Transcultural Memory and Social Media in the Context of Migration:

A Case Study from South Africa

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Abstract

Theoretically rooted in memory studies (notably the concept of "transcultural memory") and methodologically based on interviews with African migrants in South Africa, this paper explores the use of social media and Internet–based communication applications in the context of migration. Results indicate that participants use digital media platforms not only to exchange personal news, but also to engage in mnemonic practices. It is argued that conjuring up memories of home and fondly remembered episodes experienced with social groups deepens the sense of belonging for migrants in a context of alienation and isolation.

Keywords: memory, social media, migrants, South Africa, Africa

Introduction

Migration and displacement, whether temporary or permanent, voluntary or forced, are characterizing the life experience of growing populations in the contemporary world globally. The advent of modern information and communication technology, notably mobile phones, social media and internet–based communication applications has fundamentally changed the ways in which migrants and refugees organize themselves in unfamiliar territory and maintain contact with family and friends back home. Common sense suggests that communication apps

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and social media platforms—notably WhatsApp, Facebook and Skype—are widely utilized to update social relations about personal news, discuss important developments and inquire about each other's physical and emotional well–being. Little attention has been paid to the fact that social media communication is also about memory—remembering the past.

Much scholarly literature has investigated the multifarious ways in which migrants preserve memories of their pre–migration past—conjuring up memories of their home or homeland, fostering reminiscence among loved ones, and engaging memory to retain important elements of cultural identity in a foreign context. This may be achieved for instance, through food, music, photographs and other images, furniture and artefacts, clothing, social performative practices, temporary return trips, homemaking practices and routine private rituals (Hage 2010; Hung et al. 2013; Rabikowska 2010; Roberts 2018; Tolia-Kelly 2004). In this paper, I argue that migrants use social media (employed here as an umbrella term to refer to a range of related online communication platforms) not only to communicate about the present and the future but also about the past. The technology-based exchange of old photographs and messages referencing bygone episodes is positioned here as a memory practice, even an emergent memory culture, that plays a very particular role in the context of migration and displacement.

This paper focuses on African migrants or foreign students, notably Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidates, enrolled at a South African university. Within the wider field of migration studies, this focus addresses the relative lacuna of research on African migration across the African continent (Bakewell and Binaisa 2016; Cohen, Story and Moon 2015). Within the literature on migration in South Africa, it draws attention to the neglected niche of the highly skilled and educated, whose experience is in many ways markedly different from the majority of economic migrants and asylum seekers. When using the summary term "migrant," it is

acknowledged that some participants do not categorize themselves as such, and individuals may officially fall within different types of visa classifications. Whether they are temporary migrants for study purposes or permanently settled in South Africa, what matters, in the context of this paper, is that these foreign students are resourceful in maintaining contact with family and other social relations in their home country and elsewhere in the diaspora. The paper investigates how the eliciting and sharing of memory through social media bolsters the displaced person's sense of belonging in an alienating environment, and–in theoretical terms, aims to advance our understanding of memory in the digital age, in the specific context of migration, and through transnational and transcultural interaction.

African Migrants in South Africa

Migration figures in South Africa are contested because many migrants are undocumented. The 2011 census (Statistics South Africa 2011) maintains that South Africa hosts approximately 2.2 million people born outside the country (4.2 percent of the total population). According to recent research by Meny–Gibert and Chiumia (2016), 75.3 percent of foreigners are from the African continent, most predominantly (68 percent) from the Southern African Development Region (SADC). Many of these foreigners are asylum seekers or economic migrants; some are refugees (UNHCR South Africa 2015), and a portion comprises highly skilled and educated individuals who take up professional employment and leadership positions (Crush and McDonald 2002).

International student migration has been a growing trend in many parts of the world in recent years (Thomas and Inkpen 2017). As South Africa has internationalized its higher education system and de facto become a leading "education hub" for foreign students (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2010; Kishun 2007; Dell 2010) many educated Africans from across the

continent engage in what Donaldson and Gatsinzi (2005) call "educational tourism." Increases in the youth population size in many African countries and the associated higher competition for jobs necessitate the acquisition of higher degrees and foreign credentials to secure attractive professional employment positions (Thomas and Inkpen 2017 citing Hatton and Williamson 2003). Because the pursuit of higher education options, especially a PhD, is either unavailable or undesirable in their home country and unaffordable at universities in the developed world, many of these candidates come to South Africa. They typically enter the country on a student visa for a period of several years, but several participants of the current study had already been living in South Africa long before enrolling for their higher education programs.

Some participants were adamant that they intend to return home after completion of their doctoral program (usually three to four years). However, respondents close to submission of their thesis often indicated that they were weighing their original intention against the more attractive prospects of finding suitably qualified employment in the host society. As many other countries, South Africa also offers incentives to retain highly qualified international graduates and encourage them to enter the local economy, especially to address critical skills shortages in the fields of science and technology (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2010). Increasing levels of adaptation to the host country, society, and consideration of future opportunities for spouses and children are likely to turn many temporary migrants for study purposes into long–term migrants or permanent residents.

