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The class of '79

(Auckland Park, Jacana Publishers, 2014, 159 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4314-1086-6)

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When Lesego Rampolokeng took the stage at the University currently known as Rhodes in 2012 to perform his public lecture, *writing the ungovernable*,¹ he had the following to say about the current historical disposition of the country: “my generation break-beaten into line / obscenity-heritage / pornography pageantry ... superstars, asteroids/arse-steroids & haemorrhoids / all things I try to avoid / now) time’s stuck a fist so far up my rectum / it’s waving Amandla out of my mouth / (what a boneless slogan to chew)”. Rampolokeng is here throwing a looming shadow over the bright colours of the South African rainbow and the heroes and icons it produces. He is questioning the history and the narrative that has continually been re-told as the story of the glorious end of apartheid, complete with heroes, waving fists, and limp Amandla slogans.

This specific trend in South African historical writing has seen a resurgence in recent times with the publication of several books dealing with the so-called

¹ L Rampolokeng, “Writing the ungovernable”, *New Coin Poetry*, 49(1), 2013.

“non-racial” struggle against the National Party government’s institutionalised and legally codified racial laws: apartheid.² Janice Warman’s latest book, *The class of ’79*, falls squarely into this current trend of historical writing. Warman presents the narratives of three individuals that were involved in the ANC and/or later the UDF opposition to the government’s policy of apartheid. These individuals – Marion Sparg, Guy Berger, Zubeida Jaffer – were also all part of Rhodes’ Department of Journalism graduating class of 1979.

The book proceeds by collecting interviews and anecdotes related to the individuals that it claims to study. If the book is evaluated and analysed merely on what it sets out to achieve on this level then it can be deemed a successful book. It collects oral and anecdotal evidence on the three protagonists’ anti-apartheid activities and relates them back to the eponymous Rhodes University journalism class of ‘79. The book is divided into three main chapters dealing with each figure: Sparg, Berger, and Jaffer. The preface is divided into two sections entitled respectively *The Beginning*, and *Johannesburg* while the book ends with a section entitled *Sussex*.

The section entitled *The Beginning* gives us a glimpse into the method employed by Warman when she narrates her time in Rhodes, as part of the class of 1979. Warman refers sympathetically to the work of the ‘new journalists’ Joan Didion, Thom Wolfe and Truman Capote. Apart from this briefest of allusions to a literary tradition, there is no clear methodology that explains the author’s choice of material and process of compiling information. The reason for choosing these three specific individuals are explained anecdotally in the opening pages as having to do with Warman’s own experiences at university and her loose affiliation with the subjects of the book. This anecdotal form of explanation is a feature of the whole text and thus instead of argued and researched historical critique, the author employs a range of literary techniques and tropes to carry her text: confessional writing, new journalism, personal narrative, interviews, profile and feature writing.

In the absence of such a methodological clarification, it can only be assumed that the choices made by the author are of a personal and haphazard nature. Although this method can be effective, it does present a serious problem when historical, intellectual, and anti-colonial trajectories are combined

2 M Burton, *The Black Sash* (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2015); D Cornell and K van Marle, *Albie Sachs and transformation in South Africa: From revolutionary activist to constitutional court judge* (Abingdon, Birkbeck Law Press, 2014); B Keniston, *Choosing to be free: The life story of Rick Turner* (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2014); G Moss, *The new radicals: A generational memoir of the 1970s* (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2014).

and commented upon in such a haphazard way without any argument or citations. There is a telling paragraph in this regard, dealing with the Pan Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement, on pg 50. Warman attempts to make a comment on the BCM's organisational strategy and tactics and states that, "[d]espite its leader Steve Biko's own support for non-violent action, influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, it [BCM] leaned towards more militant and radical solutions". A claim like this would need to, in any situation, be justified and argued against the already existing body of literature on Biko and the BCM and the influence of thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Anton Muziwakhe Lembede, and Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. Gandhi's involvement in the anti-colonial struggle in South Africa, the Bambatha revolt being a case in point, is dubious to say the least and invoking him in the same paragraph as the Africanist movement, and the same sentence, as BCM and Biko has to be treated with suspicion. Warman then follows that specific passage with a lengthy discussion on Guy Berger's anti-establishment politics and his influences. There is a conceptual, political, and historical problem in using Biko and BCM as a foil to ultimately discuss white anti-apartheid activists; white liberals in Biko's words.

The book's inability to function as an accurate historical text does, however, not take away from its role in re-telling and creating memory. Any text – be it a work of visual art, writing, film, photo – tells not only the story of its chosen subject but it also tells the story of the one choosing the subject. The role of the author of a work can most easily be discerned by considering the choices made in the text. As mentioned earlier, the lack of methodological reflection makes the choices made by the author all the more important. Choice does not only play a structural role in the narrative but also, in the case of Warman's text, functions as a literary trope. The role of choice and the decision to act in a certain way – or to not act in a certain way – is a recurring theme throughout the book and in the interviews with the three protagonists. Warman seems fascinated by the choices made by Sparg, Berger, and Jaffer that is seemingly against the established dogmas and truths of their respective communities and families. Warman does, however, fail to contextualise and properly historicise these choices within a broader political and social history. How is it, for example, that certain people were able to choose to partake in an anti-apartheid struggle and some were forced into it by the colour of their skin, forced into revolt by birth?

The fault lines inherent in the post-apartheid rainbow myth are beginning to show clearly and decisively after 21 years. These are not the same sentiments shared by Warman when she asks each of her interviewees “was the struggle and the sacrifice worth it?” What is emerging on the campuses, streets, and public discourse in South Africa is a fundamental question of the stakes of liberation and freedom and the legitimacy of the dogmatic history of the anti-apartheid struggle for “non-racialism”. In this regard, several questions we can take from Rampolokeng need to be posed to any contemporary historical texts: is it a work in “obscenity-heritage” and “superstars” that once again waves the boneless slogan of Amandla or is it a contribution to a much needed deepening of the historical archive? Warman’s text, unfortunately, seems to answer in the affirmative to the first set of questions.

A history of Zimbabwe

(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 277 pp. ISBN: 978-1-107-68479-9)

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Alois Mlambo’s many works (single, co-authored, and edited books ranging from studies of industrialisation, white immigration, to structural adjustment, and the wide-ranging *Becoming Zimbabwe* edited with Brian Raftopoulos; and scores of articles ranging from the history of Zimbabwe’s civil aviation to the Cold Storage Commission to sanctions against Rhodesia, student politics in the 1970s, and university policies and practices after 1980) have positioned him extremely well to write this accessible *tour de force* of what has added up to create today’s well-known superficially but poorly understood Zimbabwe. This important book is the result of decades of intense research and writing – scores of theses have been scoured, thousands of pages of primary documents from archives to government bureaus have been scrutinised, and every secondary source imaginable has been interrogated – to make a clearly written