

*Onontkoombaar verleden. Reflecties op een veranderende
historische cultuur*

Inescapable past: Reflections on a changing historical culture

**(Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum, Nederland, 2020. ISBN
9789087048402)**

Maria Grever

Denise Bentrovato

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

denise.bentrovato@gmail.com

This collection of essays represents Maria Grever's farewell to Erasmus University in Rotterdam, where she founded the renowned Centre for Historical Culture in 2006 and as whose professor she is now retiring. The collection is dedicated to the topic of "historical culture", a multi-layered concept of which the author identifies three dimensions: 1. "the stories that people tell"; 2. "the formal and informal historical infrastructure" (such as schools, archives, museums); and 3. "conceptions of history", linked to terms such as "progress", "rise" and "fall". Historical culture, properly understood as a holistic access to the past, encompasses "both academic and popular history, articulated in material and immaterial culture" (p. 8).

The book, comprising ten chapters, is subdivided into four sections of which the first, entitled "Representations of the nation", explores shifting conceptions of national identity in the Netherlands in the last two centuries via two iconic female national figures. Chapter 1, focusing on visual images as powerful sources of collective memory and drawing on the work of scholars such as Jan and Aleida Assmann, Francis Yates and Pierre Nora, explores the cultural production and appropriation of the "Volendam girl", its associations with such notions as the nostalgic idea of the "good old days", and its figuration of "the 'whiteness'" supposedly characterising "the 'real' Dutch people" (p. 21). Chapter 2 examines the status of Beatrix, the Netherlands' former queen, as an incarnation of the national identity. The gender perspective underlying this section additionally directs our attention to cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity.

The second section, "Canon and Chronology", takes us further into the matter of national identity, with an emphasis on the "historical

infrastructure” that forms Grever’s second dimension of historical culture. The author challenges the assumption that the top-down construction and imposition of official histories, which this infrastructure mediates, serves to reinforce national identities and promote social cohesion; she argues instead for a non-interventionist approach to this matter on the part of governments and against the political use of the past in the service of national – and nationalist – ideologies. Chapter 3, focusing on national identity and historical awareness, is of particular relevance to the field of History Education, drawing, among others, on Peter Seixas’ work on historical consciousness and James Wertsch’s concept of narrative templates. Grever’s consideration of “[t]he risks of a canon in a globalising society” critically explores the controversial canonisation of Dutch history unfolding, notably since 2006, against the backdrop of the increased diversity typical of contemporary Western societies and of related debates on “failed integration” and a national identity allegedly in decline. The Dutch struggles echo those occurring in various countries, where the advent of the new millennium has seen the rise of calls for a shared basis for knowledge of the past rooted in chronologically organised national master narratives, and a pedagogy focused on critical source analysis and multiperspectivity has found itself falling out of favour. With reference to her country, Grever critiques the official prescription of selected facts and interpretations and their narrativisation in formal History Education around ten partly overlapping periods, amounting to an old-school “political history of the rise and prosperity of the Netherlands in a Western European context, fought over by white male heroes” (p. 72). Grever’s concern is that this approach, in curtailing the plurality of societal perspectives on the past, may in fact undermine social cohesion as opposed to producing it; she notes a particular risk in the potential further alienation of marginalised voices, notably second- and third-generation non-Western immigrants who may not identify with the history they hear in the classroom. Among the possible remedies Grever sets out in this context is the cohesive potential of presenting history as a debate, giving marginalised stories a place in history and heritage education and in museum exhibitions. An astute point Grever makes in relation to the hazardous side-effects accompanying the “top-down implementation of a national canon” and a reduced place for history in school curricula denounces the tendency, shared by countries around the world, for teachers to become “less and less regarded as experts in [their] subject matter and increasingly as implementers and process

supervisors” (p. 75). In Chapter 4 the focus shifts to heritage and its role in the construction of identity. Grever observes a fragmentation of the Netherlands’ national story in the emergence of local and regional canons and their use as a counterpoint or supplement to the national canon. The ensuing rise in the significance of local and regional history appears to her to open up possibilities for promoting young people’s historical thinking through heritage education inside and outside the classroom. Chapter 5 follows, reflecting on the relationship between history, time and identity by retracing the critical debate around the never-realised scheme of creating a National Historical Museum for the Netherlands as a showcase for its national canon, with school students as an important target group.

Section three engages with “Plural History” and with the application, in History Education and historiography, of multiperspectivity, a central concept of the didactics of historical thinking that remains a tenet of History Education in the Netherlands despite the introduction of a mandatory canon in schools. Chapter 6 examines the feasibility of using multiperspectivity in multicultural classrooms. Drawing on Siep Stuurman’s *The Invention of Humanity* and on earlier empirical research into students’ views of history and identity in the Netherlands, the author reflects on the possibilities and limits of intercultural dialogue among divergent points of view in history classrooms characterised by diversity. Her considerations revolve particularly around sensitive and controversial historical topics such as the Holocaust, which students with an Islamic background may see through the lens of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in which context anti-Semitic sentiment may be voiced in the classroom. With reference to Stuurman, Grever wonders whether the use of multiperspectivity in History Education could bring about an “anthropological turn” at the micro-level of the (multicultural) classroom, or, put differently, a “reversal of perspective” (“de omkering van de blikrichting”, p. 123) that acknowledges and allows the coexistence of differences between people and communities. Grever seeks to envisage circumstances under which students may be able to transcend cultural boundaries by putting themselves in the shoes of others and then proceeding to examine their own perspective from this distant vantage point, a process she feels may permit the emergence of a sense of community or “common humanity”. Acknowledging that “[f]or many students, listening to each other is a difficult skill in itself”, Grever formulates the key question here as being “whether they [students] can recognise and understand different perspectives on a sensitive subject,

and whether they then can articulate their own position in relation to that history” (p. 119). In this context, she does not neglect to underscore the considerable knowledge and skills that this approach requires of teachers and the necessity of adequate preparation and training.