The emergence of dual allegiance to both home and host country, what Appiah (1997) calls "cosmopolitan patriotism," is often coupled with alienation (Carrier and Kabalek 2014:54). Most African foreigners, especially those from the southern African region blend easily into the local population, but their societal acceptance and integration suffer in a host environment

characterized by pervasive xenophobia targeted at African "immigrants" (Adjai and Lazaridis 2013). Almost all participants of this study have experienced some form of discrimination or humiliation, but no xenophobic violence, which tends to be meted out at economic migrants, directly competing with the livelihoods of the local poor. African professionals and postgraduate students are relatively isolated (and they isolate themselves) from these contexts.

The lives of these "study migrants" are largely consumed by their academic pursuits and almost entirely focused on the university environment—where some hold part–time jobs in teaching or administration. Paralleling findings from studies elsewhere (Brown and Holloway 2008), the initial period of their sojourn is particularly stressful, as they have to cope with an unfamiliar academic and sociocultural environment—whilst being homesick and feeling isolated. Language is a major alienating factor not only for francophone candidates with imperfect competency in English. Many participants of this study highlighted their unfamiliarity with isiZulu, the dominant local African vernacular, as a major problem. In public settings, they are habitually addressed in that language and then forced to identify themselves as a foreigner—a situation that some local Zulu speakers exploit to humiliate them.

Memory and Social Media

Although most respondents occasionally travel back home for temporary visits, they heavily rely on new media technology to stay in touch with family, friends, and professional networks in their home country. They belong to an educated, technologically well-versed elite and can locally benefit from a highly developed information and communication technology infrastructure; however, their communication partners back home are not necessarily equally equipped. On the technologically underdeveloped African continent, computer literacy rates, access to computers and the Internet are still low in global comparison (Greyling and McNulty

2011). Frequent electricity outages, slow Internet speed, and high costs of mobile data restrain access to the web and online apps in many African countries. Nevertheless, the mobile phone penetration on the continent has evolved rapidly (GSMA 2019). Increasingly, Africans are accessing the Internet through their phones. They hence partake in the digital revolution in very specific and locally adjusted ways.

As remembrance is partly dependent on media or technologies of memory, access to and availability of such media influence the memory practices of individuals and social groups (Kansteiner 2010; Van House and Churchill 2008). The advent of digital media, the internet and mobile communication technology has altered the way we store, retrieve, and disseminate memories, and has opened up new avenues for performing memory work and for generating and using memories. We may distinguish between digital memory as the storage of data on servers and portable devices (where information may be preserved, but not remembered) and digitally facilitated forms of memory practice, the functional process of remembering in individuals and among social groups for which social media provide an enabling platform (Pentzold 2011).

A growing body of scholarly literature engages with memory in the digital age, "mediated memories" (Van Dijck 2007), "digital network memory" (Hoskins 2009; Hoskins 2017a), and more specifically the role of social media in the process of remembrance. Hoskins (2017b) argues that digital media have fundamentally changed what memory is and what it does. Digital media, with its more immediate, visceral modes of representation and circulation, have changed the storage, accessibility, and usage of memory previously held within archives, organizations, and institutions—the shift from the so–called second to third memory boom (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010).

Garde–Hansen et al. (2009) consider "social network memory" as a new hybrid form of public and private memory (2009:6). They show how "digital memories become us," as our movements and the minutiae of our daily lives are recorded and documented through digital technology, uploaded to websites and shared on social media, but also stored and distributed without our knowledge. The thoughts, conversations, images, and voice recordings we post today become memories on social network sites in the near future (2009:1). As will be illustrated below, past experiences with family, friends and classmates, digitally documented (e.g., in photos and videos) and most likely previously shared, are retrieved and circulated again through social media among the same or slightly reconfigured groups, but now in a new context, that of migration and displacement. This provides a novel setting for the interpretation of these references to the past and the purpose of remembering itself.

A digital image might be retrieved from a computer's memory forever unchanged, but human memory always entails an active process of (re)construction from a range of sources, under the influence of multifarious contextual factors and situational demands. Processes of remembrance and sharing of memories are driven by personal and social motivations, adjusted to particular audiences and consistent with "self–identity goals" (Freeman 2010; Rose 2010; Schacter 1996; Sutton et al. 2010). The use of lifelogs, blogs and social media is generally associated with self–expression and the construction of the self (Van Dijck 2011); as a private/public platform for remembrance, social media offer an ideal forum for the representation and purposeful reconstruction – or rather construction – of one's life history and identity in relation to others.

Transcultural Memory

Social media and networked technology as media of memory become more significant for migrants and the displaced, as geographical distance decreases opportunities for personal contact and increases the need for remembrance as a coping mechanism and strategy of fostering belonging. Astrid Erll's (2011a, 2011b) notion of "traveling memory" and most particularly the concept of "transcultural memory," which has recently generated much scholarly interest (Bond and Rapson 2014) are particularly relevant in the present study's context of migration. Drawing on Rigney's (2005) work, which advocates a shift away from static considerations of *lieux de memoires* (sites of collective memory) (Nora 1989) to "dynamics of memory," Erll (2011a) highlights mobility and circulation as essential characteristics of cultural memory. She defines "traveling memory" as "the incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms, and practices of memory, their continual 'travels' and ongoing transformations through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders" (Erll 2011b:11). Both migration and the digital network technology promote, and to some extent, prompt the traveling of memory and its influence by transcultural dynamics.

