

Pumla Dineo Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/ Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

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In *What is Slavery to me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Pumla Dineo Gqola offers a nuanced analysis of the ways in which slave memory, as well as its enduring reverberations in contemporary South Africa, resists simplistic relegation to binary categories. She approaches the subject of South African slave memories by suggesting that it is more important to differentiate between various “sources and modes of historical authority” than it is to “rigidly establish a distinction between history and memory” (p 7). While her research falls within the field of postcolonial memory studies, she incorporates a range of conceptual and theoretical tools and her book will appeal to scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds.

In Chapter 1, “Remembering Differently: Repositioned Coloured Identities in a Democracy”, Gqola contributes to scholarly debates on coloured identity by investigating a number of texts in which memory, representational politics and identity construction shape one another in ways that are both complex and exciting. Academic attention to these dynamics remains important because coloured identity “continues to be susceptible to marginalisation in post-apartheid South Africa”.¹ In Chapter 2, she again traverses well-travelled theoretical terrain with a contribution entitled “(Not) Representing Sarah Bartmann” as she explores how “African feminist literary projects” (p 69) offer alternative engagements with this historical figure. It is a testament to Gqola’s innovative approach that her chapters on such extensively analysed topics as coloured identity and Sarah Bartmann manage to come across as fresh and valuable rather than rehashed and repetitive.

The issue of shame has been a crucial component in studies of both coloured identities and Bartmann, yet Gqola also traces this phenomenon in her chapter on “whiteness”. The need to problematise whiteness rather than simply assuming it as the default or normative subject position is as urgent

1. B. Janari, “The Making and Staging of Coloured Identity”, *Historia*, 57, 1, May 2012, p 199.

as ever in South Africa. Gqola also tackles this topic from an original vantage point by reading “specific new ways of negotiating Afrikaner/white identities with reference to claimed slave ancestry” (p 106). One of South Africa’s most widely read literary negotiations with white identity, namely Antjie Krog’s *Country of my Skull*, is analysed alongside a lesser known television series and televised documentary in a chapter entitled “Whiteness Remixed, or Remembered Impurity, Shame and Television”.

Two of Gqola’s chapters consider slave memories in relation to the construction of Malay identities in South Africa. In the first of these chapters, she finds it necessary to perform some complex theoretical manoeuvres as she argues that a combination of theories on diaspora is the most “productive lens through which to decode the enactment of Malayness in contemporary South Africa” (p 133). She begins this exploration with a useful reflection on the politics and implications of naming in terms of the labels, such as *Maleier*, Muslim, Malay, Cape Malay and *slamse*, which are used to describe this identity. Many of these terms remain imbued with the traces of colonial and apartheid ideologies and they thus cannot be used in an unproblematic way. After a careful mixture of diaspora theorisations, Gqola continues to offer a close reading of Rayda Jabobs’ *The Slave Book* to consider the feasibility of religious diaspora as “home spaces” (p 149).

Gqola follows her analysis of written texts with a discussion of what she refers to as two “visual sites that individually and collectively encode diasporic slave memory” (p 165), namely installations by Berni Searle and Cape Malay/ Capetonian Muslim food. Her exploration of these sites results in a fascinating chapter entitled “‘Is the Secret in the Cooking?’ Coded Food, Spice Routes and Processing Malay Identities”. Food emerges as a rich and multi-layered metaphor that reflects the complex association between food and Cape Malay identities. By building on the research of Gabeba Baderoon, Gqola reveals how the nature of food as a site of memory retains its profoundly gendered dynamics, even when men take the primary responsibility for the preparation of the food. This section, like the rest of the text, will be of particular significance to scholars who are interested in the gender dimensions of both historical and contemporary phenomena.

The provocative cover image of Gqola’s text is taken from one of Berni Searle’s installations called “Girl” from the “Colour Me” series. The piece offers the viewer three repeated photographs, in three rows, of the artist’s naked body. Each row, and thus each photographed body, is divided into four boxes. Glass bottles with spices in different colours are arranged in neat rows on top of each quartered photographic segment. Although this is not immediately apparent from the reproduction on the book cover, the bodies are covered with a different coloured spice in each row. Baderoon notes that the images in the “Colour Me” series “draw attention to the role of the spice [trade] in exoticising and exorcising a black presence in South Africa’s colonial past”.² This analysis, with its focus on the way in which

2. G. Baderoon, “Approach”, in M. Stevenson (ed.), *Berni Searle: Approach* (Institute of Research in Art, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, 2006), pp 12–15.

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Searle's use of her own body "interrupts bodies of knowledge and offers her body as evidence" (p 178) usefully extends the discussion in the chapter on Bartmann by further exploring the dynamics involved in the exhibition of women's bodies. Gqola contributes to the scholarly conversation about the additional ideological factors that come into play when the bodies on display are those of black women.

In her succinct conclusion, Gqola neatly ties together all the strands of her argument and she leaves the reader convinced "that creative renditions and rememoryings of slavery in contemporary South Africa [continue to] offer fertile ground for examination" (p 203). Gqola's text constitutes an intervention into existing academic work on these topics that will be both accessible to general readers and valuable to scholars who wish to enter these research fields from any number of disciplinary perspectives.

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