capital city, Matha's incessant tears paradoxically compensate for the baby's muteness. Matha, who has been left by her lover, begins to cry and does not stop for decades. Her teardrops can be seen as a metaphor for the fluidity that pervades the story: a sprawling symbol for the format of the novel itself, Matha's crying is contagious insomuch as that it resonates across the neighbourhood, attracting other women who gather in her house in a sort of pilgrimage. Whilst tears permeate the narrative, Sylvia seems to inherit the same patriarchal model dominating her mother's world. In the same way as Matha, Sylvia will get pregnant and, even worse than her mother's misadventure, she will eventually fall victim of the AIDS epidemic of the 1990s. Interestingly, this logic of temporal circularity is embodied also in Sylvia's child, Jacob. As a young boy, he develops a fascination with planes and drones, symbolically inheriting Matha's dream of becoming the first African woman on the moon. While Matha's coming of age coincides with Zambian transition from colonialism to freedom, Jacob's obsession with drones, arises from the technological revolution of the third millennium, thus creating temporal connections between past and future. Significantly, the story of this family is thus split between identification and dis-identification, obedience and self-assertion. The plotline of the Mwambas serves as a means for constructing the history of the nation in the aftermath of the genocide and economic exploitation inflicted by British colonial abuse. While the family represents a primary place of belonging, it can also be invoked to explain the oppressions, imbalances and revolutionary effects of postcolonial history. Matha and her descendants embody the idea of the family as a site of solidarity that resists social marginalisation and gender discrimination. Thus, the intersection between family and nation illustrates the relationship between the private and the public, recalling Bhabha's "intricate invasions" (Bhabha 1992: 141) of history into the domestic sphere, where "another world becomes visible" (141).

As the narrative progresses, its linear structure is questioned by the persisting return of the chorus and by its testimonial authority which challenges human agency: "[b]*ut while you rule the earth and destroy it for kicks, we loaf about, unsung heroes. We've been around here as long as you have – for eons before, say the fossils*" (Serpell 2019b: 545). Though the chorus might be addressing the characters, or the reader, the words of the insects are inscribed within a broader temporal scale, spanning across eras. This last observation marks a distance

between *Chronos* and *Aion*. The mysterious chorus questions the linear succession of time, what the Stoics used to call *Chronos*, while foregrounding, instead, the pure time of *Aion* in which, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze, "each event communicates with all the others, and they all form one and the same Event, an event of the Aion where they have an eternal truth" (Deleuze 1990: 64). The aeonic temporality the mosquitoes bring to light is a cyclical pattern in which all times return eternally, evoking the perspective of a present which, in Deleuze's words, "spreads out and comprehends the future and the past" (90) at once. This is suggested, for instance, in the chorus preceding the last family member, Naila, whose story begins in 2019 and ends in a near future. The mosquitoes claim responsibility for the failures of many invasions, from the fall of the Roman Empire to debacle of the British military campaigns in South America. "*It was us*", they declare, "*and a matter of time*" (Serpell 2019b: 486). This last quote signals a fluid temporality that stretches chronological time to the limits, creating a disrupted form of time typical of magic realism: "*Our essence is somewhere between or besides. We flee but our flight is unruly and tangled, a haphazard over, a swarm. We loiter a lot but we move over time. We do best when we choose to meander. Come and go, nor fast nor slow, but at a peripatetical pace*" (486). As a swarm, the mosquitoes encapsulate the disrupting force of collective memory: what the insects seem to suggest is that to perceive events in their actual completeness one needs to visualise them in a palimpsestic, figural dimension where "memory traces overlap, intersect and are transformed" (Silverman 2013: 26).

Thus, with its multi-scaled temporality and its schematic paratextual infrastructure, *The Old Drift* can then be said to edge towards the aesthetics of the palimpsest. In addition, as the extracts above make clear, the narrative is contaminated by several intersections of cultural and social values and their coexistence does not imply a harmonious and shared vision, even of the same historical moment and for the same generation. Rather, the complex process of interconnection, interaction and compression of stories gestures towards the logic of palimpsestic memory in which memory is perceived as a "hybrid rather than pure category" (Silverman 2013: 8), thereby reflecting an alternative awareness of temporality.