Transcultural memory, still a new approach within the field of Memory Studies, rejects older conceptualizations of culture as discrete and hermetic, carried by clearly bounded, homogenous and localized identities, now commonly referred to (or derided) as the "container culture" model. Instead, transcultural memory emphasizes hybridity and cultural fluidity, paying particular attention to "the border–transcending dimensions of remembering and forgetting" (Erll 2011a:29), although this does not necessarily refer to a sense of cultural rootlessness or invalidate place bound memories in cultural identity formation. Transcultural memory, according to Bond and Rapson (2014:19), describes two separate dynamics: "firstly, the traveling of

memory within and between national, ethnic, and religious collectives; secondly, forums of remembrance that aim to move beyond the idea of political, ethnic, linguistic, or religious borders as containers for our understanding of the past."

Carrier and Kabalek (2014) feature several innovative approaches to the understanding of transcultural memory, one of them, focused on migration,

> …studies about migration address subjectivities, that is experiences of the past on the individual "micro level" (Welsch 1999) which occur within or are shared by small and/or large groups, the reflexivity of remembering subjects, the influence of different countries on people's personal remembering… (2014:54).

In the context of migration, displacement and diaspora, even temporary migration for study purposes, national, ethnic, and other localized cultural identifications and subjectivities transform and develop, as individuals are confronted with and partially adapt to new cultural environments. The findings below illustrate how this dynamic influences their practices of remembrance with the aid of social media, but first, I will provide a brief note on how the present research was carried out.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger ongoing research project focused on African migrants in South Africa (Marschall 2017a; 2017b; 2018b; 2019). While previous publications included samples drawn from a cross–section of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, this particular portion of the investigation focused specifically on PhD candidates. As mentioned earlier, this addresses the relative research gap on highly skilled African migrants in South Africa, but it also represents an attempt at drawing a sample from a more homogenous research population, or rather a population with similar migration profiles and social/educational characteristics.

Although the interviewed PhD candidates originate from a range of different countries, mostly in the Southern African region, and were registered for diverse qualifications (although mostly engineering), they clearly belong to an educated elite, who either emanate from a privileged social stratum or have worked their way into it. They also manifest certain shared characteristics: excellent mastery of English and being more articulate than the average economic migrant, communicating in more nuanced and meaningful ways.

Based on an anticipated saturation point and similar studies of this nature, a sample size of twenty respondents was adopted for this research. The sampling process was structured in two phases. In the first phase, ten candidates were randomly selected from a database of foreign PhD candidates enrolled at a South African university (N=204) in Durban for the year 2017. In the second phase, an additional ten interviewees were selected purposively from the same database to attain approximate gender proportionality and maximum diversity in terms of country of origin and degree programs. In total, fourteen males and six females originating from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Lesotho, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe were interviewed. Their ages varied, but the vast majority were in their thirties; some were single, others married, with or without children. As it is acknowledged that the location of spouses and children influences social media usage (along with other factors); brief introductions will be provided for the persons quoted below. It should moreover be mentioned that free Wi-Fi is provided on the university campus, but not necessarily in all places of accommodation.

Most interviews (lasting between twenty-five and forty-four minutes) were conducted in person, and two were conducted via Skype. Questions explored the personal background and migration experience of participants, how memories of the past were transferred within the family, temporary return travel, how memories of home are fostered in the host country, as well

as the use of networked technology and patterns of communication with social relations. Probing questions were sometimes added to elicit richer responses about the use of social memory in the context of remembering. Data were transcribed and a first round of thematic coding (mostly along the above-mentioned themes) was conducted through the use of NVivo. Within each node, themes emerged in a second round of coding, which were subsequently analyzed in relation to relevant scholarly literature.

Results: Migrant Associations, Personal Networks and Social Media

Historically, migrant associations and organizations have often played a crucial role in supporting migrants, refugees, exiles, and displaced people in their daily needs and multifarious challenges of survival in their new country of residence. They moreover represent a symbolic link with the homeland that helps migrants maintain aspects of cultural traditions and national identity (Marschall 2018a; Bakewell and Binaisa 2016). Most participants of the current study were aware of a migrant association that brought together nationals from their respective country, but were either not a member or did not attend meetings and events, usually citing lack of time. Most, however, were in contact with the organization through a WhatsApp group or Facebook.

For these participants, social media are augmenting and to some extent displacing the role of these associations, allowing them to stay connected without necessarily being physically present. Participants were not specifically asked this question, but it may be speculated here that these PhD candidates' lack of interest in joining a national migrant association could also be linked to a perception that they share too little common ground with the broad mix of displaced fellow nationals in South Africa. They clearly sought the company of peers, as almost all of them belonged to—and physically spent time with—university-based fraternities and student

community associations, whether comprising of nationals from a specific country (e.g., "Zim Soc") or gatherings of postgraduates of different nationalities. In addition, almost all participants had established their own network of friends and fellow students, with whom they regularly socialize. Mutual interests and a sense of belonging are fostered through eating home food, debating, talking about mutual issues and current affairs in the home country, listening to or even performing familiar music associated with home, and—not least—sharing memories of home and the past. A typical example is Sogo, a 32-year-old male Nigerian participant, who is married with a small child, but came to South Africa (SA) on his own in 2016:

> I also have friends from my area from home that I regularly meet with. Some are
> students, and some are working scattered around different campuses and
> locations. When we meet, we do create things that make us feel a sense of home,
> like preparing of our food, talking about the situations of things in our country,
> Nigerian politics, Nigerian leaders, and how our country can be better. We do also
> play our music as that is very important to us, we don't joke with it. When we are
> together also, we talk about the past because understanding the past is a key to the
> future. We feel concern about the situation about our country especially those of
> us with like minds (Sogo, personal communication September 28, 2017).

