

Imbrication: Reading a South African life

Published in the same year in which student movements in South Africa and across the world challenged universal claims within philosophical, social, applied, and scientific disciplines and domains of knowledge, this challenging intellectual memoir by N Chabani Manganyi makes for absorbing reading.

The temporal context opens in the early years of World War II, in a small village in the then Union of South Africa, and tracks a seven-decade search for meaning and truth by the author. Manganyi is a pre-eminent reader of the world and its texts – embodied, scripted, literary, critical and performed. The method of life, exemplified in this memoir, is of the reader, in Alberto Manguel's explication of the term, with reading as an active, archaeological, erudite, committed, passionate and dialogical skill (Manguel, 1996). Having taught a course on the history of reading and writing in Africa just before reading this book, I was struck here by the case it makes for a reading life – at a time when instrumental and marketised forms of knowledge stridently proclaim their worth. As an historian of medicine and health in Africa, searching out connections between fields of specialist study that often pursue similar questions in isolation, and against the backdrop of many ill-grounded attacks on the worth of the archive of human knowledge since the 1500s, I was emboldened by the approach Manganyi has taken in his intellectual life. Imperfect; bloodied; shot through with power – all these reports of the structures of specialist knowledge are recorded by Manganyi in his searches; but he also shows them to be imbricated with the marks and forms of the vanquished and the oppressed, and this memoir demonstrates how he uses and stretches and reforms these in the service of his own original

Catherine Burns

Centre for Sexualities,
AIDS and Gender, & the
Department of History
University of Pretoria
Pretoria

cath@burns.org.za

work. Manganyi's view on the canon and archive bequeathed to us in this era is not fashionable, and will be seen by some readers as conservative and even reactionary. As this book shows he regards it as irreplaceable for the new work to come.

This memoir evinces yet another level of insight into excellence, offering a sharp rebuke to discipline isolationists, and a trenchant commentary on the worth of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in academic life. Here the lessons will be seen as clearly radical and to take them up will require expanding and recasting the traditions that keep, for example, psychology, literature, statistics, and history undergraduate degrees (to offer four examples) largely separated in their curricula and approaches at universities south of the Zambezi. As the central chapters of the book show, Manganyi was dedicated to understanding and mastering the required specialist knowledge in his discipline of psychology, and applied his time and mind to achieve just this. But this was not the end point of his life as an intellectual or academic. First, for reasons of institutional state-instigated racial injustice and the cowardliness of key figures (the black teaching hospital where he was based had no psychologists on the team, and so he worked from the outset as a graduate student with a multi-disciplinary team with a psychiatric and medical approach), and later, because of the choices made by an elite western institution (where the chosen method of work was team based), his immersion in research was saturated with, and dependent on, interconnection between fields. His labours for his doctorate, and his simultaneous writing of a study of interior suffering and anguish in exile, is explained in this memoir as the production of knowledge occasioned by the power of the interstices.

At a time when Manichean world views have taken hold on the right and left of the political spectrum globally, this memoir is a secular hymn to the openness, self worth, generosity and courage that combines to make excellence, and to produce new knowledge, without losing the capacity for hard critical attack or moral certainty.

The title, **Apartheid and the making of a Black psychologist** is a compromise between major and minor keys and themes, played out simultaneously as idea-chords in this elegantly written book. Students of Apartheid and of the field of psychology will draw from deep wells of insight here, and for this reason I hope that history, politics, sociology, anthropology, medicine and psychology students will find this added to the suggested and new canons of required reading at universities in our region soon. But the book also places both the form of governance and ideology known as Apartheid, and the form of knowledge and therapy called psychology, into the wider sea of life over the last 70 years. This book allows us to see why Manganyi's published work in psychology on the themes of violence and suffering, and in allied fields of critical social thought, including life-writing and art history, has already received critical acclaim for its prescience, its

