

# The performativity of non-racialism and a culture of complaint

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

Mashele, Prince (2011) **The death of our society**. Pretoria: CPR Press. ISBN 978-0-620-50196-5 pbk. Pages 153.

Mashele's shrill and often exasperating essay pinpoints a series of factors underlying the apparent decline – even the *death* – of South African society. This somewhat melodramatic tone is seemingly belied by the vibrancy of contemporary political culture in the country, even if this culture is itself often marked by the type of responsibility-aversion, ritualized complaint and factional mud-slinging that Mashele laments.

None of this is to say that Mashele's arguments are incorrect. Quite frequently his remarks hit the target. He bemoans South Africa's "intellectual desert" – a not-so-veiled reference to the anti-intellectualism of South Africa's ruling party – and asks: "Which South African politician has written which authoritative book about our society and where we need to go?" (p 120). In a chapter on "the race question" he helpfully deploys a paradoxical notion of unity: "All racial groups in South Africa are united: their unity lies in their respective aversion for truth. Blacks do not want to hear anything negative about themselves as a group, and whites are quick to throw stones at a black person who states the truth about them" (p 84).

To this Mashele adds a poignant reflection on a failure of what we might guardedly call a type of 'inter-racial' communication:

"Both well-to-do white and black parents place their hopes in the fact that their children got to the same schools, and believe that their children will somehow integrate. But they do not make an effort to facilitate this integration beyond the school fence ... the adults do not know how to relate to one another. They do not know what to say when they get to one another's gates, or how to engage in unpretentious conversation while their children play. As a result they stand in the way of their children's innocent yearning for genuine inter-racial friendships" (p 85).

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One might phrase this differently, drawing on a psychoanalytic vocabulary, pinpointing the communication impasse imposed by the prospect of whites and blacks both still suffering racialised fantasies about one another. What we may have thought was purely a colonial or apartheid phenomena, namely the preoccupation with the imagined desires and intents of (racialised) others, has not been surmounted, 20 years after South Africa's democratic era. Awkwardness, self-consciousness and a lack of spontaneity all too often characterize relationships between blacks and whites - such is Mashele's claim. One might equally point here to the forlorn hope, nicely invoked by Mashele, that the younger generation might get right what an older era of South Africans (the "born unfrees" as we might put it) seem unable to manage: non-racialised forms of interaction. This leads to the question: has there been a tacit form of surrender on the part of an older generation of South Africans, namely, a sense that the work of integration has proved too much for us, beyond our capabilities, and that it must now be left to our children?

Mashele also includes some memorable thoughts on racism in its relation to humanism. Although these ideas at first seem uninspired, unoriginal, marked by the tone of sentimental moral humanism, they do find their mark in respect of the (post)apartheid context: "The majority of whites do not know how to be fully human in relation to blacks, and blacks are equally conflicted regarding how to be human towards whites ... most whites and blacks in South Africa ... lead daily lives of pretence towards each other ... The truth is that racial integration in South Africa remains a myth" (pp 58-60).

Many would argue that such commentary is lacking in nuance. The spectrum of subjectivities in (post)apartheid South Africa can no longer, after all, be divided into categories of "black" and "white". Nevertheless, Mashele is right to describe the everyday performativity of non-racialism that so many of us – racial categorizations aside – are deeply complicit in. Such performances of non-racialism – a distinctive form of postcolonial dramaturgy – of course contrast dramatically with the multiple realities of racialized difference as they manifest in South African society today.

Mashele is also right to single out a type of distinctive post-apartheid white phobia: the fear of being labelled racist. This nervousness contributes not only to a sharp decline in political discourse, but for Mashele, to an "artificial national consensus ... based on a philosophy of conformity" (p 71). The most perspicacious passage in the text discusses the subject-to-society relation, and indeed, the ritualized activity of complaint which particularly characterizes the South African public sphere.

"One individual removes himself from [what is seen as] immoral society, followed by another, and another, and by many more, until all morally and ethically guilty individuals disappear into their artificially constructed zones of immunity. This retreat from society leaves us with an uninhabited geographic space, abandoned by individual monads who have fled into individual zones of safety, where individuals are not seen as part of a decaying society ... In the end no single citizen views his actions as constitutive of the stuff that degenerates the social fabric. We all sit comfortably in our artificially constructed zones of immunity, and we distantly see a morally corrupt society through the lens of our individual subjectivity" (pp 92-93).