Maintaining Social Relations Back Home

Most respondents are in touch with their local social clubs or informal networks through Facebook and WhatsApp groups. More importantly, for the current study, social media was extensively used to maintain social relations back home. One characteristic of the interviewed PhD candidates is their altered relationship towards time and leisure. Most respondents, and virtually all those registered for Law and Engineering degrees, complained about feeling almost

constantly under pressure. Their lives revolve virtually exclusively around studying, leaving very little time for social activities and leisure. Even their social use of information and communication technology and especially social media was affected by the perceived time constraint—many indicated a preference for WhatsApp over Facebook, because the latter was perceived as too time-consuming. This is exemplified by Emmanuel's response, a 36-year-old Nigerian who came to South Africa in 2012; his spouse and two small children are staying with him, but his father remains in Nigeria:

> I don't use Facebook, because to me, it's a distraction. My only surviving parent,
> my father, used Facebook, but now he is no longer [using it], because we
> communicate physically using WhatsApp messenger (Emmanuel, personal
> communication, November 1, 2017).

> I don't often visit Facebook because to me it's time-consuming, looking at…you
> know…but on WhatsApp, I can just quickly drop a message and then move on
> with other things I want to do (Benedict from Nigeria, 37-year-old, male, married
> without children, in SA since 2009; personal communication, November 4, 2017).

Some participants attested to using WhatsApp or Skype with their family, but Facebook with their friends and former classmates. Only in very exceptional cases did participants use conventional phone lines to communicate with parents, either because the latter lived in remote areas without infrastructure or because they were not versed in the use of digital technology. For the vast majority of respondents, digital communication apps and social media played an extremely important role in maintaining contact with social relations back home, as well as family members and friends dispersed in other countries. Virtually all participants emphasized the importance of WhatsApp groups. Most had at least two groups: one for family members,

another for friends. Some had many more groups—for example, immediate family and extended family, locally versus home–based friends, groups of alumni or classmates from previous schools and universities, church–affiliated groups, and/or professional network groups.

Talking About the Present and the Past

Participants were asked whether they communicate mostly about the present or the past (i.e., sharing news and commenting on current events versus sharing memories and conjuring up a mutually experienced personal history). The most frequent responses are exemplified by the following examples. "It's a mixture of everything, we share old photographs, we talk about the past, we talk about the present, we talk about where we are heading to. We talk about achievements" (Benedict).

It is both past and present, but mostly the past because you always long for your childhood. … We share videos of our childhood asking one another if we remember such video in our childhood … we share current and past events in our country. … Thanks to Mark Zuckerberg, though he makes money from it, but the fact that he makes people from the past to connect is really awesome; though not really seeing those people but seeing them in the virtual space makes me connect to the people of the past and connect to old collective memories (Danford from Zimbabwe, 33-year-old male, in SA since 2008, unmarried; personal communication August 4, 2017).

We also have WhatsApp groups for alumni associations from different schools that I have graduated from. We share and discuss memories of the past in such WhatsApp groups. We also share where we are at the moment, our levels academically and so on. Discussions around our present constitute … about 20

percent, while discussion around our memories constitute the remaining 80 percent (Sogo).

Reminiscing about the past seems to occur especially often in groups linking friends and old classmates or alumni groups. Communication appears to be casual and entertaining, but also serious and productive, often focused on organizing initiatives to support the old school.

For friends, I have WhatsApp group for them, [they are] alumni from the schools I finished. On these WhatsApp groups, we share things like calls for action for our alma mater, job vacancy related posts, jokes, good memories, news about the schools where we finished. … Also friends back home, we also have WhatsApp group where we communicate with ourselves. During our communication on the group with friends, we do and always share memories of the past and updates of the moment (Daniel from DRC, 36-year-old male, in SA since 2010, married with two children, who are staying with him; personal communication, October 30, 2017).

We do have groups that we have created both for my friends from high school and other friends. There we talk about when we should come home, when we should have a reunion; and [there is an] other group from my primary school where we share old photos and we laugh at the pictures we didn't like and things like that. It just keeps us connected. On the group, we only share memories of the past, not of the present, because to some people it feels like you are bragging and also knowing full well about how people at home in Zim[babwe] are struggling (Muneinazvo from Zimbabwe, 28-year-old female unmarried; came to South Africa first in 2008; personal communication, August 3, 2017).

Focusing on memories of the past fosters a sense of connection—with a mutually shared pre–migration history; with the homeland and specific places there, especially educational institutions that played a formative role in where the PhD candidates find themselves today; and, most importantly, with meaningful social relations, friends, and former classmates who have walked along one's path of life. Such connections and the sense of belonging and rootedness they provide are important for migrants and the displaced, who experience loneliness, alienation in a foreign country, and isolation, exacerbated by their intense PhD research, a lone project few others can relate to.

The second quotation above moreover suggests that the participant is acutely aware of and sensitive about her achievements and societal status in relation to fellow nationals, even many of her friends and former classmates. As talking about the present, personal or academic achievements may be perceived as bragging, resulting in envy, jealousy, or a sense of distance, the focus on remembering a mutually experienced past and shared values is a form of escape that can help bridge fault lines and foster unity and belonging.

