



Some people said they could no longer live here because it required too much emotional energy to do so – great highs, like the soccer World Cup are too soon followed by deep lows. PICTURE: BILL OLNEY



Though many believe that the advent of new technologies and social media has 'brought the world closer', Maria Marchetti-Mercer, head of psychology at the University of Pretoria, suggests that this is an illusion which has prevented people from coming to terms with the manner in which emigration destroys relationships. PICTURE: LA TIMES

I hated Christmas as a child. This annual celebration only seemed to bring into stark focus the fact that I had no extended family. There were no aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents. They existed, but all lived elsewhere in the world.

I don't remember when my aunts left the country. I was too young to notice or grasp the significance. What it would mean to never really know your family or be part of one because they lived so far away I never asked why they left. They never explained. There seemed no need.

Leaving South Africa, ironically seemed to be an essential characteristic of being South African, like boerwors and braais. They left in the 1970s along with many South Africans looking to escape the political upheavals, persecution and uncertainty in the country. As the political climate worsened and a state of emergency was declared in the 1980s, I would ask my parents why they had chosen for us to stay.

It was an automatic question. I had watched so many friends leave that it was logical to ponder why we had remained behind. Perhaps I, even thought that if we left, too we

would no longer have to carry the emotional burden of this perpetual sense of loss that this quiet exodus had wreaked on our lives.

In *Death of the Colonialist*, playwright Greg Latter suggests that this culture of emigration has been eating away at our social fabric, eroding familial bonds and friendships – the vital support systems meant to bolster individuals against the trials and tribulations of life.

He uses cancer as a metaphor for this pervasive malaise. In his play, that showed at the Market Theatre this year, the silent cancer manifests as a terminal disease in a woman whose family has been torn apart by emigration. The play is set in the present-day and gives expression to the new waves of emigration that have gripped the country in the post-apartheid era.

It's not political upheavals that motivated the two children in this fictional family to move to foreign shores, but crime.

As exiles returned and the recon-

structive aftermath that the birth of a supposed Rainbow Nation in 1994 inculcated widespread optimism, the culture of emigration that defined our nation seemed to abate. But it didn't take long before the honeymoon was over, and high crime rates, among other failures of the post-apartheid state, fostered disillusionment and new cycles of so-called "chicken runs".

The outcome of the ANC conference at Polokwane in 2007 and the "loadshedding" phenomenon, which followed on its heels, propelled many to leave, according to a new study by Professor Maria Marchetti-Mercer, head of psychology at the University of Pretoria, who has recently conducted qualitative research into emigration patterns and behaviour in present-day South Africa.

The emotional toll of political turmoil is often what drives people to new pastures, she proposes. One respondent in her study said they could no longer live in the country

because it "required too much emotional energy" to do so.

"South Africa is a manic depressive country. We experience great highs, like the soccer World Cup and then we are plunged to such lows so soon after. This takes emotional energy and some people obviously find it difficult to live in this kind of social environment," she commented during a recent presentation on the topic at the Origins centre.

Because the decision to leave South Africa was always historically tied to political events or realities in the country, today there still seems to be a sense that leaving the country is a politically loaded act.

This aspect came sharply into focus in Latter's play, where he positions emigration in the post-apartheid era as a particularly white phenomenon, underpinned by a sense of dislocation brought on by policies engineered to shift power

dynamics. In a moving soliloquy at the end of Latter's play the main protagonist alludes to this notion and argues for whites to remain put.

"You white chaps are all worried there's no place for you in this new South Africa. Well, that's not true. You go overseas and you have no roots there, no history – you're at sea there. I see it in the faces of my children. They love coming home and they hate going back. But they can't live with the fear here. What is it with us? We're not visitors in this country, you know?"

To forge a sense of belonging with the country of his birth, the character Smith has to reconcile with history. He recounts history in such a way that he identifies with the Xhosa victims rather than the British colonials. This identification reaches an apogee when he smears red earth over his white skin, obscuring his racial heritage.

Like most South Africans, Latter has seen many friends and family members leave the country. He suggests that many leave in a move to regain control over their lives.

"Though they left for greener pastures, maybe it's more true to say they left because of fear of losing ownership, the future, control over their lives – an illusion in many ways," he asserts.

In her research Marchetti-Mercer found that many of the Africans respondents felt that they no longer belonged in the country.

"They felt that they were involved in another Great Trek."

Post-apartheid emigration is not limited to white people: black South Africans seeking better work opportunities have also been leaving. Yolanda Mkhize left South Africa in 1996 and settled in Ontario, Canada. She left because of the limited opportunities and the inadequate so-

cial infrastructure.