We have thus a failure of agency, a situation wherein individuals ex-nominate themselves from society which becomes the receptacle of many condemned values. In locating their own sense of agency outside of – and typically as opposed to – the broader public sphere, such individuals failure to grasp that this is not an isolated phenomenon, and that the similar actions of many others itself leads to the malaise of values that is being decried. Exempting ourselves from the society

we condemn is itself a part of what is ultimately condemnable about the society: it becomes an evacuated space of public participation.

Mashele is of course drawing here upon the familiar Hegelian theme of the beautiful soul who castigates the surrounding world without realizing that they are themselves complicit in what they so bitterly resent. “[A] finger-pointing South African fails to understand the dialectical interplay between himself and society; thus does he see himself as a deserving beneficiary of the morality that immunizes the observer” (p 89).

This is a fine point and it is well made. The problem though is that in his more moralising moments, Mashele falls prey to his own critique. In a chapter on immoral and social decay he regrets the growing number of children raised by single mothers in contemporary South Africa and the “overwhelming majority of husbands and wives who have extramarital affairs” (p 97). He likewise invokes the fight of good against evil, an odd gesture in a book that approvingly cites Nietzsche. In such sections it becomes clear that Mashele’s is essentially a conservative vision. It is likewise apparent that he is prone to locate himself outside of the society whose decline he spends so much time chronicling.

# From Azania to the new South Africa: Thinking with Neville Alexander

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

Alexander, Neville (2013) **Thoughts on the New South Africa**. Johannesburg: Jacana.  
ISBN 978-1431405862. 232 Pages.

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When Neville Alexander died in 2012 he was 75 years old. He could look back on a long and significant – and certainly exemplary – life as an activist, scholar and public intellectual. Yet it is difficult not to think of Neville Alexander as someone who had died too soon. More than just a role model for a younger generation of academics, committed intellectuals, and campaigners for a democratic socialist alternative in South Africa, Alexander was at the time of his death very much still a fellow traveller; a generous, durable and effervescent participant and partner in all manner of critical and reconstructive dialogues and projects. Completed shortly before his death and published posthumously, **Thoughts on the New South Africa** certainly reinforces the impression of a vital voice interrupted.

Neville Alexander will be remembered as an anti-apartheid struggle icon, imprisoned on Robben Island (alongside Nelson Mandela and others) for a decade (Alexander, 1994), and moreover as a prominent scholar of educational practice and especially sociolinguistics and language planning in South Africa before and after the 1994 transition (Alexander, 1989, 1990, 1993, 2002). But rather than basking in the glory of his struggle credentials, being redeployed to the boardrooms of multinational companies or allowing himself to be commodified as a dispenser of either sanitised or faux revolutionary political sound bites, Alexander navigated the new South Africa as a principled, calm, yet unrelenting left critic of the new ruling elite. Late in his life he described himself as one of those “incorrigible revolutionary socialists [...] who were clear that the 1993-94 agreements were in essence about stabilising the capitalist state and system in South Africa and creating the conditions for its expansion as a profitable venture” (Alexander, 2010: 4). In Alexander’s (2010) reading of what transpired in South Africa in the years

following the commencement of negotiations between the apartheid regime, the business elite and the ANC and leading to the 1994 elections, the short-lived Government of National Unity and the adoption of the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, he noted that

“we have been catapulted into the ugly world of modern-day capitalist barbarism with its devastating features of high and growing unemployment, increasing social inequality, horrific violent crime, racist and xenophobic dog-eat-dog conflicts, among many other things. This is very far from the almost utopian revolutionary euphoria with which most South Africans, unaware of what had been agreed upon in the devilish details of the negotiation process, had so proudly cast their votes on April 27-28, 1994.” (p 5)

This is by now, since the re-vitalisation of radical social movement politics in the late 1990s, and since the almost canonical left analyses of the transition by scholars like Bond (2000), Marais (1998) and Terreblanche (2002), a familiar critique of post-apartheid South Africa. However, its basic tenets were already present as analytic predictions and warnings in Alexander’s work throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, establishing him not only as precursor, but also as someone whose continued involvement reinforced the historical continuity between an established political tradition and the current left critique of capitalism in both its scholarly and radical social movement manifestations in post-apartheid South Africa. Here is Alexander a year before the first democratic elections:

