

What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/ Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Pumla Dineo Gqola.

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African diaspora scholarship has long privileged forced and voluntary diasporic migration to North America, as well as the Atlantic Ocean as its primary route. Citing Paul Gilroy's pioneering text, *The Black Atlantic*, as exemplary of this narrow focus, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2005) critiques this "analytical tendency to privilege the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch of the African diaspora, as is so clear in Gilroy's seminal text" (36). Zeleza argues that the Atlantic is just one element of Africa's diaspora, albeit the one with the most developed historiography. He names diasporas in other parts of Africa, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean as parts of the African whole in need of analytical development, in order to "yield a more comprehensive and complex picture of the global dimensions of the African diasporas over the last millennia" (44). With *What is Slavery To Me?* Pumla Dineo Gqola has produced a remarkable monograph which addresses national identity construction in post-apartheid South Africa while contributing significantly to the development of Indian Ocean diaspora scholarship.

Gqola's project examines "how the South African imagination conceives of, constructs and interprets itself at a time of transition, and how slavery is evoked and remembered as part of negotiating current ways of being" (1). She achieves this through varied and nuanced analyses of a range of post-apartheid identities as they are constructed through rich and textured cultural processes. Raising questions about the way slave memory has been invoked and performed in post-apartheid South Africa and the timing of group claims to slave ancestry—previously a lineage shrouded in shame—Gqola scrutinises a number of cultural moments in which groups reconfigure identities by claiming slave heritage. The monograph examines contemporary 'coloured' identities and the ways in which these groups deploy Khoi and slave lineages to re-anchor themselves in both racially conservative and progressive ways. It explores literary representations of slaves and colonized subjects, using Black Southern African feminism as a lens for dissecting such representations through engagement with the figure of Sarah (Saartjie) Bartmann; and surveys strategic Afrikaner appropriation of slave heritage in the "new" South Africa. Additionally, it re-evaluates the Muslim diaspora in an

attempt to tease out the strands of contemporary Cape Malay identity, and juxtaposes the art of Berni Searle with the art of Malay cooking as “sites of creativity in service of memory” (19).

The production of memory is central to all of the above processes: articulations of memory become the bedrock on which current identity processes and identifications rest. Gqola relies on Hesse’s formulation of “postcolonial memory,” a political project not only concerned with mere recordings of the past, but also engaged in critical excavation of the experiences of those marginalized and dispossessed by colonialism. In her discussion of slave memory as postcolonial memory, Gqola draws on African-American novelist Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory as a creative, imaginative reconstruction, outside of formal historiographies, of knowledges which have been eviscerated through colonization. Rememory is the “filling in, recasting, relooking, reformulating (both of memory and history)” (Gqola 8), and a key process through which slave memory constructs post-apartheid identities.

The book’s opening chapter theorises ‘coloured’ identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Using texts by key theorists of ‘coloured’ identity such as Zoë Wicomb, Zimitri Erasmus, and Mohamed Adhikari, Gqola compares the identity-making processes of the !Hurikamma Cultural Movement (!HCM) and the Kleurling Weerstandsbeweging (KWB) and the ways both movements deploy Khoi and slave memory. Gqola argues that contemporary reclamations of ‘coloured’ identity do not necessarily signify in politically regressive and conservative ways, as has frequently been argued in the aftermath of South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994. She makes a convincing case, reading emerging ‘coloured’ identity articulations in the !HCM’s political statements as displays of political agency denied during apartheid, and proffers that such articulations utilize slave and Khoi heritage in progressive ways by destabilizing and expanding conceptualizations of Blackness. Such an analytical move counters “contestations of Blackness through the bestowal of progressive subjectivities to specific Black ethnicities, and the Othering of other Black ethnicities through the projection of ‘slave mentality’ and/or ‘collaborationist lines’” (Gqola 41).

Gqola moves on to a fascinating and novel exploration of Afrikaner post-apartheid identity, which co-opts slave ancestry in order to realign itself with shifting power structures. Here she examines the 1995 play “Krotoa, Onse Ma,” which claims Krotoa as an Afrikaner founding mother. Such a reclamation depends on a paradoxical forgetting of the true circumstances of Krotoa’s life, including her banishment from Dutch society after her husband’s death, and the loss of her children. This reclamation also paradoxically exposes one of apartheid South Africa’s fundamental lies: the myth of racial purity on which white supremacy rested. Through further analysing the television series “Saints, Sinners and Settlers” (1999) and a speech by then NNP Member of Parliament, Anna van Wyk, Gqola masterfully lays bare the *willful* forgetting of Afrikaners’ earlier articulations of white purity and supremacy as they renegotiate

national belonging in the post-apartheid state. One concern with this chapter, and the monograph as a whole, is the omission of a theorizing of white English South African identity in relation to slave memory. By ignoring an important population in apartheid and post-apartheid racial landscapes, Gqola perhaps inadvertently reifies English-speaking white identity as normative, taken-for-granted, and not open for the same type of analytical scrutiny as other South African identities. But the reason may lie with the absence of claims to slave ancestry from English-speaking white South Africans.

The final two chapters on Muslim/Cape Malay identities and spice routes in relation to Malay and 'coloured' identities are breathtaking in their range and interdisciplinary melding of unlikely cultural sites. In the latter chapter, Gqola reads Malay cooking as creative work which, along the art installations of Berni Searle, encodes diasporic slave memory. She argues that "these visual texts challenge received notions of how diaspora and slavery are articulated by their location and through chosen framings" (166). In these two chapters Gqola broadens concepts of African diaspora through centering Indian Ocean diasporic routes, while enlarging our understanding of contemporary Black South African identity in all its gradations and shades. *What is Slavery to me?* is an excellent, painstakingly researched text, which should be required reading for all who are invested in South African identities and future directions in African diaspora studies.

Works Cited

- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- Zeleva, Paul Tiyambe. "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic." *African Affairs* 104.414 (2005): 35-68. Print.