

Of Memory and Justice: Revising History as an Act of Justice

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The IAFOR International Conference on Arts and Humanities – Dubai 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Although Aristotle has maintained that memory “is of the past,” yet, it does not belong solely in the past, as it can bring the past forward into the present. As Booth explains in *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice*, memory “is woven into the continuity that we call identity...into our practices of justice” (x). It is these practices of justice, or rather, the practices of injustice, that the current paper will discuss by focusing on Michelle Cliff’s novel, *Free Enterprise*, and on the film adaptation of Andre Brink’s *A Dry White Season*. Similar to Booth, I do not approach memory as a psychological phenomenon but as a concept bearing political implications and having a central role in the formation of identity. Questions of “whose justice?” or ‘justice for whom?’ will be discussed, as the texts very aptly highlight how memory can be used “to justify crimes... yet it is [also] central to the pursuit of justice” (Booth, Ix). Indeed, both the novel and the film become a site of struggle against the omissions mandated by what Peterson calls “the rules of safe politics.” Starting from this premise, I will attempt to consider the ramifications that the remembrance of the past has for the recuperation of justice in the case of people whose voice and story have been stifled by the dominant historical narratives.

Keywords: film, literature, memory, identity, justice

In “On the Use and Abuse of History,” Nietzsche praises forgetting as the medium for achieving national coherenceⁱ. Even though Nietzsche’s proposition needs to be seen within the cultural framework of his time, yet, it cannot be denied that forgetting is more often than not linked to structures of power that, as Foucault has rightly observed, perpetuate the existing status quo. Several scholars have pointed out, for instance, that forgetting is an integral part of historiography since history is based on selective forgetting, or else, on selective remembering. This is evident in Walter Benjamin’s words when he says that

the historical account given the greatest credence always belongs to the ruling culture. Thus, history is the Master narrative a dominant culture tells about itself. This narrative effaces as many contradictions as it can, destroying certain records, highlighting others, and creating heroes and villains generally convenient to it. (as quoted in McKible, 1994, p.224)

Starting from the same premise, Felix Guattari, Michael Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, to mention but a few, have argued that history should be challenged and reexamined.

Such a reexamination has been part of a postcolonial enterprise that brings together cultural practitioners across racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries with the common goal of remembering what has been forgotten, destroyed, or, stifled, in an attempt to reconstitute the marginalized subject and open up space for alternative representations, and, ultimately, alternative histories. In this presentation I will focus on Michelle Cliff’s novel, *Free Enterprise*ⁱⁱ, and on Euzhan Palcy’s film, *A Dry White Season*ⁱⁱⁱ in order to show how both film and literature can become sites of memory and justice, or, in other words, sites where official history can be revised. Echoing Foucault, I argue that the suppressed memories and stories emerging from these texts are invested with a destabilizing potential that can ultimately counteract the lack of possibilities imposed on minorities by dominant hegemonic discourses and representations.

In *Communities of Memory*, William Booth (2006) argues that justice is intimately linked with memory and its workings as both recollect in order to bring the past into the present. My discussion of film and literature as sites of memory and justice is based on an approach to memory that is very similar to Booth’s, namely as a concept bearing political implications and having a central role in the formation of identity instead of a mere psychological phenomenon. Remembering can indeed become the means of giving voice to the silenced constituencies, of reconstituting a sense of wholeness, a sense of identity, from which they have been deprived.

To begin with, Michelle Cliff’s novel, *Free Enterprise*, addresses the omissions of the official Jamaican history, as it attempts to narrate the stories of two women, Mary Ellen Pleasant and Annie Christmas, who plot to take part in John Brown’s Raid at Harper’s Ferry in 1859. This raid was, in fact, a prelude to Jamaican attempts at independence, however, as we see in the novel, nobody has ever heard of their names or their contribution to the enterprise. Along with the two women’s stories we also “hear” African, Indian, Hawaiian, Tahitian people narrating stories of persecution,

ⁱ In Breazeale and Hollingdale (2012).

ⁱⁱ The novel was first published in 1993.

ⁱⁱⁱ Released in 1989.

oppression and colonization as the novel moves back and forth in time and space disregarding traditional rules of spatial and temporal linearity. At the same time, *Free Enterprise* disregards mainstream spaces, such as official records, and focuses instead on the margins, by paying attention to myths, dreams, notes, epitaphs and letters. As Belinda Edmondson notes, it is in these spaces that “the unwritten history of Jamaica –the genocide of its inhabitants, the suffering of the black slaves, the cruelty of white plantation owners” survives (1993, p.187). Thus, these spaces become sites from where an alternative history erupts; a history that highlights not only the oppression of white structures of power, but also the resistance of black people against them.