“In spite of its vulnerability, the ruling elite has retained its grip firmly on all the repressive apparatuses of the state. In this regard, the triumphalist illusions still rampant in some circles of what is now fast becoming the ex-liberation movement amount to a dangerous condition that has to be cured quickly if we are to see the way ahead clearly and avoid catastrophic mistakes.” (Alexander, 1993: 8)

Of course, these catastrophic mistakes have not been avoided. Yet there is nothing defeatist or even disillusioned about Alexander’s last book. On the contrary. With a title that deliberately recalls a much earlier work by Olive Schreiner, **Thoughts on South Africa**, likewise published posthumously (Schreiner, 1923), Alexander looks back, takes stock, and seeks to inspire his readers. As he writes in his introduction, “I genuinely believe it is not too late to change course in the new South Africa”; and that he hopes, by revisiting his “intellectual, scholarly or journalistic interventions” over the last number of years, the book could act “as a possible launching pad (one among many) for a national rethink and dialogue about where we are heading as a society and where we think we ought to be heading” (p viii). And whilst Alexander does not provide a blueprint for an alternative future, the change of course he advocates is not restricted to better governance, the attraction of “foreign investors” and black economic empowerment. Alexander in his last book had remained as resolutely anti-capitalist as he had remained resolutely non-racialist (and anti-nationalist) in his envisioning of a truly postcolonial South Africa. In the process he challenges political suppositions of both capitalist right *and* socialist left.

In the first three chapters Alexander looks back, almost cryptically, on neglected strands of struggle in South Africa, countering what he sees as “many distortions and, sometimes, conscious falsifications of the history of our struggle” (p 1). He focuses in particular on the Unity Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement – both movements Alexander had been intimately involved with and which are discussed “in an elegiac tone and in a biographical

mode" (p 1). One wishes Alexander had had the time and inclination to write a full-length autobiography. These thumbnail sketches, with their tender recollections of the people who had inspired him and offered him his apprenticeship in struggle and revolutionary humanism – and the important role he affords women and educators in these accounts deserves mention – leaves one begging for more historical detail.

After this all too brief historical and autobiographical excursion, Alexander revisits and reasserts the important work he had done in the areas of education, language planning and what used to be called "the national question" (constantly reinvigorated by Alexander, throughout his career and once more in this book, through questioning analyses of the ways in which national, ethnic and racial ideologies are being reproduced across the political spectrum in South Africa). Alexander's reflections on education remain vitally important in South Africa today; it is an account steeped in grassroots activism and community work, richly described in this book, which cannot be dismissed as impractical or "merely academic". His writings on language planning represent perhaps the pinnacle of his scholarly career: it hasn't been equalled, in scope, imaginative vision and political acuity, by anyone in South Africa, and even internationally Alexander occupies an important place in the scholarship on language and (especially postcolonial) society. Finally, Alexander's discussions of the pitfalls of race-based affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment will be controversial, but are not meant to be merely provocative. Alexander's integrity and insight as an intellectual is such that he lifts these debates out of a mire where political mudslinging and self-interested commentary from all sides of the spectrum often set the rhetorical tone, and restores them to a level of fundamental reflection on the questions of who we are, who we can be, and where we are going. After all, Alexander insisted to the end that "South Africa is the one country in the world where, for historical and cultural reasons, it is possible to demonstrate that a raceless society is possible" (p 171).

Towards the end of the book Alexander notes that he has refrained from developing yet another analysis of capitalism and its current global crisis. Indeed, it is not a demanding text theoretically. Alexander communicates simply and comes across as level-headed, clear-sighted and pragmatic – but he manages to do this without in any way compromising his idealism, critical humanism and anti-capitalist agenda. In other words, it is the kind of socialist text that even the liberal mainstream will not be able to ignore or dismiss easily, as they are wont to do with leftist ideas, as "ideological" (as opposed to their "realism"). That alone makes this a treasurable book, even for those of us who already know Alexander's work well. But it is also more than that. It is a book that reminds one just how inspirational a single revolutionary life can be.