All migrants experience some degree of identity change as a result of their displacement from home. The trajectory of the PhD candidate's migratory and educational journey changes various aspects of their daily life experience, their values, expectations, and sense of awareness and identity. It is often during temporary home visits, the re–encounter of their home environment and social relations there, that participants become acutely aware of how different they have become in comparison to their peers back home.

> My view of things - after getting home - changed, as some will always say that
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> the way I am speaking, and your way of thinking are different and that I have
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> grown. For me, my perception of friends I left never changed, because as a

Christian, I must humble myself no matter what I have achieved in life, though some people feel uncomfortable as soon as they start to see you prosper. What you do, whatever action you take, they judge you and see it as you are showing off that you are now studying abroad, and that makes you proud. So I try to put myself in their shoes, because every move you make, people are always going to comment; they would criticize you. So [during] subsequent journeys, I focused on my family and business (Daniel).

While family members and some friends tend to be proud of the participants' achievements, welcoming them with admiration, respect, and a spirit of celebration, some former peers react with envy and perceive the returnee as competition. This forces participants to develop personal strategies and coping mechanisms. Where reminiscence and reflection about the mutually shared past prove impossible or inadequate, one might be left with no other option than walking away, focusing on one's own family and minding one's own business.

The reference in the above narrative to the Christian duty of humbling oneself highlights a striking characteristic observed during the interviews with virtually all participants of the current study, namely their humility. Whether they identified themselves as Christians or more generally acknowledged their God or spiritual center in their achievements, almost all appeared to have a profound sense of indebtedness to their community and the individuals—parents, teachers, mentors—who enabled them to be where they are today. This attitude also explains why so many of the participants indicated re–visiting their former schools or universities during temporary home visits and the deeply emotional responses and sense of gratitude that this re–visit and the encounters with remembered persons and familiar spaces instilled in them. The perception of the former school environment as a formative experience and basis of current

academic success may also underpin their motivation to remain connected and active within alumni social media groups.

The Role of Pictures

To gain some understanding of the family–based "memory culture" prevailing in their childhood homes, participants were asked about the role of family photo albums and story–telling around old photographs. Most interviewees—irrespective of where they came from, geographically and socio–economically—indicated that their family had photo albums or collections of photographs, which would be jointly contemplated and narrated by a parent or grandparent, hence transferring memories and historical knowledge about the family and community to the younger generation. All participants moreover had collections of digital photos either on their mobile phones or other storage devices and some explained how they used these photos to reminisce about home or loved ones.

Of specific interest to this paper is that most participants indicated circulating "old pictures" on social media platforms and especially WhatsApp groups. These included photographs and to some extent videos of events from years gone by, and of persons during their childhood, adolescence or student years. Seen within the context of the participants' lifespan, the term "old" pictures may include visuals dating back only a few years, but the point is that they are testimonies of a remembered past.

> On the family WhatsApp group … we discuss family issues. Also, my mother
> when she needs something, she puts it on the family group so that all of us are
> aware of it. We share memories of the past, we upload funny pictures we took
> while we were small, and we laugh about them. We share how we go to our
> father's farm and things like that (Daniel).

I also have a WhatsApp group for the family. That's where we really communicate things that concern our family and it's been active for a while now. … We do use this group to reminisce about the past, which is common to us; uploading of old pictures, which we comment on. Sometimes some of us put some phrases that generate comments about our past experiences; it is always fun and interesting. We do also have photo albums where we sat down with our parents to watch them together. Before our mother died, we always took pictures together. Those are some of the memories we share together when we chat on the family WhatsApp group platform. For me it is always important to take pictures and keep them. It is always good to see how you were on those pictures in years gone by (Emmanuel).

The above speaks to the continuation of the family's past memory culture – sitting around the family photo album with the parents—and its shift into a new technology. One participant appears to inverse the familiar pattern of parents showing their children photographs of the past, perhaps laughing together about baby pictures, as he now sends his father pictures of when the latter was young, resulting in excitement and appreciation.

No, I'm not active in the professional [WhatsApp] group …but my family group. Like, my dad's birthday was earlier this month. I sent some old pictures … like that's usually my gift to them. I'd like to remember; they talk about it. … I know it's exciting for him. Like I send older pictures of my dad when he was much younger. So I would know he will appreciate it (Funsho from Nigeria, 29-year-old, male, unmarried; in SA since 2016; personal communication, November 30, 2017).

Many participants seemed to be particularly active in sharing photographs of the past among friends and alumni groups, using both WhatsApp and Facebook.

> Yes, there is a WhatsApp group with my friends from back home, the people that I went to school with [and] also the family WhatsApp group. [In the friends group] … randomly people just post pictures of when we were back in high school, we would laugh and share memories. Sometimes we would have pictures of others that have passed on and we would remember them through those pictures (Bianca from Zimbabwe, female, 30-year-old, married with small child; came to SA in 2007; personal communication, October 23, 2017).

If these words contain an element of sadness and imply paying tribute to friends and classmates who passed away, for the most part, the photo–elicited sharing of memories seems to be fun, affirmative, and rewarding, conjuring up happy memories and "good old times."