It is this resistance that offers the possibility for agency and subjectivity for black people. For instance, the focus on the story of Mary Ellen Pleasant and her central role in the 1859 Raid at Harper’s Ferry that would grant Jamaicans their independence bespeaks of acts of heroism and resistance that are absent from official records. Equally absent from these records are the stories of several heroic women such as Quasheba, Pleasant’s mother, Nanny, the notorious Maroon leader, Rachel DeSuza and Annie Christmas that populate the novel. The image of the white, male, larger-than life hero is not to be found in Cliff’s universe as new concepts of black heroism emerge, offering Jamaican people a new source of identification, and opening up new spaces of subjectivity.

As Cliff explains in her interview with Palmer (1994), if Jamaicans forget that their people have resisted, then this inhibits present and future resistance. Forgetting is thus synonymous with the perpetuation of the conditions of oppression that erased the marginalized subject in the first place. As Michael Rogin says in “‘Make My Day’: Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics,” the forgetting of history cuts off politics from its roots and thus allows for the mistakes of the past to be repeated (1990, p.106). Remembering on the other hand, as Booth has argued, is similar to justice, namely “a moral response to the passage of time.” Indeed, the act of remembering in the novel brings the past forward into the present and in so doing destabilizes the master narrative that has deleted the history of “The Other.”

An eloquent example of such a distortion is found towards the end of the novel when a Tahitian woman narrates the story of how Fletcher Christian and his men “populated their island colony by taking Tahitian women as their, so to speak, wives,” captivated as they were with “the brown tits of Polynesia” (p.56)^{iv}. Yet, what official history *left out*, as the woman claims, is that “these women had husbands already, and in some cases children by their Tahitian men” (p.56). Benjamin’s selective recording of history comes in mind as we see how the violent story of colonization is sanitized and presented instead as a peaceful encounter between two different cultures.

Similarly, through the Hawaiian man’s story, Cliff further disrupts the winner’s story, by revealing how Captain James Cook, the white history’s great explorer, was an invader, who “wanted to own us, and the islands, tame the landscape to their purposes, tame even the slopes Kilauea” (pp. 47-8), as the Hawaiian says. From this point of view, Cook’s murder was not simply an act of cannibalism, as the official version would have it, but of retribution (p. 49). The cannibalistic, uncivilized, bloodthirsty

^{iv} *Free Enterprise*, (1990). All further references to the novel will be cited within the text by page number only.

heathens are thus transformed into revolutionaries that justifiably rebel against the villain conquerors.

It seems then that the untold stories of the past present an interesting reversal that threatens to collapse nation-building, colonial enterprises. The importance of these stories for the recuperation of justice operates on multiple levels as they fight against the distortions and omissions of history, intercede in the injustices perpetrated at the expense of Jamaicans, and fight against hegemonic representations that interpellated Jamaicans as villains or victims. Along the same lines, Euzhan Palcy's *A Dry White Season*, a film based on Andre Brink's novel of the same title, disrupts the official history of Apartheid by highlighting the brutal, inhumane repression of black resistance against it. The film follows Ben DuToit, a white, high school, history teacher, who is introduced to the horrors of apartheid when his gardener, Gordon Ngubene, is viciously murdered in his attempt to discover the truth for his son's death. DuToit in turn is also murdered as he tries to make Ngubene's story public after the judicial system fails him. What becomes clear as the film unravels, is that the real focus is not DuToit but Ngubene and his story that sheds light on the political reality of South Africa and justifies the need for action.

A Dry White Season, in fact, adds a new page to the history of apartheid by including shocking scenes of torture enacted by the apartheid regime that are absent from the novel on which the film is based and, as June Gill (2000) posits, from other anti-apartheid movies^v. For instance, we see young Jonathan Ngubene's wounded body as well as the brutal police tortures inflicted on Gordon Ngubene himself. Through close ups and slow motion the camera reveals every shocking detail of the black tortured body, lingering on Gordon's swollen face as his eye is about to drop out of its socket. Palcy explains that "the torture scenes are not in the book," and that she "went to South Africa and met people who showed me [her] their bodies and what was done to them" (as quoted in Glicksman, p.65).

Assuming the role of the historian, Palcy attempts to make visible what has been omitted and in so doing she calls attention to the "absence of crime," to use Booth's words (2006, p.122). Thus, the tortured black body is transfigured into an undeniable symbol of 'truth' and knowledge, and ultimately into a symbol of crime. In fact, it appears as if the hidden, obliterated history of Apartheid is painfully and undeniably carved on it. The attempt to conceal its injuries from public exposure as we see in various instances in the film, is then similar to hegemonic history's attempt to suppress and deny the reality of black experience.

