

David Johnson, *Imagining the Cape Colony: History, Literature and the South African Nation*

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Imagining the Cape Colony is a slim but dense work which examines how this part of the world has been written up and analysed as a political community by eighteenth-century travellers, thinkers and theorists from Europe; but also by settler rebels, emancipationists and early African nationalists who drew on Enlightenment precepts of equality and governance in various ways, and for various reasons. Surrounding and giving texture to this enquiry is attention to a wide range of historical and literary works, allowing us to see how certain elements of the past come into cultural visibility at certain moments, and why. For “poetical genius”, to quote the young radical Robert Southey who appears in these pages, “is certainly a barometer that rises or falls according to the state of the political atmosphere” (p 21).

In a short, incisive introduction, Johnson considers influential Anglo-American theorists of national imaginaries (Benedict Anderson) and the cultural pressures of “national allegory” in the newly postcolonial state (Frederic Jameson), as well as their critics from the global South. Partha Chatterjee, Maya Jasanoff and Aijaz Ahmad are invoked to question the idea of those in the postcolonial world as “perpetual consumers of modernity” (p 2), and to probe less determined, more locally specific ways of figuring the social in the wake of decolonisation. Heeding such warnings, but still retaining a sense of the need to “interrogate the nexus between national/political and literary narratives” (p 7), Johnson offers southern Africa as a particular case study through which to read debates surrounding colonial historiography and postcolonial imaginings of the nation.

Why does all this matter? Because, the author suggests, we need to hold in mind the dissonance between the democratic, egalitarian values espoused by Enlightenment thinkers – values underpinning the Western European “blueprint” of the modern nation state, and taken up (selectively)

by Thabo Mbeki's presidency, for instance – and the persistence of structural inequality in a place like South Africa. Postcolonial and post-apartheid returns to this eighteenth-century legacy yield (in Johnson's sternly Marxian reading) both a lofty language of political inclusion, and a grim logic of neo-liberalism, economic deregulation and chronic unemployment. This contradiction in the present "functions as *the* organizing problematic for reading the histories and literatures of the Cape Colony, 1770–1830" (p 5).

The Khoihoi victory over the Portuguese Viceroy Almeida in 1510 and its literary afterlives; French representations of the Cape "Hottentots" in the late eighteenth century; Dutch settler republicanism and the failed "revolutions" at Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam between 1795 and 1799; the impressions of American visitors to the Cape following the War of Independence; the complex history of the Griqua nation as embodied in Andries Waterboer's and Hendrick Hendricks's "writing back" to European ideas of nation – such far-flung topics are dealt with in chapters which generally perform a dual function. First, they assess how "egalitarian discourses of the northern-hemisphere revolutions" are deployed on the Cape frontier during "the violent expansion of capitalist economic relations into Xhosa and Khoikhoi societies" (p 137). Second, they track twentieth-century (and in particular 1990s) revisitings of such events – by ANC politicians, by poets, novelists and playwrights – and generally find much to be anxious about in the way that such violent ructions in southern African history are cherry-picked and packaged into a succession of all too usable pasts. In this sense, figures as different as Mbeki and André Brink are revealed as failing in the principal task that Georg Lukacs ascribed to the historical novel: that it should represent the past as "the concrete precondition of the present" (p 140).

The book is a joint publication between the university presses of Edinburgh and Cape Town, and one sees the logic of this structural underpinning in the way that Johnson tracks the intersections between the Scottish Enlightenment and the Cape: a geopolitical rest-stop on the way to somewhere more profitable that was (as Kipling put it) "snatch'd and bartered off from hand to hand" by various European powers. As such, the early chapters trace a dense network of associations between social ferment in France and discourses of political economy in Edinburgh; this in turn allows us to explore the relation between aesthetic and political representation in texts about Britain's new colonial possession at the tip of Africa. In a meticulous way, then, close readings of figures like Rousseau, Adam Smith, Southey, Francois Levallant and Lady Anne Barnard enable us to approach a central paradox in the constitution of modern South Africa: that because of its tragically delayed decolonisation, ours is a country that could only begin to assert its nationhood at a moment when that very category was being undermined by the high tide of economic globalisation.

This vexed historical juncture is dramatised forcefully as the book tracks Mbeki's erratic invocations of the colonial encounter. In November 2003 he praises Robespierre and Rousseau at France's National Assembly

(while asking for investment); but at the reburial of Sarah Baartman in August 2002 he condemns French scientific racism as represented by Baron Georges Cuvier, who dissected her body (a speech that has been read by Neville Hoad amongst others, as a coded discussion of his HIV/AIDS policy). In 1999, at the retirement of Nelson Mandela, Mbeki reactivates a long dormant narrative of indigenous resistance to Portuguese encroachment, evoking the 1510 Khoikhoi victory over Dom Francisco de Almeida on the shores of Table Bay. Yet at the Mozambican National Assembly in May 2002 he refers warmly to Vasco da Gama's description of this part of Africa as a *Terra da Boa Gente* – a phrase which was, Johnson remarks, “an anomalous precursor to centuries of plunder” (p 189). The author wonders what the Mozambican audience made of this, but his own verdict is unwavering: placed in context, such citations of the colonial encounter (we read in the book's closing lines) “point ... to what is suppressed: the imagining of political community under neo-colonialism” (p 193).