> During our communication on the group with friends, we do and always share memories of the past and updates of the moment. We share photographs from the past, which people comment on. It is quite amazing that it makes you remember the good times (Grace from DRC, male, 34-year-old, married, no children, came to SA in 2012; personal communication, October 13, 2017).
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> Yes, I am involved in a lot of WhatsApp groups. … Yes, we do talk about the past, post old pictures and talk about what is happening in our lives now. … Mostly we share pictures we took in the past, one of us can post an old picture that we took together and it's like we remember those days (Mary from Kenya, 47-year-old female, married with two children, came to SA in 2015; personal communication, September 29, 2017).

Old group photos or pictures taken during joint experiences in the past cement the bonds between friends and with the institution (school, university, etc.) that brought them together, because they provide unique visual evidence of mutually experienced places and events. The effect of old photographs can be more powerful and effective than text–based mention of such events, because images are complex, multivalent signifiers that can elicit many memories as different details are noticed and contemplated (Brown and Phu 2014). Images easily evoke emotions, perhaps a longing for home, and a desire to relive the fondly remembered moments, warm feelings of appreciation of friends, and the good times one has had together. In the context of migration and displacement, such sentiments and indulgence in memory can strengthen one's sense of belonging and reduce negative feelings of alienation and isolation.

But this sharing of old pictures is not only about indulgence and nostalgia, as the following illustrates:

> Hmmm, when it comes to memories like…it's kind of freaky, because my
> friends…let's say we are going somewhere this weekend, they will post, okay we
> are going here, do you remember the other time we did this together, that's it. So
> sometimes they will be posting stuff from way back then to spite me like: hey girl,
> you are stuck there, and you …[could] be going there with us (Samantha from
> Zimbabwe, 28-year-old female, unmarried, no children, came to SA in 2009;
> personal communication, October 13, 2017).

In this quotation, the participant's friends are using memory, tongue–in–cheek, through photographs of the past; they are beckoning her and reminding her of what she is missing out on by having removed herself to another country. Testifying to the creative use of memory

prompted by situational demands, this response moreover illustrates the neat interweaving of past and present.

Programmed to Remember

The sharing of old photographs on Facebook and WhatsApp tends to entail more deliberate and considered processes than exchanging text messages. It involves scanning photo collections, considering which image to select, posting it and sometimes adding a caption. In the meantime, browsing through personal digital archives that document one's own past precipitates memories and self–reflection. Among the recipients, the surprise effect of seeing an image from "the old times" may cause a rush of memories or puzzlement, as one struggles to remember. Zooming into the image, contemplating details, comparing it with others in one's own collection initiates thought processes and may result in further communication exchanges—comments, questions, and/or posting of more pictures. Such flurries of activity or increased "user traffic" is, of course, much in the interest of commercially-operated social media platforms such as Facebook.

> …our friends, some of them I have barely…I can't remember their names, but when I see their picture on Facebook, I say I remember these guys; I send him a message and we try to reconnect; you try to remember, so it creates that…info cyber network of communication…(Benedict).

People often acknowledge not remembering names, but claim to remember faces. Facebook's heavy reliance on pictures, especially of people's friends, helps users to remember and prompts them to reconnect. The social media platform is built on memories—of friends and shared experiences—and the mere encounter of a picture may spontaneously trigger the user into action: posting comments, questions, pictures, initiating an exchange of current information, and

memories. A closer examination of Facebook reveals that the sharing of memories is even more deliberately built into the system itself through automated prompts, as the following participant explains:

> …Facebook sometimes reminds you and post some memories and asks, like, do you want to share this memory? So like sometimes, people would share memories from, like, 2012 and it will be, like oh, you guys remember when we were still undergrad doing this or whatever (Samantha).

These examples illustrate that digital networking technology and, specifically, social media platforms such as Facebook, are not simply a new memory technology, a neutral medium of memory to facilitate remembrance among social groups. As Van Dijck (2011) similarly shows for Flickr, through its interface, algorithm and database, Facebook plays an active role in prompting its users to remember and disseminate memories. In other words, the system is to some extent designed and programmed to generate memories among users, because this can ignite excited, ongoing communication exchanges about past and present, accompanied by the posting of multifarious material testifying to values and lifestyle interests, all of which essentially advances the social media company's corporate commercial interests.

Discussion

It is self–evident that staying in touch with people back home, facilitated by modern communication technology and social media, is important for migrants and the displaced. Discussing diaspora formation in the intra-African migration context, Bakewell and Binaisa (2016) found that the young Somalis in Kampala use different strategies from the older generation, notably social media, to maintain contact not only with the home country, but with youths in the wider Somali diaspora. The current study illustrates that such communicative

exchanges may not be limited to updates about personal news and current matters of importance, but include significant elements of remembrance. All participants indicated using social media platforms to share memories (in the form of text messages, images, and videos) of their personal pasts and joint experiences with groups of family, friends, or alumni. This paper has argued that reminiscence (rather than mere exchange of news) can be very meaningful and deepen one's sense of belonging in the context of migration. The following discussion will draw some wider conclusions in relation to theoretical concepts introduced above, notably transcultural memory, and digital memory.

Transcultural Memory

Carrier and Kabalek (2014:52) maintain that the significance of transcultural memory "does not lie in the definitions of its terminology, but in the practical studies of memory formation between, across and even beyond the boundaries of closed groups." The current study is an example of such empirical investigation. The digitally–based memory exchanges in this research shift attention from static objects of memory and remembrance within the nation state towards dynamics of memory across borders, occurring not only between the migrant participant and communication partners back home but among social networks dispersed in several countries in the diaspora. If transcultural memory is contrasted with cultural memory that circulates among nationally or ethnically-bounded cultural groups (Erll 2011a), the question arises to what extent the findings of this research evidence the dissolution of "container culture thinking."