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# Knowledge and knowing in South Africa: Making a case for the social sciences and the humanities

## [ B O O K   R E V I E W ]

Jacklin, Heather & Vale, Peter (eds) (2009)

### **Re-imagining the social in South Africa:**

### **Critique, theory and post-apartheid society.**

Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal

Press. ISBN 978-1-86914-179-0 pbk. Pages viii + 308

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Congratulations on your Bachelor of Arts Degree. Now go on out there and be the best damn something-or-other you can be!" Quips like this, which imply that there is little value in the knowledge produced within the humanities and social sciences, are not unfamiliar to those who work in these disciplinary areas. In recent years the practical value of these disciplines has been increasingly questioned, as "hard" science and policy-oriented research has been prioritised over critically-oriented, qualitative, conceptual, or "merely" curiosity-driven research. Academics are increasingly required to respond to social and economic development initiatives, including the production of a capable workforce. Jacklin and Vale's edited volume **Re-imagining the social in South Africa** responds to the global "threat" (p 78) and makes a case for "the indispensability of the humanities" (p 269) and social sciences.

Focussing on the particularities of the South African situation in which, it is argued, "deep thinking about the social world, even within society is not encouraged" (p 1), the overarching concern of the book is with "how knowledge and knowing has shaped South Africa and how it has fed—and continues to feed—the country's understanding of worlds, both social and other" (p 23). Collectively, the works gathered in this volume speak to a socio-political context where, as the development and transformation agenda has predominated, the role of South African scholars has shifted "from critique to subservience" (p 2). This shift has also been noted by critical psychologists who have argued that the earlier oppositional discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, which sought to challenge the Apartheid state, has become one of social responsiveness. Rather than being adjudged on the basis

of its transformative potential, the “relevance” of psychological knowledge is now evaluated in respect to the degree to which it contributes to government programmes for social and economic development (Macleod & Howe, 2013).

The book comprises a collection of papers written by eminent humanities scholars and social scientists (though none from psychology). The papers were originally prepared for a symposium focussed on understanding the reasons for the “end of [critical] public debate” (p 2) in South Africa and the ways that social theory can contribute to restoring critique in the interests of social justice. While a range of fields and perspectives are represented, what unites the authors is the emphasis placed on the liberatory role that the humanities and social sciences are seen as appropriately playing. This argument is probably best summed up by Olivier’s conclusion (chapter 4) that: “Human ‘knowledge’, when divorced from emancipatory action, is irredeemably vitiated” (p 102). In grappling with the “prospects for an emancipatory intellectual praxis” (p 141) in South Africa, a range of issues are identified as impinging on this, chief among these are: state politics; the tyranny of economic imperatives in knowledge production; and the commodification and managerialism of higher education.

The first substantive contribution to the volume is Schatzki’s well-placed chapter on social theory (chapter 2). This chapter provides a good conceptual basis for subsequent chapters. He argues that it is social theory that connects the humanities and social sciences. In his detailed exposition, he not only explains what social theory *is* but also offers a view on what its ultimate purpose ought to be, namely, “changing global constellations of power, finance, culture, productions and governance” (p 30). This theme—of the relationship between humanities and social sciences—is revisited later in a chapter by Higgins, who also attempts to find common ground between the disciplines. Approaching from a somewhat different angle, Higgins maintains that these disciplinary areas have more in common than their mutual marginalisation through the privileging of science and technology and construction of useful knowledge as instrumental. Their common ground, Higgins argues, is that of representation or the “presentation of reality” (p 179). By this he refers to semiotics or the realm of ideology, which he then goes on to show is central to understandings of citizenship and ultimately to political critique.

A number of other authors also pick up on the ways that our relationship to the state impact both on knowledge production and social change. In chapter three, for instance, Chipkin discusses nationalism and the disablement of critical thought, particularly in relation to the ANC government and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). He asserts that, as a highly-regulated parastatal entity, the council runs the risk of functioning as a service provider to the state. Similarly, in chapter five, Neocosmos criticises state-liberal politics for stultifying emancipatory action—looking particularly at the limitations of human rights discourse. A similar point is made in chapter six by Pithouse, who asserts that, within the confines of the current configuration of state, mass participation and truly revolutionary pro-poor politics is not possible. Rather than acting in the good of the poor majority, the interests of the middle classes and the new elite are being upheld through the liberalism of academe and the bourgeois politics of civil society.