Chapter 7 centres on a recently created Second World War memorial site in Nijmegen, a bridge known as “The Crossing”, and its exemplification of the appeal of war-related *lieux de memoire* and their power to mediate a “wordless understanding of the past” (p. 129). Grever then moves in Chapter 8 to a critical discussion of the historiographical field, denouncing the outdated Whig approach and its celebration of the canonised series of “historiographical heroes” often found to populate university textbooks. Her call here is for a broadened perspective that might do justice to a plurality of views and add greater nuance and diversity to the trope of exceptional, “lonely geniuses”, hitherto beloved of a field with a history of neglecting women, presenting them, at best, in supporting roles, and espousing “a broad Western canon ...[that] quickly disintegrates into national variants” (p. 137). Recognising the crucial role of inequalities of power in this discourse, Grever points out that intellectual discourses centring different, lesser-known voices on the past and critiquing contemporaneous events have the potential to challenge and productively disrupt the argument that that we cannot apply our present-day norms and values to that past, specifically to historical wrongs such as the oppression of women, the slave trade and colonial exploitation.

True to the spirit of the considerations it has detailed thus far, the book’s final section focuses on “Critical Thinking and Historical Understanding”, specifically the advancing politicisation of history – and of national histories in particular – and the notion, notably fuelled by social media, of “alternative facts”. Grever’s reflections on this matter in Chapter 9 of the book take in the question of an adequate educational response to fake news and fake history, the answer to which she locates in the concept of historical thinking and its core skills of critical source analysis and multiperspectivity, and in the incorporation of new media literacy into teaching and learning. She additionally highlights the importance of providing careful explanations of the meaning of historical truth and imparting an understanding of the process of finding that truth as open-ended. While acknowledging the limits of historical thinking and its teaching in non-democratic and strictly controlled political contexts, Grever points to the potential of this approach to provide tools for

questioning narratives and discourses and in so doing exposing fake news. Again, the endeavour is a highly demanding one for teachers, and their thorough preparation for the task is of paramount importance: Grever considers it crucial for teachers to gain skills and knowledge in media literacy, to the end of better understanding online culture and students' interactions with it, and in popular historical culture, encompassing media such as video games. The book's tenth chapter examines the importance of pedagogical tact in historical understanding, citing the necessity both of putting forward valid arguments and evidence and of cognisance of the challenges associated with confronting different, shifting perspectives on sensitive historical issues. In Grever's view, a "pedagogy of tact" (p. 162) would entail approaching students' worldviews, alongside the memories and narratives they may bring to the classroom, with openness and sensitivity. The concept of historical distance, she advises, is helpful in this respect, as it also represents distance from personal connection with a potentially controversial event.

In her closing remarks, Grever reflects on the inescapability of the past (and of its many interpretations) and on the tendency of repressed histories to suddenly return with a vengeance; the suppression and imposition alike of specific memories and narratives appear in this view as vain attempts to escape the workings of a past which "cannot be squeezed into a straitjacket" (p. 172). Grever reminds us that we are inescapably connected, in ways we may not see and recognise, with the past, and with traditions whose influence on our present-day thinking and behaviour persists unabated. For all this, however, this past is not set in stone; we are continuously engaged in its re-interpretation, manifest, for instance, in the rise and fall of historical heroes and in the rejection of certain events and personalities which may follow hard on the heels of their celebration and glorification. The ubiquitous "resistance to the dynamics of these reinterpretations" finds material form in "attempts to hold on to the past" (p. 7) through monuments, statues, rituals, canons and even laws and decrees on historical memory. In this regard, Grever acknowledges the risky business of giving space to these divergent and changing interpretations in schools or museums, noting the concomitant endangerment of state control over a nation's collective memory.

Overall, the critical reflections on historical culture in this book, while written in Dutch and focusing on the Netherlands, appear of great relevance to our times beyond that country's borders, challenging us to consider the

ways we relate to and handle the past. The collection makes for engaging and absorbing reading on academic and lay representations of collective pasts which may be sensitive and emotive; their production and public consumption, including their appropriation or subversion by individuals and communities with varying power statuses; and the changing meanings of the past and their relationships to historical consciousness, collective memory and identity. Grever poses topical, thought-provoking and compelling questions, and her considerations and suggestions show an evident underpinning by both theory and practice. Ranging across the fields of historiography, History Education, heritage and popular culture, surveying national, local and translocal dynamics, and not neglecting crucial issues of gender and ethnicity, this collection, driven by a holistic and critical approach to our interaction with the past, is testament to Grever's versatility and her commitment to bridging gaps and instituting dialogue and understanding between interconnected "worlds", multiple voices and divergent perspectives. This is a scholar whose prolific, passionate and influential work will undoubtedly find resonance beyond her academic career, and it would be highly desirable for this book to be made available via translation to a wider audience.