The admonitory and sometimes hectoring tone here reveals the difficulties associated with Johnson's approach. At the launch of the work in Cape Town, he spoke about the difficulties in balancing what Ernst Bloch referred to as the “warm current” and the “cold current” of Marxist thought, and quoted Antonio Gramsci's gnomic phrase: “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”. Finishing this book with a great deal of admiration for the calibre of scholarship and the careful textual work that it contains, I nonetheless wondered if the cold tap had been left on too long. There is a rather melancholy feel to the text, stemming perhaps from a sense of belatedness. Today, the strenuous and prickly intellectualism of the Mbeki presidency seems very far away indeed. Public discourse has shifted in populist, not to say recidivist, directions; the South African-funded libraries of Timbuktu that Mbeki harnessed to his vision of an African Renaissance remain empty. On Human Rights Day 2012, the ANC under Jacob Zuma summarily relocated the commemoration of the Sharpeville massacre to Soweto's Kliptown, never mind some distant episode in the colonial archive.

As a literary scholar, I found much to agree with in Johnson's suggestion that, far from transcending “the prosaic discourses of history and law”, many recent literary re-imaginings of the colonial encounter project to a disconcerting degree “the anxieties and concerns of their contingent political present(s) onto the past” (p 140). The phrases are from a textured account of how Cape slavery appears in novels, poems and plays from the early nineteenth century onwards. The long historical reach of Johnson's enquiry allows us to read abolitionist discourse and early adventure yarns like *Makanna* (1834) and Edward Augustus Kendall's *The English Boy at the Cape* (1835) alongside late twentieth-century literary revisitings, from V.M. Fitzroy's *When the Slave Bell Told* (1970) to the late and post-apartheid works of Brink, Rayda Jacobs and Yvette Christiaanse. What many of them share, Johnson suggests, is the portrayal of slavery as “a safe target, as deserving the righteous loathing of a self-congratulatory readership” (p 145). And also, a refusal to admit linkages between past and present: such literary works “have typically ignored, denied or repressed the

continuities between exploitation under slavery and exploitation under capitalism” (p 153).

However, in seeing all cultural texts as so wholly determined by (and symptomatic of) their economic function, much of the work settles into a rather predictable form of argumentation. Asking about the “asymmetry between the cultural representations of the Khoisan and their economic plight” (p 37) – the disjuncture between the |Xam motto enshrined on the national crest and the material conditions of a place like the Smitsdrift resettlement camp – Johnson poses the following questions:

[D]o the more positive representations of the Khoisan serve a compensatory ideological function? Do such representations offset the economic devastation inflicted upon them by the expanding capitalist economy of the settlers? Crucially, for Mbeki, has this eighteenth-century contradiction between cultural representation and economic impoverishment been transcended in post-apartheid South Africa? (p 37)

To which (one can hazard a guess), the answers are going to be, respectively: yes, no, and no. If that is, they are answerable in any meaningful sense. The questions, then, may well be purely rhetorical, and they isolate the problem of how to write with suppleness and surprise at the interface between economic history and literary studies. Is it too much to ask that a work of cultural critique begin with questions that it does *not* know the answers to already? Is it naïve to wonder if a close attention to texts as linguistic texture might allow us to think new things, rather than simply confirm old ideas?

Perhaps it is. The statistics and grim social indicators that Johnson reels off at regular intervals might incline one to abandon such thinking as woolly idealism. But I couldn't help feeling that some of this ground has been covered before, in more vital ways. Both J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988) and Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992) are texts about imagining the Cape Colony that – while also working to demystifying history within a cultural materialist paradigm – nonetheless remain rich, surprising, often flawed but still compelling pieces of scholarship: texts that do not release all their insights on first reading, and do not assume that they have the master-key to cultural analysis.

Finally, rather than the sometimes mechanistic sense of literary texts as easily decoded ideological apparatuses that hovers behind Johnson's work, I wanted an infusion of the warmer, more writerly cultural Marxism that he name-checks but does not seem to activate: the density and unpredictability of Gramsci, Jameson or Walter Benjamin. At the launch, Johnson invoked the latter's dictum that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” – and so the task of the critic is to “seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger”. But as always in Benjamin, the high seriousness and mystical turn of phrase is mixed with a dissonant

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and worldly irony: an awareness that “recognising” the past, or bending to our own present purposes, is inherent to all cultural production. And so we can’t, ever, be too sure of ourselves.

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