Several contributors consider the factors that act as impediments to critical thinking and broader societal transformation. The subordination of critical thought to economic imperatives is identified and discussed as a central factor in the depoliticisation of thought and knowledge production. Several authors discuss the relationship between the commercialisation of knowledge and the strong instrumentalist view toward ameliorating social problems, usually through policy-driven

research. This is most explicit in Chipkin's critique of the HSRC as an entity tasked with conducting "social science that makes a difference" and in which a strong instrumentalist view of research is promoted. Chipkin considers how a great deal of the knowledge produced by HSRC researchers is shaped by the council's funding model that requires researchers to locate donor funding for their projects, usually within targeted areas dictated by national policy objectives. This significantly narrows the scope of the research that is carried out, he contends, with very little latitude for critical inquiry or critique. In a similar vein, Olivier argues that within the academy itself the critical and emancipatory role of the humanities has been minimised and de-politicised by the current incarnation of neo-liberal capitalism.

Accordingly, Olivier argues—along with his fellow contributors—for the crucial role of the humanities in providing social critique and producing unique kinds of knowledge that allow us to reflect on oppressive practices, even within supposedly 'free' democracies. Likewise, Rowe (chapter 8) contends that precisely what is needed in higher education is "humanities informed by a rigorous engagement with the common good" (p 271). Using a case study to illustrate, he maintains that the "utilitarian aspect" of higher education cannot simply be dismissed, but instead suggests how this aspect might be reconciled with the more traditional roles of the university, including that of social critique.

Central to most chapters in the collection is the issue of race, with some interesting discussion of its intersections with class, especially by Pillay in chapter nine. In this chapter, he outlines the historical trajectory of scholarly discussion of the race-class nexus in South Africa. He goes on to claim that scholars' focus on race and class in their attempts to understand post-apartheid power relations has been at the expense of issues of language (and translation). His argument is certainly confirmed by the book itself which, save for the attention to class and the brief mention of gender, tends to focus solely on the ongoing significance of race in our country. There is no disputing that race continues to be a crucial signifier in our society and while this focus allows for a deep discussion of the topic, it also narrows it. Feminist scholars have argued that in order to create a nuanced picture of how privilege and oppression continue to operate, and to produce socially-relevant knowledge (in the radical sense), then we also need to engage with the diverse socio-political concerns and "multiple sources of social inequalities and diffractions characteristic of South African society" (Macleod & Howe, 2013: 222).

In sum, as the preceding discussion reflects, the volume is informative and rich, spanning a range of social science and humanities disciplines and including a number of different perspectives. The book's overall style, however, is challenging, even turgid, at times. Its audience is therefore likely to be specialist academic readers, regrettably excluding those who ought to hear its important message. Nevertheless, those who do engage with it will be presented with a number of crucial, provoking questions regarding the contemporary conditions of knowledge production in South Africa and its connection to emancipatory politics. The book, in a sense, revives and continues a vital discussion for all academics, including psychologists, in which we reflect upon our knowledge production as "a socio-political project that is intricately interwoven with the socio-historical and socio-economic power relations of modern society" (Macleod & Howe, 2013: 222).

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# 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.** Hounds Mills: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-1-37-26389-6 hbk. Pages xviii + 368. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. ISBN 978-1-86814-756-4 pbk. 320 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 review, 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!

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# Some old problems with the new guidance on counselling people of African ancestry

## [BOOK REVIEW]

Mpofu, Elias (ed) (2011) **Counseling people of African ancestry**. New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-88722-9 hbk. Pages xix + 332.

The purpose of this book is an ostensibly worthy one, which is to promote Afrocentric understandings and culturally sensitive mental health interventions for Africans and people of African ancestry. The latter includes descendants of the African diaspora – whose ancestors were scattered across the globe, often by violent force, and who retain a cultural affiliation with their ancestral origins.

Representing the work of 48 contributors, and edited by Elias Mpofu, a leading African scholar, **Counseling people of African ancestry** is published by Cambridge University Press. The text is divided into four parts and twenty chapters. The first part sets out the supposedly essential, shared cultural features and assumptions that are relevant when counselling people of an African cultural heritage. Part two describes some of the typical settings or contexts in which this Afrocentric counselling is relevant, and part three focuses on some of the particular problems that are the focus of such treatments. The final part considers how these Afrocentric understandings and approaches to mental health might be advanced.