Multiple Focalisation and the Multi-generational Novel
In the opening chapter of the novel, we witness the death of David Livingstone, whose heart is buried under a tree in the Zambian veld, while the ambiguous narrator, contemplating the final moments of the Victorian explorer, claims that *"[w]ith his rooting and roving, his stops and starts, he becomes our father unwitting, our inadvertent* pater muzungu" (Serpell 2019b: 1). The last phrase, meaning "white man" in Bantu, embodies the symbolic power of Livingstone's expedition from England towards Zambia in that, as the narrator clarifies, "*the story of a nation – not a kingdom or a people – so it begins, of course, with a white man*" (1). Paradoxically, Livingstone's death, with his vital organ planted in the Zambian earth, entails a process of transformation. What the reader realises here is that a sense of erratic movement, capable of percolating across time and space, animates a novel where memory trajectories contaminate generations and genealogies. In search of the source of the River Nile, Livingstone reaches the banks of the Zambezi: his errantry, hence, generates a network of ramifications that cut across time and space, creating, as the mosquitoes report, a "chaos of capillarity" (2). On that

piece of land where Livingstone's heart is buried, a rhizomatic structure emerges, with three generations of the three families interacting by means of empathic, economic and socio-political connections.

Despite the historical events on which the plot is based, the scattering of memories, as they collide and conflict, contributes to a "turning that unrolls" (563) days, years and decades. As memory, migration involves mobilisation, departing from a stable point: it has, as Julia Creet argues, "an effect on how and what we remember and that displacement intensifies our investments in memory, illuminating the *topos* of memory itself" (Creet 2011: 10; emphasis in the original). Along these lines, *The Old Drift* evokes the past as a way to illustrate the present and imagine the future. If, in Creet's words, memory and migration entail movement, "where we have arrived rather than where we have left" (6), so Serpell's exploration of Zambia is full of crossings and intersections. As the mosquitoes put it, to err means "*to stray or to veer or to wander*" (Serpell 2019b: 2), so in this section I intend to show how multi-perspectivity and the multi-generational format are able to convey a "loose net of knots" (19), in an echo of Silverman's conceptual model. Firstly, palimpsestic memory retains the traces of the composite and multi-layered history of a place, highlighting how memory functions "according to a complex process of interconnection, interaction, substitution and displacement of memory traces" (Silverman 2013: 28). Secondly, it subverts the vision of the past as a definitive temporal moment, envisioning it, instead, as a "dynamic, unstable, multivalent and ambivalent 'image'" (28).

As a narrative of migration, the novel challenges stability, privileging instead a multi-layered articulation which implies different speaking positions and multiple spatial configurations. Such a construction of space recalls Sara Upstone's transformative conceptualisation of the "post-space" in postcolonial novels, that she understands as "a necessary turmoil that offers the tapestry of influences and possibilities that only a fractured, multiplicitous space can provide" (Uptstone 2009: 15). Thus, in *The Old Drift*, the migrants' trajectories may be said to reveal, in Upstone's words, fluid and unstable sites of "possibility and resistance" (11). In this respect, the focal perspectives of the various characters are juxtaposed to the changes of material space as it shuttles from colonisation to independence, undergoing a series of precarious territorial divisions into new states, such as Northwest Rhodesia, Northeast Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia. These spatial fractures unveil, as in a palimpsest, the spatialisation of memory. In addition, due to the tension between multiple focal perspectives and contrasting dieceses, the novel complicates the assumption that memory itself emerges from stability, thus underscoring a link between spatiality and temporality as signifiers of instability. As Creet argues, what if one assumes that "memory is *not* a product of stability, but quite the opposite, that it is always attended by migrations?" (Creet 2011: 6; emphasis mine). In keeping with Creet's contention, Serpell's novel can be said to challenge the allegedly stable operations of memory.

