

Temporal readings of memory work in the prison memoir

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Suttner, R (2017) **Inside apartheid’s prison**, 2nd edition. Auckland Park: Jacana Media. ISBN 978-1-4314-2517-4. Pages 214

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Writing an academic review of a memoir is a particularly difficult undertaking. On the one hand, it is a process requiring a critical appraisal of the scholarly contribution of the text to an extant knowledge base; but on the other hand also requires a certain fidelity to the phenomenology of authorial experience that is conveyed through this life story genre. When I was approached to write this review of Raymond Suttner’s **Inside apartheid’s prison**, I was initially somewhat hamstrung by these two tasks that can appear inimical to each other at times. But it soon struck me that I had in fact encountered the text on three distinct occasions, in discrete temporal moments, from the early 2000s to 2018. Each of these encounters provided me with a different understanding of the text, the authorial voice, the register of the subjects being textually produced, the context of textual production, and the possible interpretations from interlocutors who apprehended the narrative at these varying temporal moments.

Suttner’s book employs memory work in the service of the quintessential “struggle” prison memoir – following the events leading up to his multiple incarcerations, up until the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other banned organizations in 1990. The book is a memoir precisely because it focuses on a defined period of time and set of events that centre mainly on his life entanglements with the security apparatus under

apartheid, and his life as a prisoner in some form or another because of his political activism. In terms of periodization, various sections of the book cover his recruitment into underground liberation activities; his arrest; torture; trial and incarceration in 1975; his detention without trial; house arrest; and his eventual full emergence back into public life in the late 1980s. These events are also peppered with the many correspondences between Suttner and others during these periods, creating fine-grained textures of the experiences of incarceration and detention for the reader. Also, in the 2017 edition, as compared to the first edition in 2002, Suttner has revised the introduction to include his reflections on life outside of the ANC since formally leaving the organization in the mid-2000s – a matter that I return to later.

As a form of the life story genre, the memoir is autobiographical in nature, and is a narrative account of specific elements and/or time periods of the person's life. Similar to many other famous prison memoirs of political activists, such as Nelson Mandela's **Long walk to freedom**, Eldridge Cleaver's **Soul on ice**, and Nawal El Sadaawi's **Memoirs from the women's prison**, it is a partial and perspectival representation of a life – in this case, often dealing primarily with the period of imprisonment, but also the events both culminating in incarceration and in the immediate aftermath of freedom. But like all prison memoirs, Suttner's book is an attempt at the first-person nature of memory – the endeavour to recreate and inhabit the moment of experience from which the memory was originally crafted (Ferryhough, in Manganyi, 2016), and is a challenging undertaking to say the least. This is precisely because memoirs invariably involve both objectively verifiable information and private autobiographical memory “steeped in imaginative reconstruction”, but the minute one puts “the private on display, the clear distinction between honesty, dishonesty, revelation and dissimulation, dissolves” (Cohen, in Manganyi, 2016: xv).

The memoir is thus not static. In some instances (such as in Suttner's book) it is revised; it is read and re-read over time; involves private memories of actual events; is a public telling to a real or imagined audience; and is therefore always a selective, crafted and curated account of events (Nuttall, 2008; Soudien, 2015). This is the nature of memory work in all personalized stories, accounts and narratives – it is a provisional truth, but is a provisional truth that is nevertheless worthy of analysis (Peterson, 2012), as it is historically contingent, reflective of the moment of production, revealing of the author, but can also be interpreted according to the context and positionalities of the interlocutors who selectively read these accounts. Of course, there have been many who have supported the use of memory work as a politically viable vehicle in contexts of oppression (see for example, Kundera, 1980; Smith, 1999; Stevens, Duncan & Sonn, 2010; Sonn, Stevens & Duncan, 2013); as well as those who have been more methodologically critical of the

autobiographical, storied account because of its performative dimensions (see for example, Eagle & Bowman, 2013; Hook, 2013).