deep and precocious engagement with global black studies and post colonial theory, as well as its rare philosophical commitment (Macleod, 2004; Hook & Howarth, 2005; Hayes, 2011; and Masemola, 2012). Scholars have noted Manganyi's constant reverberation, in his thought and writing, between the possibilities opened up by the therapeutic purpose, the efficacy, and the discipline of taking a clinical psychological history of an individual, and that person's wider biography; as well as the wider local and global context of personhood, making the anguish and joy of any person resonant with meaning. This memoir will bring new and seasoned scholars of Manganyi's work to appreciate the courage he evinced, sometimes through mentorship (which he fulsomely and warmly records and acknowledges through the book, from his earlier days in primary schooling, university days in Apartheid South Africa, to his experiences at leading universities in the west), and more often through autodidactic labour, to expand his universe of knowledge and salt his approach by reading the best thought of his peers and forebears. In this Manganyi shows himself to be truly rare: a man of intellectual and personal confidence, even when his own fears threatened to engulf him, approaching the world's thinkers and practitioners with an open mind – a phrase that echoes throughout this memoir. His open mind in the face of his experiences of institutional and personal racism, personal suffering and injury, remained a life commitment even as he faced the wider storm of South Africa under the deepening, cracking system of oppression. Through his constant reading he opened himself to the thoughts of radical black power activists in the USA, and also to the works of French Marxist and existentialist thinkers; to the challenges against class and race binaries levied by socialist and radical feminisms; as well as to the social history methodology of empirically dedicated Thompsonian inspired historians of Africa, the USA and Europe. Often his milieu facilitated this engagement – time at Yale University in a multi-disciplinary community health environment with colleagues emerging into specialisations from broad liberal arts undergraduate educations; time at the African Studies Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand with historians, literary specialists, photographers and archivists; and so on. But much of Manganyi's encyclopaedic reading was the work of sweat and dedication over many years of deep reflection and the combination of the dogged pursuit of truth, and a delight in imagination and the arts.

Over a life time of work he helped to establish the field of community therapy, bringing his unique and wide knowledge to bear on the historical context of violence and pathology in his region of birth, drawing on global knowledge, insights, evidence and poetic imagination. His pragmatic and applied energies were always twinned to his complex considerations of the complexities of mind and embodiment, and he paved the way for what we would today call the fields of neuropsychology, literary and cultural psychiatry, and medical humanities, each with attendant departments, research centres, and journals in their fields. This memoir will, I hope, inspire and challenge because of how the

author traces the seams and borders between his work on paraplegia, on the condition known as albinism, and his broader investigations of violence, trauma and race. Later in his career Manganyi was able to consolidate and receive validation for his own multi-faceted approach, joining with like-minded groups internationally in his reading of, and work on, pathographies and on the body and its role in politics and the somaticisation of power. Here he drew on his first work, published even before embarking on his doctoral degree, on reconsiderations of hysteria in a South African context. I was certainly given pause when I considered whether it was racism alone, or also short-sighted disciplinary chauvinism, that prevented him from being appointed to lead a major Psychology Department in the dying days of the Apartheid era.

Manganyi devoted considerable effort and passion in the 20 years of his prime academic career to the development of University structures and life in South Africa – battling with the contradiction, corruption and hypocrisy of the Bantustan system in his leadership roles, and, in the era after Mandela’s release, in his herculean efforts and uneven successes, in the rebuilding of an institution in a unified South Africa. His struggles to build higher education in the region would occasion a review of their own. These sections of the memoir add considerably to our understanding of the dangers of ethnic and racial exclusion and of authoritarianism, and warn of the stifling effects of state control on independent learning and critical thought. We can certainly draw insights from the analysis of his experiences at several university institutions, and their oft ill-fated efforts at transformation, in our current era. Manganyi’s contribution here is the work of memory against forgetting. He thinks of a university as a body, using the metaphors of vitality, illness, health and pathology to animate its every day life. His warning about the tyrannical zeal that so rapidly can engulf and destroy an institutional of learning is well taken.

The memoir culminates with his analysis of his team’s creation of the Political Violence and Health Resources Project at the height of the last monumental political battles of the Apartheid era, and the work he did in a series of complex political trials as an expert witness on behalf of women and men charged with serious crimes as defined by the Apartheid state. The transcripts at the close of the book were published at a time in 2016 when some of the political detainees of the 1980s era were once again in the news spotlight, in the midst of enduring bids for power, but now in the time of the Zuma Cabinet. Scholars of South African legal procedure, evidence leading, and political culture will find many apposite insights into boyhood, memory, masculinity and the role of patriarchy in these closing sections of the book, as Manganyi parses the underlying causes of radical political action and the use of political violence. These book-end reflections echo Manganyi’s opening sections, when he depicts and examines the layers of meaning evoked by images of his father. In extant mental and

photographic images he traces the long shadows they cast over his own journey, and allows the reader to understand something of the meaning and contribution of his own life.

References

Hayes, G (2011) (Re-)introducing N Chabani Manganyi. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, **41**, 1-6.

Hook, D & Howarth, C (2005) Future directions for a critical social psychology of racism/antiracism. **Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology**, **15(6)**, 506-512.

Macleod, C (2004) South African psychology and 'relevance': Continuing challenges. **South African Journal of Psychology**, **34(4)**, 613-629.

Manganyi, N C (2016) **Apartheid and the making of a Black psychologist**. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Manguel, A (1996) **A history of reading**. Toronto: A A Knopf.

Masemola, K M (2012) Reverie qua worldliness in the wilderness texts: The autobiographical fiction of Es'kia Mphahlele and N Chabani Manganyi. **Journal of African Cultural Studies**, **24(1)**, 55-72.