

Unbuttoning, appropriation, reconstruction: Histories of the past and present

Book review:

Nuttall, S & Coetzee, C (eds) (1998) **Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa**. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-571503-9pbk. 300 pages.

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Negotiating the past is a deconstruction of the complex ways in which South Africans understand who they were; and who they are. This identity-quest through memory, as editors, Nuttall and Coetzee argue, defeats an agenda motivated by a simple unbuttoning of “historical truth”. Historical unbuttoning, pervasive in early discourse about the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, asserts a linear relationship between “truth”, a past which is uncoverable, and “healing”, which is to be somehow liberated by / from this truth/past. Rather, within the diversity of tactics and strategies of subjectification that are available to us, this book suggests that we “find ourselves” in the past-present-future through the work of invention, as public memories are mobilised, contested and negotiated. The “interiority” of memories and selves are fashioned through the reflexive folding in / back of these discontinuous, exterior surfaces of truths/pasts (cf. Rose, 1998).

South African academics from a range of disciplines have been assembled by Nuttall and Coetzee to theorise the liminal spaces between private and public, fiction and facts, fragments and whole, memory and forgetting. To their credit, the editors have resisted essentialising definition of what “memory” is - see encoding, storage and retrieval in undergraduate psychology textbooks - preferring to open the *process* of memory-making to various theoretical, societal and subjective inscriptions. This has the effect of unblocking ideas about multi-layered contexts of truths (or providing theoretical tools and lenses to do this); and recharging intellectual debate in South Africa’s post-TRC context, where discourse about past/truth has tended to get rather stuck with caricatured binary opposites. On the one hand, the hegemony of “historical truth” (e.g. evil Apartheid ideology) and “brute facts” (e.g. deaths); and on the other, anything-goes relativism (e.g. multiple versions of pasts) (cf. Braude, 1998). The problematic of the hegemonic war-cry - “but, is that true?” - lies in its morally superior position; and in its

power to dismiss truth's Other, and to disallow account of the manufacture of that truth/Other.

Rather, **Negotiating the past** interrogates the historicised conditions of possibility for truth(s), and asks about what we - as witnesses and manufacturers - are enabled to *do* with truth(s). This offers engagement with the loci and "usefulness" of truthful memories: who are they useful to, why, how, when, and so on? The authors gather variously demarcated texts, such as autobiography, museum exhibitions, advertisements, stories from the TRC hearings, Robben Island, etc., and explore these as surfaces of emergence for memory-making. Thematically, the book is divided into four sections. The first section deals with responses to the TRC as a forum for the production of truthful memory, particularly the relation between individual testimony and collective memory. The second section explores strategies of the self and selving through story-telling and confession, and through the (re)inscription of bodies with marks of history. The third section looks at particular projects undertaken to intervene in memory-making (e.g. museums). The last section addresses institutional responses to memory's limits, and the significance of historical traces in the transformation of discourse (e.g. the new Constitution).

The TRC was a multi-layered, institutionalised space which promised (racialised) reconciliation through access to a/the truthful past. Njabulo Ndebele's chapter argues for the need to establish reflective engagement with "the truth" through the narratives of the TRC, a shared "reality" grounded in "validated mass experience" (p20), to counter the lies, division and "the moral desert" produced through Apartheid. This position would problematise, for example, the discontinuity of a Eugene De Kock re-casting his past in terms of a shifting present, editing his/our memory to present himself as mad, misunderstood or harmless.

Counterpoised against this argument is Ingrid de Kok's chapter, which warns that the TRC's strategy of national reconciliation produces amnesia about the past through the sense of wanting to forget, silence or transcend it; or through the production of a seamless, unitary, homogenous collective memory of the past by way of narrowing of the definitions of victimhood and power. Within this frame, Eugene De Kock is understood to use the TRC to re-assemble a shattered self; as would survivors of human rights abuses. Using the metaphor of a "cracked heirloom" for memory processes in South Africa, Ingrid de Kok argues that the task of memory is not to "heal" in such a way that fractures are rendered invisible; but that memory-making might include fragmentation, contradiction, turbulence and pain, to constitute new registers of selving.