The broad range of topics comes at the expense of depth. One might have expected a book such as this to have been written for postgraduate students training in counselling or psychotherapy, but the fairly brief chapters and multiple choice questions suggest that it is aimed at an undergraduate rather than postgraduate audience. It might serve as a useful adjunct to the more detailed counselling and psychotherapy texts that are offered to postgraduate students in psychology, but, apparently only available in hardcover, it is prohibitively expensive (\$100 on amazon.com).

The book certainly contains a number of well written and informative chapters. The chapters that describe the working

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contexts and the problems that are likely to be encountered are useful. (Perhaps one criticism here is that both of these sections could be expanded.) But much of what I thought to be most useful is not necessarily specific to Africans or those of African ancestry but is rather applicable to people all over the world, especially people who are or have been marginalised, colonised or racially oppressed, regardless of whether they identify with Africa or not. Take the excellent chapter on trauma for instance, which elevates socio-economic contextual factors over cultural ones in the aetiology and course of traumatic stress, and claims that with minor cultural adaptations, interventions drawn from theoretical models that have been developed elsewhere can be effectively used with African clients.

The chapters that are perhaps specific to people of Africa and their descendants, particularly some of the chapters that are located in the first part of the book (with at least one exception being the chapter on racial oppression, colonisation and identity) refer repeatedly to fixed, homogenised, romantic notions of African culture. What troubles me is that the suggestions and tone of some of the chapters, by implying an undifferentiated African population bound by geographical origin and wedded to a common cultural identity, are deeply essentialising. This discounts the fluidity and diversity of African beliefs, ways of being and cultural practices, and how these might overlap with those of people in other parts of the world, including the post-industrial Western societies. Indeed, the emerging sub-discipline of postcolonial psychology problematises these very representations (Macleod & Bhatia, 2008).

For example, two of these chapters claim that narrative therapy is well suited to Africans, apparently because of the African oral tradition, as storytelling is a “naturally occurring phenomenon in Africa” (p 31), and because the approach is “linked to African values”, primarily the humanistic values associated with *Ubuntu* and the supposed emphasis placed on interdependence (p 49). Apart from the fact that these notions are contested (eg, Vogt & Laher, 2009), what these proponents of narrative therapy fail to see is the way in which these discourses position African subjects as fundamentally different to other people, as exotic and primitive. The problem I have here is not about the usefulness of a narrative approach - it is in suggesting that a very heterogeneous group of people share these supposed fixed, essential cultural characteristics. Elsewhere we are told that there is benefit to exploiting “African clients’ natural affinity to group work” (p 31). In discussion of the development of a culturally specific version of the TAT, we are told that “each card captures the lifestyles, physical characteristics, and values of Blacks” (p 50). Now there is, of course, nothing wrong with ensuring that test content and materials are relevant to the people who are to be tested, but the suggestion that there exist uniquely Black physical characteristics, lifestyles and values is obviously problematic. In fact, I thought that this was the very essence of racism, even if well meaning.

Certainly the notion of a relatively uniform African culture does not resonate with the diversity of clients that are seen at the psychology clinic at the university at which I work, which is located in an impoverished and rural region of the Eastern Cape province in South Africa. There we have seen clients ranging from a lesbian township resident who has been subjected to vicious homophobic attacks, on the one hand, to the patriarch who abuses alcohol and his family on the other. I would think that an Afrocentric approach would do well to emphasise rather than minimise the diversity and fluidity of cultural beliefs and practices across Africa, and also emphasise the interplay between culture and context in the development, expression and treatment of mental illness or psychological distress.

In this regard, it is perhaps unfortunate that the book does not deal with the large literature on idioms of distress - the socially and culturally prescribed ways of conveying distress (Nichter, 1981)

that can influence the development and expression of psychopathology- and how an understanding of these can be used to develop culturally salient interventions (Hinton & Lewis-Fernández, 2010). An important point is that idioms of distress are employed in all cultures and their understanding reduces the danger of exoticising others, as some of the chapters of the text risk doing. Also important is that exploring clients' idioms of distress is necessary to obtain any idiosyncratic meanings implicated in their distress and to access their life worlds. This understanding should facilitate empathy, while the idioms of distress are oftentimes the target of interventions (Hinton & Lewis-Fernandez, 2010). Thus, exploring these idioms of distress is not only the task of ethnographic researchers who study mental health in different cultural milieus but also for counsellors who seek to be better equipped to engage clients who are located in social and cultural contexts that are different to their own.