In contrast to the traditional historical novel, *The Old Drift*'s opening scene introduces a fragmented, unreliable narrative mode. As alluded to before, the novel alternates short, italicised chapters offering a choral viewpoint with long chapters narrated by an omniscient extradiegetic narrator. Despite being titled after the nine family members, these longer

chapters often employ a variable focalisation, a technique allowing Serpell to contrast perspectives and create narrative tension. The dialogue between the two types of narrator impinges on the novel with the extradiegetic narrator disclosing the internal frictions of the various characters and the intradiegetic narrator constructing apparently odd juxtapositions among the narrative strands. This fragmented narrative viewpoint, with a constant dialogism between the intradiegetic narrator and the extradiegetic one, complicates and amplifies the connections between narrative form and memory, echoing Rothberg's multidirectional approach in which diverse discourses interact, showing the "dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and time during the act of remembrance" (Rothberg 2009: 11). Whereas the long chapters are focused on a single character, the shifting focalisation reveals the logic of a spiralling memory which recalls Silverman' palimpsest in that it achieves to connect distant places and several generations, disrupting the unity of the narratorial perspective. Notably, this poetics of the palimpsest complicates the condensation of distant spatio-temporal dimensions by evoking the idea of memory as a composite amalgam "whereby one element is seen through and transformed by another" (Silverman 2013: 4).

The palimpsestic organisation of Serpell's prose is evident on the level of focalisation. Take, for example, the following passage in which the external narrator reports how Sibilla realises that she is not a "bastard child with no past" (Serpell 2019b: 72) but the illegitimate daughter of Giacomo, Pietro Gavuzzi's son:

> Nobody had ever told Sibilla that Signora Lina was her aunt, or that the Signora's brother Giacomo was her father, or that this man – Pietro Gavuzzi, who had apparently run this hotel in the middle of Africa – was her grandfather. Staring frozen before his portrait, trying to see her face in his, […] Sibilla was speechless (72).

As in the birth of a nation, so Sibilla's origin is situated in a distant past. While living in Zambia, where her husband Federico is engaged in the construction of the Kariba Dam, Sibilla establishes bonds with her origin. Here, a local boy leads her to N'gulube, the old black man having met her grandfather in his youth. Paradoxically, such a narrative overlay shows the unpredictable trajectories of memory and migration. It is in this remote place, a village inhabited by the Tonga people, "a cluster of mouldy thatched roofs" (75), that Sibilla eventually learns the truth about her birth. Events, then, do not follow a linear chronological articulation; rather, they float in the characters' minds, combining past and present.

The italicised chapters, instead, move the narratorial perspective beyond the boundaries of human voice. Though this intradiegetic viewpoint is ambiguous, as it will be shown in the following pages, the chorus often addresses an anonymous "you", that might be identified with both the reader and the characters themselves. The chorus communicates with this mysterious addressee in various ways: by metafictionally commenting on the spiral-like format of the story, "*You go hunting for a source, some ur-word or symbol and suddenly the path splits, cleaved by apostrophe or dash.* […] *Where you sought an origin, you find a vast babble which is also a silence*" (2); by warning mankind against the dangers of the world, "*Trust our biology, it teaches you better. If you grip too tight, you'll lose the fight. If you stay in one place, you'll fester and waste*" (318), and, eventually, by ironically questioning its own narratorial authority, leaving

the reader with a plenty of doubts about its identity as it gravitates on the threshold between insects and electronic devices, "*ERROR. HTTP 404 FILE NOT FOUND. WE ARE HAVING TROUBLE RECOVERING THE FEED. CHECK YOUR MONITOR AND TRY AGAIN*" (562). Despite the unifying function of the chorus, apparent amnesia and contradictions, as the last quote manifests, reveal the palimpsestic method of storytelling as it hinges around both acts of remembering and forgetting.

In formal terms, Serpell adopts the format of the "multi-generational novel", which has ramifications on family configurations, with socio-cultural transformations transmitted both synchronically and diachronically. Interestingly, the combination of vertical and horizontal lines provides a useful framework for understanding the negotiation of individual stories and collective tragedies in *The Old Drift*. The strong focus on the portrayal of generations, both diachronically and synchronically, combines the private with the public sphere. Serpell complicates this multi-generational narrative frame with the voice of the mosquitoes that ventriloquise the persistence of the past. The word "generation", as the insects observe, "*is related to* genocide, genre *and* gender – *they all come from* *gene-, 'to give birth'*" (318). The common etymology "gene" hence foreshadows the possible invisible trajectories which proliferate in the novel: in invoking what course the story will follow, the chorus achieves an archival function, highlighting the multiple ramifications of memory. As Astrid Erll argues, the term "generation", from the Greek *genesis* ("origin"), displays a double meaning: vertically, it implies "the production and reproduction of a species from one generation to the other" (Erll 2017: 111), while, horizontally, it designates the members of the species "that have the same age" (111). In some postcolonial novels, that Erll terms "fictions of generational memory" (110), the entanglement of mnemonic transitions is predicated upon "enmeshments that cut across what is constructed as the boundaries of family, gender, race, nation, colonizer, and colonized" (115). Erll's observation seems to be confirmed by Serpell's palimpsestic connections between family memories and migration, where the concept of individual memory is inextricably linked to a collective dimension that emerges from the transition from one generation to the other.