In the context of reviewing Suttner's book, whilst recognizing the limitations of the life story genre, it is nevertheless clearly a site of potential analysis. Reading him across three different temporal moments opens up the possibilities for commentaries about the author's intentional or unintentional emphases at different times, the influence of context on its production, the influence of context on readings of the text, the varied constructions of social subjects through texts, and so on. Importantly, re-reading and reinterpreting a text in the present that has been produced in an earlier period of history is not simply an act of presentism or revisionism (even though in this instance the text has technically been revised in the second edition in 2017). As Edward Said (2003: 25) notes:

"[Historical writings are] further actualized and animated by emphases and inflections that [the author] was obviously unaware of, but that his writing permits. Thus, later history reopens and challenges what seems to have been the finality of an earlier figure of thought, bringing it into contact with cultural, political and epistemological formations undreamed of by – albeit affiliated by historical circumstances with – its author."

It is in this context that I offer the following three temporal (re)readings of Suttner's **Inside apartheid's prison**.

My first encounter with Suttner's memoir was in the early 2000s, shortly after it had been published. Of course, it had been written and released in a period of South Africa's history when the events and consequential outcomes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had dominated much of the social and political landscape. The confessional loomed large during this period and I read Suttner's text as an extension of this confessional process. Much of the book was devoted to an account of the harshness of his various brushes with the apartheid security apparatus, the brutality of torture, experiences of anti-Semitism, and the relentless attacks of the process of incarceration on his sense of self as a subject. I read the book as a compelling account of how challenging it was for political activists who had been incarcerated, to manage and resist the everydayness of trauma, pacification and surrender under difficult imprisonment circumstances. But, of course, it was also a metonymic device to stand in for the larger apartheid state – the draconian measures in prison were also a reflection of the draconian measures of an authoritarian and racist state – and so the confessional here served several functions. This was not simply a cathartic revelation of personal trauma, but was a way of constructing the past, rupturing with this past,

contributing to the generation of a larger grand narrative of this past, and the creation of a “new” nation narrative.

Nuttall (2008), in an examination of this kind of memoir in Mandela’s writings, has cautioned about how the personal can be elided when a public telling occurs. Whilst taking serious cognizance of this point, I had missed a sense of such a complete elision in Suttner’s text, as there were moments of close identification that were possible in the text. His reflections on his youthful exuberance and revolutionary fervour, yet the detailed and grainy accounts of mundane underground activities that were far from romanticized, the chaotic nature of political activism, and the laborious nature of prison life that constantly encompasses a larceny of time and subjecthood, would all resonate with the thousands of activists who had found themselves in similar positions during apartheid. Ironically, it is in these textured details that a more personable account is crafted, and I was able to identify with it as a reader, and the confessional was made even more powerful by its less abstracted quality and credible personification. The subject was cast as politically committed, and as having paid his dues to expose a heinous racist history and to contribute to the formation of the “new” nation. Alongside this was the fact that this was an account of a white activist who was relatively privileged in terms of race and class – landing on the fertile ground of the newly established “rainbow nation” where blacks and whites would overcome the past and move ahead with a degree of mutual reciprocity. So even though the personal was not completely elided in this instance, I nevertheless read it as being employed in the sacrificial service of the “new” nation.

In contrast, my second engagement with the text was in 2010, when I was asked to respond to Suttner’s public lecture at a UNISA seminar series on violence. Based primarily on the original book, this lecture was more a re-thinking of his experiences in prison, emphasizing agency amongst those who are incarcerated. A somewhat different reading was made possible by Suttner’s own shifts in emphases, and some of these engagements were in fact published in **PINS 39** as a pair of articles (see Stevens, 2010; Suttner, 2010). In this lecture, Suttner focused on the personal agentic elements to life in apartheid’s prisons, even though still acknowledging many of the hardships and traumas of incarceration that were originally articulated in his book. Here however, he foregrounded non-compliance with authorities, disciplined studying and exercise, humility and stoicism, managing violent brutality, reclaiming humanity through circuits of care for animals, and everyday disruptions to the regimes of power within the prison complex. Whilst all important, they do also reflect what Soudien (2015) refers to as components of triumphalism with prison memoirs that again offer a particular rendering of the experiences that also need to be carefully interrogated because of their partiality. At the time, I had offered an

alternative response to his lecture, by suggesting that these processes be explored through the lens of the power-resistance matrix in which certain forms of action become possible or impossible. I had taken this approach to attempt to disentangle Suttner's arguments from individual agency and personal attributes, so that agency could be thought of as sets of resistances beyond the individual and potentially extending into the broader socio-political realm.

