

# In the present looking back and imagining a future that could be

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

Stevens, Garth, Duncan, Norman & Hook,  
Derek (eds) (2013) **Race, memory and the  
Apartheid Archive: Towards a transformative  
psychosocial praxis.** Houndmills: Palgrave  
Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-137-26389-6 hbk. Pages  
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*"Traumatic experiences from the past will constantly attempt to re-inscribe themselves (often in masked form) in the present, if they are not acknowledged, interrogated, and addressed."*  
(Apartheid Archive Project, 2010)

They are considering giving him parole after only 20 years ... He has not even served a fraction of his sentence. Could they not wait for us to die first? Why are they opening the wounds? Is he celebrating 20 years of democracy too and being given freedom as a gift? What about our pain, our loss? (*Paraphrased response from a family member of one of Eugene De Kock's victims interviewed on eNCA News channel, 30 May 2014.*)

Narrated in a blend of frustration and outrage, helplessness and betrayal, this plea delivers an unfinished story, wounds that continue to fester, perhaps re-opened with his release, and healing that is never quite complete. The Apartheid Archive, a virtual attic of such stories, reminds us that as a nation, and a world, tomorrow is never possible without revisiting yesterday; that healing is a national obligation, never resolved in a single act of reconciliation. With their plea, the family has brought to the public their hidden transcript of pain. I see this as a befitting opening to my reflection on the book that engages with the project of memory and the complexities of race within a country like South Africa. This book is a treasure and a burden, insisting that we remember and re-view, re-engage and reflect on the cost of ignorance, breaking the silence, and being in conversation with how our past influences the present. This volume insists that we integrate memory, pain and the unspoken into our vision for social justice.

This year (2014) South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy, and as can be imagined this calls for reflections, interrogations and a need to pause and think about the present as it relates to the past. The post-apartheid narrative is only one slice of the story; there have been a number of seminars, and conferences (including the Apartheid Archive Conference held in May, 2014 at the university of Pretoria) aimed at creating spaces for these reflections, encouraging a relentless cost accounting of our past, provoking strategic moments for re-thinking and re-imagining. This makes the book timely as it tackles the importance of memory/remembering/narratives and the importance of revisiting the past as a form of meaning making and tomorrow-building.

The apartheid archive offers a textual (and virtual) space for the acknowledgement of multiversality (multiple voices from various contexts) and interrogates and troubles psychology's stubbornness and refusal to engage seriously with multiple ways of knowing. Drawing from decoloniality, the book offers a critical engagement on the importance of remembering and the complexity of memory and the retrieval across the treacherous power lines of race and class, gender and age. Whose memory is privileged and who gets to tell the story? The book draws from feminist perspectives, sociological analysis, psychoanalysis, history, liberatory psychology, and the field of education.

Time matters, obviously, of course, in terms of 20 years, and how old you were during the apartheid years. But time matters even today. I wonder if those of us who read this book, depending on how our families fared during the apartheid years, metabolize the archive entries at different rates. For me, the readings had to pass through a biography of experience, witnessing, betrayal, education in the U.S. and coming home. It took me a while to finish reading the book (and this was not because the contents were not interesting enough). After each chapter I was almost forced to step back, reflect and sit with the conflicting feelings induced by paging through the volume. This for me is one of the strengths of the book as it pulls the reader into a conflictual embrace, almost forcing a conversation with its contents. The multiple voices of the various authors offer us diverse perspectives that do not necessarily diverge but instead converge in many ways, for example, the chapters on 'Whiteness, Blackness and the Diasporic Other' by Straker, Ratele, Laubscher, Sonn and Hook.

*Why, to whom and for what, is the archive important?* In an attempt to respond to these questions, Laubscher engages the idea of the importance of building, harvesting, and constructing an interactive archive. His chapter points to the pertinence of archives as ways to confront ghosts and to constantly remember. The archive offers space for the interplay between the past and present, the living and the dead. It offers space for conversation, interrogation and engagement with that which might not be easy to confront. He highlights the importance of speaking the unspeakable even though words may not do justice to the experience and its impact. Laubscher's sentiments are echoed in the chapter "Memory, narrative, and voice as liberatory praxis in the Apartheid Archive" by Stevens, Duncan, and Sonn.

## **Entering racialized spaces**

The book offers an invitation to "unravel" the hidden voices that for a long time were silenced, some voluntarily and some because they were denied the platform to "speak". In this book, the reader is invited into the multi-racial voices of experiences of Apartheid. Through the narratives that the chapters draw from, we hear the voices of those who were oppressed and the voices of the oppressors filtering through the pages. While these may not be in conversation with each other, the reader has the opportunity to hear as these voices echo through each other (albeit with no equivalence as they enter from very different positions) and indirectly being in conversation with

one another. Long's chapter echoes one of the Latin American Feminist scholars, Gloria Anzaldua and her concept of *Nos-Ostras* (We-Others), that suggests that the colonizer and the colonized are in constant interaction with each other, although from unequal positions. She argues that they are implicated in each other's lives and that they have overlapping, interlocking pasts, presents and futures. The very powerful narrative of a white South African woman's reflection (Narrative 29) of growing up during apartheid that Long refers to exemplifies the *Nos-Ostras*.

South Africa continues to be a racialised landscape where many people are confronted with the realities of racism on a regular basis, and with this as a reality we cannot claim ignorance of "not knowing"! Nancy Tuana's notion of the 'epistemologies of ignorance' becomes relevant and critical in assisting us to wrestle with the problematic nature of claiming ignorance. Long's chapter highlights this challenge of claiming ignorance when people's lives continue to be riddled with racial categories that determine how people are treated. Racism continues to be with us in the present, and it is therefore important for us to engage with, confront, and face it as we continue to be in this transitional moment 20 years into democracy in South Africa where many are asking the question: *what have we achieved?* As we (scholars, activists, and community members) attempt to answer this question, it is imperative to pay attention to the underlying discourses (those of persistent inequalities in various aspects of our society) that are necessary in our endeavor to make sense of and wrestle with issues of structural violence.

## Whiteness

One of the themes that is worth mentioning is the critical lens with which the book tackles the notion of whiteness. This particular discussion provides a much needed platform for the problematization of the politics of race and how these are produced daily and therefore beg for confrontation and interrogation. The chapter that stood out for me in this regard is that of Gillian Straker. She unapologetically offers a critical analysis of what it means to be white, white privilege, guilt, anger, and shame. She goes on to further challenge what it means to be white (specifically within the South African context where such conversations rarely take place). She dares to go to uncomfortable spaces in her interrogation of what it means to be white and the implication of losing political power but holding to economic power. In this way, Straker refuses to plead ignorance but instead challenges the grand narratives of what it means to be white in the democratic South Africa.

In closing, the book takes the reader on a very necessary emotional journey and forces us to page through and immerse ourselves in others' experiences of living under apartheid. It induces us into a time travel machine filled with gaping horrors that many may not want to confront. As we continue to debate about/on issues of cost accounting and redistributive justice, race, privilege and tomorrow, this text assists in setting the stage for the continuance of such debates. The apartheid archive project is a necessary- mirror on the past and GPS for the future -- lest we forget!

## Reference

Sullivan, S & Tuana, N (eds) (2007) **Race and epistemologies of ignorance**. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.