The Novel as an Allegorical Palimpsest
According to Silverman, the palimpsest is conveyed through the figural language of "metaphors, analogies, allegories and montages" (Silverman 2013: 4), linguistic devices allowing for connections and transformations across time and space. Owing to the magic realist tones *The Old Drift* presents, allegory constitutes an interesting speculative source, consigning the reader to a multi-layered proliferation of meanings. The cluster of distant spaces and different temporal moments finds in the palimpsest the privileged metaphor for Serpell's rich narrative. As Silverman makes clear, his poetics of palimpsestic memory, which clearly derives from Benjamin's conceptualisation of memory as "dialectics at a standstill" (Benjamin 1999: 463), reveals how "time and space are reconfigured through a ceaseless process of straddling and superimposition of elements, and condensation and displacement of meaning" (Silverman 2013: 22). By combining the logic of the paradigmatic

and syntagmatic axes, allegory provides an adequate interpretative tool to capture memory's overlay of multiple temporal moments[4].

This weaving together of multiple traces is perceived by the reader in the character of Sibilla, works as a symbolic collection among the various narrative strands. As her name suggests, the woman incarnates the mythological oracles of ancient Greece, whose prophecies were said to be capable to orientate human destiny. Not only does her name suggest a problematic interweaving of the temporal axis, it also reconnects Serpell's multi-generational story to the epic-scale tones of Virgil's *Aeneid*. As already discussed before, in the epigraph of the novel Virgil's hero is going to consult the famous Cumaean Sybil's oracle, on whose prophecy Aeneas' fate in Italy depends. In a similar vein to Virgil's mythological figure, the illegitimate daughter of the Italian aristocratic Giacomo Gavuzzi embodies the intricate texture of Serpell's story. In her childhood, the world manifests to Sibilla as an "elaborate tapestry of memory" (Serpell 2019b: 48). However, her extended vision of temporality applies to the whole novel and, allegorically, her hair becomes the emblem of the flowing of time, establishing unpredictable connections among people and places. Sibilla's face and body are entirely covered in a coat of hair, as if by some mysterious magic. The reader eventually discovers that Sibilla's mother, who worked as a servant for the Gavuzzis, had developed a craving for parsley during her pregnancy and that the garden where parsley was grown had been fertilised with the leftover hair of a barber. According to this anecdote, Sibilla's hirsutism is then an inherited condition striking its roots in the earth itself where she was born, though forms of rhizomatic ramifications extend beyond her geographical origin[5].

Hair is to be found everywhere in the novel, becoming an allegorical vector for cohesion. Horizontally, hair establishes mnemonic connections between the three families while, vertically, it also interlaces the members of the same family. This double power of hair points to the complex layering of memory in *The Old Drift* as a rhizomatic element that blurs linearity. In her old age, Sibilla becomes a client of Sylvia's salon, thus linking her storyline with that of the Mwambas, N'gulube's descendants. If hair links Sibilla's journey from Italy towards Zambia through Sylvia's trade in the newly-born African nation, Sibilla's daughter, Isabella, similarly seems to benefit from her mother's hirsutism. Isabella temporarily runs a wig business, until she marries an older Indian man, Balaji, who sells hair products. A further instance of the generative, allegorical force of hair is exemplified in the third generation of Sibilla's family. Her granddaughter, Naila, decides to satisfy her father's desire to scatter his

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[4] Silverman draws on Craig Owen's study of the allegorical nature of Benjamin's philosophy, who claims that allegory "implicates both the metaphor and the metonymy" (Owen 1980: 73). This interface of the paradigmatic level of substitution and similarity (metaphor) and of the syntagmatic level of continuity and association (metonymy), as theorised by Roman Jakobson, emerges, according to Owen, in Benjamin's treatment of the urban landscape as "a sedimentation in depth of layers of meaning which would gradually be unearthed" (Owen 1980: 84).