On one hand, one may say that the digitally–based memory sharing that occurred between the migrants and their social networks across borders does not erode, but in fact, bolsters their sense of belonging to a clearly defined cultural group. Remembrance is fostered at

the micro level of the family and among friends—with whom one has grown up in a specific locale, defined by a shared language, cultural values, norms, and practices. While most participants exchange both memories of the past and current news, it was shown above that some prefer to focus on the past to bolster a sense of belonging and sameness, rather than emphasizing their difference. The use of digital media with their immediacy and vividness (especially videos) enables them to overcome geographical distance and mimic the interactive dynamic of personal presence. The memory exchange in cyberspace becomes an extension of the home trip and its immersion in home culture; the affirmation of cultural belonging provides a stable base for coping with migration related stress and cultural change.

On the other hand, migrants (in general and even PhD candidates who have only lived in South Africa for a relatively short period of time) begin reflecting on their home country, and become consciously aware of cultural norms once invisible and taken for granted, in other words, they gradually begin to see from the outside the container that bounded their culture. This point of view constitutes the present context in which remembering the past occurs. As mentioned earlier, personal memory is always an active, selective, and purposive process of reconstruction, which is inseparable from the influence of the present. From this perspective, remembering one's own past will reflect in subtle ways some cultural norms and values absorbed from the host country context. But even the conscious focus on home culture, the strategic deployment of memories to bolster belonging to a secure bounded cultural group, when occurring from a position of partial absorption or gradual integration in a different cultural context, could be considered a transcultural memory practice. It does not dissolve, but problematizes or inflects identification with national, ethnic, and otherwise bounded forms of cultural memory.

Digital Memory

Transcultural memory can manifest itself in all types of memory practices and media. To what extent does the sharing of memories through digital media differ from other kinds of memory exchanges, notably by phone calls, letters, or personal interaction during migrant home trips? What makes digital media unique and interesting in our understanding of memory? The scope of this paper does not permit to delve deeply into the burgeoning literature on digital media memory, but a few important points shall be highlighted here.

Where temporarily or permanently displaced people struggle to integrate or adjust to an alienating environment, find themselves stressed by the demands of their daily lives, or feel lonely or homesick, digital media enables communicative exchanges—including the conscious utilization of memory to stimulate a sense of connection to the pre–migration past and belonging to meaningful places and social groups. Much more so than the receipt of a phone call or letter, the unexpected arrival of a message, image, video, or sound clip via WhatsApp or Facebook may induce spontaneous remembering and a sense of belonging, as it testifies to someone else reflecting on a mutually shared past and reaching out to connect across time and space. Perhaps more importantly, for individuals who find gratification or solace in reminiscence, but lack communication partners, social media platforms provide an implied audience, "friends" who may or may not participate in active communication.

Hoskins (2017b) argues that the "connective turn," the sudden abundance of digital media has fundamentally changed what memory is and what it does. In today's digital media culture, the dominant form of sociality is what he calls "sharing without sharing,"—a compulsive behavior of posting, forwarding, and commenting that is primarily motivated by the rules of participation and the obligation to reciprocate. Viewed in this light, the digitally connected

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African migrant participant who receives messages and pictures referencing the past from her friends and relatives is compelled to acknowledge or comment, feeling obliged to engage in reciprocal acts of memory sharing. However, the findings of this research illustrate that many of the participants were very discriminate about their use of social media and their level of communication, given the time pressures they face. As remembering is always linked with self–identity goals (Freeman 2010), the compulsion to participate in the digital sharing of memories is weighed against the needs of fostering identity projects and the desire to belong to particular groups.

As digital networks are increasingly structuring the formation of memory, both the human and technological aspects of memory are closely intertwined (Van Dijck 2011:2); in the "socio–technical practices of memory–making and memory retrieval" (Van House and Churchill 2008), both human and technological agency play a role. One can prevail upon, dominate, or prompt the other in complex intertwined ways. Ultimately, the process of remembering is always performed in the minds of individuals, but online technology and social media communication can provide clues that stimulate remembrance and digitally–generated mnemonics may be carried over into analogue forms, notably verbal communication.

If social media hence facilitate remembrance in various ways, it is important to note that "people do not generate memories by means of networked platforms", explains Van Dijck (2011:4), drawing on Hoskins (2009). Rather it is "the dynamic of connection," the "connective work of human contributors" that constitutes the essence of memory and gives meaning and impact to texts, images, videos, and sound files uploaded on websites or shared through social media. This dynamic of connection occurs on two levels. There is, firstly, the technologically-facilitated linking of a plethora of different media and thoughtful acts of combination—

manifested for instance in the adding of a witty caption to a memorable image (as was mentioned in some of the narratives), a meaningful piece of music or a voice–over to a video, the collation of several images or their juxtaposition in comparison. Such "work" of linkage, combination, and association is performed very deliberately by human actors and intended to evoke memory through connection; it becomes worthwhile and meaningful only when shared. The connected media elements—the crafted "memory prompt"—constitutes a signifier in its own right, which can be fully decoded only by those belonging to the "in–group." As the data presented above illustrates, receiving such memory prompts may result in positive emotions, for example, prompting a laugh or causing a warm, loving feeling, not only because they precipitate fond memories, but because the ability to understand the signifier affirms one's belonging to a loved one or a social group with deep roots in one's autobiographical past.