"I could go to college there, even if I did not have a cent in my bank account. I did not even have to get a part-time job while I studied full time and also had good childcare fully subsidised," Mkhize said.

"I did not need to have parents who could afford to pay for my education, nor was I limited in my choice of study by a bursary."

"Another thing, at the worst of times, the unemployment rate (in Canada) is between seven percent and eight percent. So if you want to find a job, you will find one. So the chances of being homeless, hungry or without clothes on mine and my child's back are close to zero."

Safety was also a concern for Mkhize, who is a single mother.

"This place felt safe in every respect. So I knew that even if I ended up living in the streets, they would be safe streets. I have heard horror

stories about many job interviews that turned into sexual harassment when I was trying to find a job in SA. Such things would make prime-time news here. The health-care system (in Canada) is phenomenal."

Thirty-six-year-old Mkhize resents people vilifying South Africans for choosing to leave the country, reading their exodus as some kind of betrayal or tacit judgment on the new political dispensation.

"I exercised my right to live in a place or country of my choosing. I made choices and changes that were for my personal benefit. People have done that throughout history. It's a new thing for black South Africans – moving around the world freely, leaving by choice, not (being forced into) exile."

One of the other benefits for South Africans living elsewhere is that they are no longer boxed in by historical racial identities.

"There is something empowering about being in a place where nobody

knows you. You get to attempt being your best self, sort of reinvent yourself. That is and was very appealing to me."

Traditionally discourses on South Africa's emigration culture have centred on the exiles – certainly a canon of South African and African contemporary literature is devoted to this aspect.

This focus has been mirrored in the field of psychology, according to Marchetti-Mercer, who aims through her study to shift attention to the "victims" of emigration, that is the large groups of people who are left behind when someone leaves the country. Their emotional pain is rarely acknowledged.

"People use all their emotional energy on the move and what they have to go through that they don't have much to give to the people who are left behind," she says.

Though many believe that the advent of new technologies and social media have "brought the world closer", Marchetti-Mercer suggests

that this is an illusion, which has prevented people from coming to terms with the manner in which emigration destroys relationships.

"Fifty years ago when people emigrated they would write a letter and get a response three months later. You only spoke for 50 seconds on the phone at Christmas because it was so expensive. So back then people were forced to say goodbye properly."

"People don't say goodbye properly anymore because they have a lot of faith in technology. They say: 'Don't worry, we'll be skipping tomorrow'. (These new technologies) help, but they also create a bit of an illusion around intimacy."

Those who are left behind experience emotional ambivalence, says Marchetti-Mercer.

It's ambiguous loss, too, because the person is psychologically present, but physically absent.

"This is the case with emigration, where they live somewhere else, but are still very much part of your life. They are still alive, but it might feel as if they have died."

"Many friends did refer to emigration as a kind of death. That it is the death of a relationship as they know it. What made it quite difficult staying behind, was that the people who left did not acknowledge that this was a loss for them at all."

Those left behind are also saddled with ideological baggage.

"When you have friends of the same kind of age group leaving, there is a conflict between the ones who are staying and the ones who are going. Not only because the ones going are going start to bidmouth the country, but when they say they can't bring up their children here they make others feel bad about doing so. One woman asked me if she was as bad a parent for staying behind."

Predominantly it is young people who are more likely to emigrate, consequently parents are the worst hit by the phenomenon, posits Marchetti-Mercer.

All three of Merle Greenwood's sons emigrated and she has been on an emotional rollercoaster ever since.

"At times I feel angry I am not sure if I am angry at the children or the country. My feelings fluctuate between being pleased for them and then feeling very angry," observed the Sandton-based mom.

Greenwood was adamant that she would not move overseas to be with her children.

"They have to make their own lives. Besides, as she observes, 'You don't know where they will end up'."

Her middle son, who emigrated to the UK has now settled in New York.

The hardest moments are Mother's Days and Father's Days, says Greenwood.

"One year on Mother's Day, we visited the Walter Sisulu Park and when we looked around all we saw were parents with their children and grandchildren. We felt devastated and sad."

To combat these feelings, she says, they are going to places where families tend to gather. They have also sought out friends in similar circumstances, who provide each other with support in difficult moments, such as when their children have been in the country for a visit and they are returning from the airport and are faced with the bleak "emptiness in the house. It is terrible to return home after dropping them off at the airport."

In this way Greenwood implies that seeing her children can be just as painful as being away from them. Every time they part, the loss is replayed.

Emigration isn't just an historical part of South African culture, it has also become part of the post-apartheid experience. What happens to those left behind, asks Mary Corrigan

We're not visitors in this country, you know!

You get to attempt being your best self... reinvent yourself

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