What this involves, then, is the capacity to engage with the unfamiliar. Such a capacity is much more than the narrow idea of multicultural competence as learning snippets of other cultural beliefs and practices to avoid the common cross-cultural misunderstandings that might derail the counselling process. This is because cultural understandings and practices are not fixed, and because culture is used to denote and demarcate not only different customs and ways of life, but a host of other differences between people, including race, gender, sexuality and class (Eagle, Haynes & Long, 2007). This capacity can only be born from experiential practice in community settings that serve diverse client populations (Eagle, Haynes & Long, 2007).

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# Chewing the fat: Feminist analyses of neo-liberal discourses on obesity

## [ B O O K   R E V I E W ]

Tischner, I (2013) **Fat Lives: A feminist psychological exploration.** (Women and Psychology series.) London & New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-68094-3 pbk. Pages ix + 166.

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Apart from the material that the domain of popular media literally sells to us, it also gives us clues as to what cultural products and social constructs are being produced and presented for broader discursive consumption, usually to ideological ends far more serious than the forms in which they are conveyed. Take the issue of health and more specifically, body size. Although there has always been significant emotional, political and economic currency in the topic of health, there is currently an onslaught of messages and images that speak to a notion of health informed by a particular construction of the *overweight* or *obese* body. Follow the thread of seemingly nonsensical reality television (“*The biggest loser*”), seemingly innocuous news headlines (“*What caused the obesity crisis in the West?*”; “*Most obese South Africans in denial*”), or advertisements (*Coca cola’s anti-obesity ad campaign* – in the United States), unpack the meaning making occurring beneath the surface and you are likely to find rather sober proscriptions governing our lives and bodies - often with our “manufactured consent”. Although far more visible in the UK and US, these pronouncements on fat bodies are gaining discursive momentum here in South Africa.

The body has almost always been at the centre of culturally constructed ideals of gender identity, attractiveness, sexuality, strength, fertility and a host of other value-laden ideals of beauty, goodness and power (Bordo, 1998). Women’s bodies in particular have received ongoing scholarly attention, with biomedical discourses playing a powerful role in dominant meaning making around women’s well-being. The discipline of psychology is a prime example of how women’s biological and social inferiority has historically been ‘written on the body’ in theories of women’s madness, badness and sadness (Ussher, 1992; Chesler, 2005). Feminist analyses shifted the discourse

around the body from biological causation to social construction and regulation, with a pivotal text being Susie Orbach's 1978 publication **Fat is a feminist issue**, a book that linked women's relationships with fat and food to broader societal power dynamics and gender inequity. In the thirty-five year interim since that publication, there has not been much focus on individual narratives that speak to the experience of being "large", with scholarly attention seemingly more drawn to the medicalisation and pathologisation of being "too thin".

This book, **Fat lives**, offers us a feminist psychological exploration into the subject of fat, looking at women's embodied experience of being large and exploring how self-designated "fat" individuals discursively manage their subjectivities and subject positions within the politics of "obesity". The context of Tischner's study and this publication is British society and the introductory chapter gives a glimpse of the current "healthism" and "war on obesity" in the UK, using examples from popular media, national health promotion campaigns, and medical and psychological literature. As stated by Cheek (2008, cited in Tischner, p 6), "Health has become ... a new form of badge of honour by which we can claim to be responsible and worthy as citizens and individuals".

Tischner also introduces a reflexive thread that runs subtlety throughout the text by succinctly describing her own "embodied experiences of the regulatory power of discourses" (p 3), with reference to the gendered body, feminization and weight. The study is simultaneously a critique of reductionist approaches to public health, a commentary on the role of discourse in reproducing power relations and a description of the production of subjectivities within the broader body politic. The feminist poststructuralist and critical psychological theoretical resources are well suited to a study such as this. The premise of knowledge as partial and situated, rather than as a metanarrative of truth shifts analytic attention to the contextual sites (material and discursive) and subject positionings out of which particular meanings and experiences of obesity emerge. Together these resources thus allow Tischner to explore the link between macropolitical governance and micropolitical self-governance of bodies (Saukko & Reed, 2010, cited in Tischner).