The second level of connection facilitated by social media is the networking and interconnecting of persons and social groupings. The findings of this research illustrate the importance of WhatsApp groups and Facebook networks of family, friends, alumni, religious congregations, and local associations of migrants, in exchanging and discussing memories. The social media facilitated practice of evoking and distributing references to a mutually experienced past, fosters a group–based memory culture among individuals dispersed across geographical space, but often focused on localized, place–embedded memories. For the generation of this study's participants, who have already grown up with digital technology, many of the remembered episodes (e.g., graduation) will have been documented at the time of their erstwhile occurrence; they can now easily be retrieved, in some cases virtually beckoning to be compared with present–day data. Social media hence promotes not only the constant interweaving of past

and present by drawing on its own stored resources, but may even create a kind of "filter bubble" for memories.

Conclusion

One of the characteristics of the field of Memory Studies is the overwhelming emphasis on the memory of trauma and victimization – the personal and collective memories of suffering, violence and death – both internationally and especially in an African context. Far less research attention has been paid to other types of remembrance and memory in alternative types of contexts. Although a few studies make cursory reference to memory (e.g., Bakewell and Binaisa 2016), the systematic exploration of reminiscence, the process of mentally indulging in a fondly remembered past, or simply ordinary recall, the mundane activity of remembering that underpins every aspect of our daily existence, is neglected in the field of African migration. The present research makes a small contribution to this lacuna. The findings illustrate how digital media platforms are used to conjure up fond childhood memories, nostalgic memories of home, recollect funny episodes and warmly remembered interactions with friends and loved ones, as well as share proud memories of educational and other achievements. Such remembrance and memory–based communications give meaning to present experiences, provide continuity to self–identity, and foster a sense of belonging for migrants in a context of alienation.

Compared with sharing memories in personal interactions during phone calls and home trips, the use of digital platforms is significant for its formation of new memory groups, especially through the use of network-based social media and the popular practice of establishing WhatsApp groups. Images shared or comments posted will not always be relevant to every individual in the virtual group, notably when groups of friends contain both persons from the home and host country, yet everyone is part of the audience, and can listen, observe, make their

voice heard, and tell their own story. As opposed to personal interactions between locally-based groups of family and friends, digitally-linked individuals dispersed in the diaspora are subject to more diverse situational factors and cultural reference points influencing the process of remembering, which may over time lead to the emergence of a new transcultural memory.

The results of this study are obviously not generalizable. Limitations include the small sample size and other factors generic to qualitative research and the case study approach. This study has moreover not attempted to determine patterns and analyze findings in relation to gender, class, religious affiliation, migration experience and other demographic and circumstantial factors that could have a bearing on the use of social media. It is worth re–emphasizing that all participants and their communication partners in various African countries had access to the requisite technology. Different results may have been obtained from interviewing poor and uneducated economic migrants with very limited and, perhaps, expensive access to the Internet. Perhaps for them, indulging in remembrance on social media might be a luxury, de–prioritized against essential communication and information exchanges that support their efforts at survival. Further research can focus on comparing the role of memory in the communicative exchanges of different categories of migrants, but also investigate socio–cultural patterns of mnemonic practice in different geographical and transcultural memory contexts.

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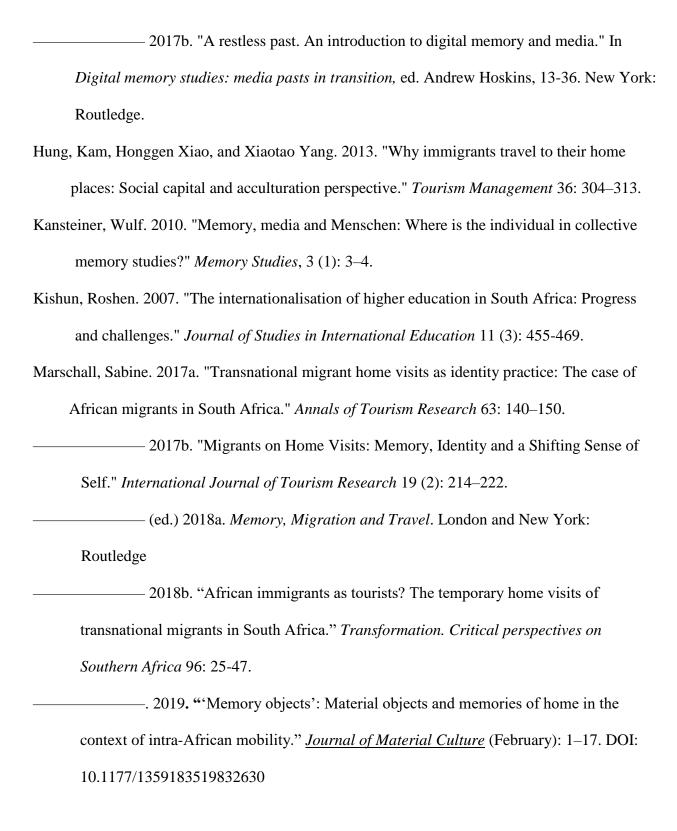
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