Andre Brink's chapter theorises post-Apartheid "truth" by way of post-structuralist reflexivity about writing history/fiction. Despite his advocacy of story-telling as an appropriate form of remembering the past (whether in the TRC hearings or in fiction), Brink doubts the possibility of historical truth or facts. The production of history has the subject "entangled in a patchwork of different versions and stories" (p34). Thus, individual testimonies in the TRC are read with and against one another, always-already in the context of the TRC's mobilisation of particular public memories about South African history. Similarly, in fiction, archival lacunae produce powerful symbols for the creative re-narrativization of the past/present. In both instances, audiences of

the stories compare versions, choose among them, or construct composite versions from all / some of them.

Brink's ideas produce predictable flutters from reviewers. Sutherland (1998) asks whether this means historical truth becomes "just another story". Braude (1998) accuses Brink of historical relativism, conservatism, and of "detached theoretical contemplation" of fact/fiction and history/story which undermines the TRC's socio-political legitimacy. Back to binary opposites, then, and perhaps over-hastily so. A possible reading of Brink's project is that he uses the potentially subversive space of history to re-cast the modern subject-in-crisis, to deconstruct the texts of history/truth, and to forge a critical, politically motivated position on truth in the service of power, from which the memory-making strategies of the TRC - legitimate or not - would *not* be exempt. Those that oppose relativism (or constructionism) characterise its creative anarchy as totalising; as if its agency is unfettered by any structural or discursive restraint. In Foucault's view, subjectivity - the work of selving - is more complicated than the triumph of either duality (e.g. history *or* story); and is enmeshed in the interstices between them (e.g. history *and* story).

This theme is pursued in the second section of the book, with regard to the relation of the corporeal body to the body politic, and the marking of history on the body, already inscribed by gender and race. As a form of social diagnosis, Michael Godby's chapter finds in Kentridge's short film **The history of the main complaint**, the vocabulary of the white male body (e.g. with stressed and excessive lifestyle) and metaphors of disease (e.g. with cancer that must be excised). Impelled to confess the "sins" of his past, and institutionally cleansed, the cartooned white male body is stricken with ironic healing in the form of being enabled to resume his stock-brokering-work. There is equal irony in white Afrikaans-speaking women's quest for hybrid-inscription in Carli Coetzee's chapter. As a kind of counter-memory to displace centuries of disclaimed identity, Coetzee explores the cultural appropriation of a seventeenth-century KhoiSan woman, Krotoa, as "an Afrikaner fore-mother" (p114). This re-narrativization of the past brings, argues Coetzee, an uneasy silencing of Krotoa's sorrow and conflict; and a (mistaken) reading of Krotoa's silence as forgiveness and forgetting.

This book deserves to be read. It is filled with ideas and many theoretical twists and turns; and, powerfully, it asks rude questions about identities and memories, unsettles what we take for granted, and resists quiescence and synthesis. *Don't* be put off by fore-warnings of "off-putting academic discourse" (Sutherland, 1998). There are sufficient hooks - pressing questions about the negotiation of a heinous past within an uncertain present, and incisive bouts of textual analysis - to sustain and scaffold the theoretically challenging pieces. Antjie Krog, poet and former TRC-journalist, has spoken of the "gatvol" factor in recent public discourse about truth, memory and our collective history in South Africa; a sense of weariness, perhaps, numbing, saturation and paralysis as the harrowing stories of our pasts are recycled. Nuttall and Coetzee's book resists "gatvol" discourse through reframing debate in fresh theoretical ways that implicate the selving-work of all readers as manufacturers of truth and memory, and impel them to interrogate the historicised conditions of these constructions.

REFERENCES.

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