This book has seven chapters, and to my reading can be divided into three distinct sections. The introduction and first two chapters set the scene, describing the social context of the issue of obesity, reviewing relevant literature on the topic and outlining the research methodology, respectively. A separate appendix includes further detail on the "epistemological, theoretical and methodological foundations of the critical psychological approach taken in exploring fat embodiment" (p 133). I am not sure whether this separation works and I would rather have it included in the main body of the book. My guess is that the dilemma was between overwhelming the reader and forfeiting a substantial theoretical review that had probably accompanied the original dissertation.

Chapters 3 to 6 focus specifically on the research data and are positioned as the heart of the book. The data emerged from interviews with both women and men and were analysed using Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). The author provides a clear and accessible description of the difference between various strands of discourse analysis and of the principles of FDA. This section will be useful to students who are often overwhelmed by the range of different offerings that define discourse analysis and describe how to do it.

The excerpts from interviews with participants provided a rich nuance to the analysis and made the analytic commentary on the main themes easy to follow and comprehend. The first theme on the in/visibility of fat women looked at issues of surveillance and the politics of visibility or appearance. The second theme was on issues of clothing choice and availability. Tischner

describes how “The women constituted themselves as interested in fashion and appearance, but regulated and hampered by the retail industry, and a neo-liberal society that values self-perfection according to socially constructed standards, which equate fat with unattractive, and unhealthy” (p 73).

The third theme concerned the constructions of health, responsibility for health/weight and the neoliberal citizen: “ ... in the current neoliberal atmosphere of healthism, health and healthcare have been made the individual’s responsibility and body weight has become the prime indicator of a person’s health status, and by extension, moral standing” (p 7). The analysis draws on Nikolas Rose to describe how in neo-liberal societies like the UK, notions of individual responsibility mean that the role of the state escapes scrutiny and individuals’ “free choice” is a regulative freedom based on what is considered culturally normative and for the good of society.

While the author acknowledges that the theme of “gender” runs through all the analysis, it is dealt with as a separate thematic chapter. She describes her surprise that the concept of gender was not spoken about much in interviews with women, while it was clearly raised by men. Her curiosity led to subsequent focus groups on “gendering fat” and the chapter thus looks more explicitly at issues of gendered identity and gender differences and similarities in the embodied experience of being fat.

I like the way in which, using fat or obesity as an illustration, this book allows for a critical interrogation of the ways in which subjectivities are produced, reinforced or transmuted through discursive constructions of “difference”, deviance and personal responsibility. It shows how these discursive mobilisations can exclude, marginalize and oppress those who do not fit within these narrow and regulated brackets of dominant notions of what is normal, natural and healthy.

The analysis was also strengthened by the focus on agency in participant’s resistance to objectification, the ways in which they asserted their denied subjectivity and disrupted and resisted the hegemonic readings of the fat body. This is one area in which this book could resonate in our South African context as the large, Black body has been construed as a resistance to “both imperatives of whiteness and slenderness as an ideal state of embodiment ... as well as to hegemonic aesthetic imperatives” (Shaw, 2006, cited in Ogana & Ojong, 2013, p 111).

I like how clearly structured, coherent and accessible this book is. It is a good example of how to describe and share relevant research with a wider audience, while still making a contribution to the body of critical scholarly literature. Because of this, the book will benefit not only those working on the topic of the gendered body, but those interested in using the resources of poststructuralist and critical feminist theory as a way of making sense of social issues. I would recommend this book to students who are embarking on a research project and intend using critical psychology and feminist poststructuralism as theoretical resources.

The other side of this coin is that in my opinion the book lacks a more nuanced analysis. Perhaps the analysis seemed a bit weak to me because in our African context the body has been so heavily implicated in the ideological projects of scientific racism, and constructions of health deeply informed by gendered and racialised notions of sexuality, risk and deviance (MacFadden, 1992; Gqola, 2005). Social crises (whether “HIV/AIDS” or “obesity”) are given a specific moral lexicon depending upon the ideological needs of a society at a given moment in time (Gilman, 1988). I would have liked Tischner to go further in interrogating how ‘the fat crisis’ as historically

situated, structured by political economies and institutions (global, national, familial – all gendered, sexualized and racialised), and inextricably enmeshed with the social ideologies and cultural codes. I missed that deeper engagement. On the whole though, I expected to have to wade through heavy, inaccessible theory and culturally irrelevant analytic conclusions and I was pleasantly surprised to find that this was not the case.

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