[5] Sibilla's character is clearly inspired from the Italian Giambattista Basile's tale "Petrosinella", collected in his *Pentamerone* (1634). Basile's story, that later influenced the Brothers Grimm's "Rapunzel" (1812), recounts the story of a pregnant woman stealing parsley from an ogress' garden, being then forced to leave her child to the cruel woman.

ashes in the Temple of Tirumala. She then travels to South India, a journey that amplifies the geographical scope of the novel, where Naila, clinging to the Hindu tradition of tonsure, has her hair cut from an Indian barber. This practice allows her to mourn her father's loss and reconnect herself to one of the multiple fragments of her composite ethnic origin.

Allegorically, hair retains its metanarrative power, suggesting a generative force capable of multiplying narrative strands. Furthermore, hair becomes a flexible performative symbol where past, present and future are intertwined, creating a sense of solidarity among people and opening up to continuous transformations. The regenerative function of this allegoric language clearly emerges in the last generations where the technological revolution projects people into the future, blurring the border between human mind and machines. In the last chapters, the novel features the proliferation of high-tech machines called "Beads", technological devices embedded in human hands. In the same way as smartphones, the "Beads" become a means in the hands of the government for controlling citizens and, at a later stage, for transmitting an experimental HIV vaccine on them. Again, history seems to replicate itself: the dystopian perspective epitomised by the "Beads" seems to entail a twenty-first century version of colonial power, because of their implications in terms of individual freedom. Also, this speculative stance provides an eerily warning about the delicate interface of biopolitical issues and privacy protection, as the debate on the use of apps for monitoring the current COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates.

By the end of the novel, Jacob, Joseph and Naila, the representatives of the third generation of the three families, see present Zambia as a reflection "of the olden days, when the British first came here, a hundred years ago" (547). As in a palimpsestic modelling of memory, the three young people decide to resist this further re-enactment of the past by means of sabotage and revolt. The idealism infused in the very final pages of the novel constitutes a further instance of palimpsestic memory: close to the old drift, where a cemetery hosts the tombs of those colonial settlers coming from England, Italy, Poland, India and North America – the place then being a symbol of the connection between memory and migration, a drift of people, culture and time itself – Jacob, Joseph and Naila, the inheritors of the multiple trajectories of their ancestors, mount a revolution by hacking technology, eventually carrying the reader towards the future.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, in *The Old Drift* Serpell creates a narrative structure that reflects the multi-layered and fragmented articulation of palimpsestic memory. British colonialism, racial stereotypes, human migration and other manifestations of displacement affect the story-lines of the three families, creating a tensional interaction between chronological and cyclic time. Whereas the hybrid narrative format stages a dialogic structure between intradiegetic and extradiegetic narrators, the temporality of the novel straddles the continuum from the past towards the future. On the one hand, it attempts to order events chronologically with temporal linearity and paratextual elements; on the other, the turn to aeonic and circular temporality disrupts any possibility of stability. In line with Creet's vision of memory as an unstable mechanism, Serpell's saga suggests that time progresses but its curve is not linear, showing residues and invisible traces lying behind the stories of migration. This vision of memory, however, discloses also a future-

oriented approach, recuperating Jacques Derrida's cosmopolitan vision of a "democracy to come", that Silverman sees as "the prospect of new solidarities across the lines of race and nation" (Silverman 2013: 8). Furthermore, the use of allegoric language offers a vision of the symbolic structure of palimpsestic memory, disclosing hidden connections across time and space.

In the last chapter, the reader is no longer certain of the real identity of the chorus – "*Are we truly men's enemy,* Anopheles gambiae, *or the microdrones Jacob designed?* […] *are we really a we? Or just a swarm in the swarm?*" (562). As an "*Archimedean spiral*" (562), the novel unveils the sprawling entanglement of generations, synchronically as well as diachronically, by interlacing families, gender, ethnicity, nations, individuals and places. Both ancient and futuristic, *The Old Drift* tells the story of a nation through the intermingling memories of many characters and places with a polyphonic style that starts as a historical novel, turns to magical realism and eventually ends as a speculative parable.

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