Of course, what we had not spoken about at the time was the context of textual production in this instance of Suttner's revised lecture. He had broken ranks with the ANC after Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo had laid charges of rape against Jacob Zuma, and from his own accounts, had objected on principle to the manner in which this had been managed publicly and within the organization. At the end of his lecture, Suttner also alluded to some of the perverse and cynical effects on new political elites, which may have added impetus to his withdrawal from the organization in the mid-2000s. This context in which he re-engaged the prison experience is critical for a further reading thereof, as it appears that a mirroring and parallel process was occurring simultaneously. Thus, while Suttner was distancing himself politically from the ANC, he was also employing memory work in literary modes to distance himself rhetorically. His subjectivity was crafted as more distinct, autonomous and agentic, and he emerged much more forcefully as a wilful subject who was more than a mere representative of an organization or revolutionary struggle. This seems to be an important literary and rhetorical variation that not only positions him as overcoming adversity and attaining a degree of mastery in the text, but has the political effect of discursively positioning him as having reclaimed his independence in the prevailing political context of the time in which he was becoming more isolated from former comrades.

My third reading of Suttner's memoir was in 2017/2018, after it had been formally revised and released. The most striking difference was of course the inclusion of a new introduction that reflected on Suttner's life outside of the ranks of the ANC, and in my view, provides a very different framing for the entire book. Here, Suttner focuses on the importance of deliberacy and commitment, the necessity for aligning personal and political values, the centrality of choice in living ethically, and the importance of all of these attributes in generating a degree of connectivity to others in a humanist project – the quintessential ingredients for committing oneself as a life-long revolutionary, so to speak! However, this is then starkly juxtaposed with deep realizations and disappointments about internal organizational factionalism, corruption, levels of unequal commitment, betrayal of political values, and the inhumane treatment of others – all associated in some way with his political home. The net effect is one of isolation, loss of connectivity to a life-long community, and a regrettable experience of loss (existentially, relationally and materially). This new

introduction set against the original prison memoir has a potential consequence of establishing a somewhat veiled nostalgic trope in the book in which mourning and melancholia seem traceable – implicitly setting the virtuousness of traumatic and damaging past political struggles against the crisis of the ANC under the Zuma administration (at the point of revising the book).

In its original definition, nostalgia was a yearning for home or *homesickness* (Laubscher, 2012), but of course has also come to refer to a return to a previous idealized time because of the disappointments of the present (Hutcheon, 1998). A nostalgic reading of Suttner's revised edition renders the past not merely as oppressive, but as a site of righteous resistance and reclamation – unsurprisingly seen in periods when the promises of a better future have not been realized. Here, the present is a place of disillusionment rather than one in which those ideals are materialized, involves a shattering of those ideals, and results in a recovery and elevation of selective elements of the past. "This idealization of that which has been lost in the present is then cast back onto the past and becomes inscribed onto another moment, time, or place, resulting in perfectly preserved nostalgic moments that are, of course, always imagined, fantasised, unreal, partial, oblique and perspectival" (Duncan, Stevens & Sonn, 2012: 210). As a consequence, one has to wonder whether in this new edition, Suttner is reflecting primarily on the past, or primarily on the present.

What should be apparent from the above is that the fluid nature of memoirs open them up to multiple interpretations over various temporal moments, within different contexts, by different readers, and especially when they are also revised over time by their authors. Suttner's prison memoir certainly ticks all the boxes in relation to the above. **Inside apartheid's prison** has already secured a place in the archive of autobiographical struggle narratives, and will no doubt continue to be read as a memoir by a new generation of interested historians, literary specialists, social scientists, scholars, students and citizens. But ironically, while the memoir is initially a derivative of a set of personal experiences of the author, once it is in the public domain, it no longer quite belongs to the author. **Inside apartheid's prison** will be subjected to many interpretations in the future – some of which may very well include questions of white activism and whiteness inside anti-racist struggles in the decolonial moment; gender and the prison memoir; entanglements of trauma, violence and freedom in modernity; and so on. Perhaps this is the double-edged nature of the memoir – that in the public telling of the private experience, ownership and interpretation of the memoir is increasingly evacuated from the author and resides progressively with various publics – allowing them to interpret history, context, subjecthood, authorial intent, as well as their own interlocutory apprehension, in potentially infinite ways.

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