When DuToit sees Gordon's dead, tortured body, he can no longer ignore the truth and thus resorts to justice only to discover that "justice in South Africa is misapplied when it comes to the question of race," as his liberal, white lawyer, Mc Kenzie, warns him. The court scenes very eloquently dramatize how justice, like hegemonic history, can be manipulated into selectively recording 'comfortable' facts. Walter Benjamin's description of how master narratives are consolidated through the creation of convenient heroes and villains and the obliteration of contradictions comes to mind when we see how the legal system tries to absolve Captain Stolz, the police officer who tortured Ngubene, from any liability.

^v In fact, as Glicksman (1989) pointed out, it is said that women cannot direct such brutal films.

Ironically, McKenzie presents enough evidence to prove that the latter has been unjustly murdered when he tried to discover the truth about his son's death. In a memorable moment, a black officer testifying as a defense witness for Stolz, removes his shirt revealing how he has also been tortured and blackmailed in order to conceal the crime. Despite such powerful evidence, however, the theater of the absurd, or rather the court of the absurd, continues and the judge rejects DuToit's appeal for justice refusing to rule in favor of black people. The image of the black officer's wounded body as an incontrovertible type of evidence brings up the questions of "whose justice?" and "justice for whom?" Truth, like Benjamin's history, is constructed, is hidden behind a shirt, behind the cloak of an alleged justice.

If we see the courtroom as a microcosm reflecting the society at large then we are bound to realize how the white history of apartheid has been nothing more than a travesty. Nevertheless, if the diegetic court becomes the stage for the parody of justice, the film as another court provides the space for its recuperation. Through public exposure, the perpetrators are brought to justice and the crime can no longer evade denunciation. At an extra-diegetic level, the viewers become the judge and the jury of the absence of crime that is of all the omissions and distortions of hegemonic history and memory. The film then as a site of memory and justice attempts to "ensure that those wounds, left by a gross violation against human beings, are answered by justice and not by forgetting or other salves (Booth, 2006, p. 123).

It should be further noted that the black officer's courageous act of revealing the gross face of the regime is an act of resistance that has important ramifications for black people on a diegetic and extra diegetic level. To remember Cliff's words, the memory of resistance carries with it the seeds of future resistance and thus can destabilize structures of oppression. Indeed, apart from the black officer, all of Palcy's black characters are strong as we see them resisting and fighting against the gross injustices. In her interview with Glicksman, Palcy talks about the strength of her black characters explaining how white directors generally depict blacks as weak and dependent. "They give all the initiative to the white hero" (1989, p.66). In the case of *A Dry White Season*, however, the black characters rise above such constricting, annihilating, hegemonic stereotypes as they take initiative and claim agency.

The most poignant example is Stanley, the black cab driver that helps DuToit in his journey to awareness. When Captain Stolz murders DuToit, as the latter strives to publicize Ngubene's story threatening to expose the workings of the regime, it is Stanley who rises above his role as DuToit's 'facilitator' to that of the revolutionary, as Kolokotroni and Taxidou argue (1992). Kolokotroni and Taxidou also explain that Stanley's killing of Stolz, the evil representative of the monstrous regime, turns him into an "'avenging angel, who administers justice and channels emotional and political release on behalf of the audience" (1992, p. 50).

The fact that Brink's novel ends with DuToit's death whereas Palcy's film associates Stanley with the real resolution once more reveals Palcy's attempt to revise the master narrative by giving voice and agency to the silenced, marginalized constituent. The political implications of such a revision are obvious as "The Other" now claims center stage and thus becomes an obvious point of identification for the spectator. Stanley is no longer the villain or the silent victim of the white history. Like Cliff's heroic

Jamaicans, he is the “the potential protagonist of the sequel,” (Kolokotroni & Taxidou, 1992, p. 51), a heroic figure that black people can safely identify with, claiming kinship, claiming identity.

All in all, both *Free Enterprise* and *A Dry White Season* work at the intersections of memory, justice and history. The stories and images that populate the texts are forbidden by what Nancy Peterson calls “the rules of safe politics and clear evidence that underlie official historical accounts” (2001, p.5). These rules dictate that minority and colonized groups must forget their individual histories in order for the hegemony of the oppressor to be consolidated. Fighting against the erasure and subjugation that such a forgetting implies, Palcy and Cliff unearth the past in order to revive suppressed memories, or, to use Lipsitz’s (1989) term, counter-memories, that can shock the readers and viewers out of their comfortable existence into an awareness similar to DuToit’s. Interestingly enough, the memories emerging from both texts do not reside solely into the past, entrapping the reader and viewer into an Achillean, revenge-driven rage. Instead, these memories are laden with Foucaultian possibilities as they bring the past into the present, seeking to intervene into contemporary reality and make a different future possible.

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