



Black South African autobiography after Deleuze: Belonging and becoming in self-testimony

by Kgomotso M. Masemola, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2017, 204 pp., €105.00 (E-Book), ISBN 978-90-04-34644-4

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BOOK REVIEWS

Black South African autobiography after Deleuze: Belonging and becoming in self-testimony, by Kgomotso M. Masemola, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2017, 204 pp., €105.00 (E-Book), ISBN 978-90-04-34644-4

Kgomotso Masemola's *Black South African Autobiography after Deleuze* is a study in the practice of reading in post-apartheid South Africa. Far from offering a sense of black writing as becoming modern through a mimicry of what might be called the non-African or foreign, Masemola gives us a nuanced reading of how South African autobiography (including authors such as Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele, N. Chabani Manganyi, Miriam Makeba, Bloke Modisane, Ellen Kuzwayo, Sindiwe Magona, Nelson Mandela, and Mamphela Ramphele) reads in a broader context. This is an intervention that deserves to be engaged with not only for its deft and lucid articulation of "theory", but also for its strong literary sensibility. In Masemola's intervention, the book is not an image of the world but rather a rhizomatic line charted through chaos. This Deleuzian insight is paired with a postcolonial tone borrowed from Homi Bhabha, which fundamentally alters the key terms of his text: the reader very quickly realizes that neither the adjective "black", nor the proper noun "South Africa", is straightforwardly accessible. These are complicated through an understanding of the self in "self-writing" as a process of *subjectivation against the state*, what Deleuze and Guattari called "deterritorialization". The self is written, it emerges, in the struggle to resist, to depart from the drive to fix the self in place through the science of the state.

The strength of Masemola's intervention, which asks to be read as a "compulsive cultural act" (2) (his own definition for self-writing), stems from his ability to demonstrate – most effectively, in my opinion, in his discussion of Kuzwayo, Mphahlele, and Manganyi – how these writings were themselves inventions, not simple repetitions. It is not a case of utilizing these autobiographical accounts as evidence for a theoretical framework; rather, theory functions as a language that is available for the production of the new, to re-create from what exists. This allows for a reading that emphasizes how the act of writing functions in and against its time. In other words, what Masemola locates in what he calls black South African autobiography is a repetition with difference; these writers are black, both in the sense of their epidermal fixity produced through apartheid and colonialism, and through the inventive dislocation of identity that the struggle against that formation requires.

Masemola's refreshing commitment to reading the text to the letter allows us to grasp, in detail, the way in which these instances of self-writing take place in the in-between-ness of the scripts that would try to fix subjects in place in relation to concepts like tradition, modernity, race, and gender: either as categories to which people are relegated, or for which people *must* speak. For Masemola, the point of black autobiography, and the point of reading it today, is the pedagogical effect of encountering the "discursive migrancy between belonging and becoming" (176) that marks these interventions. Cultural memory emerges in this reading as a weapon for realizing a project of "theory by any means", as Souleymane Bachir Diagne famously described the theoretical work of the Négritude movement. At stake is the work of emerging as a face, rather than the repetition of a mask.

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Literatures of liberation: Non-European universalisms and democratic progress,
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A great deal of critical energy has been devoted in recent decades to the dismantling of universalisms within fields such as postcolonial studies, critical race studies, and feminist and queer theory, among others. To take the concept of the human as an example, we can think of Agamben's influential work on bare life, Sylvia Wynter's brilliant theorizing of the Man/human divide, and Donna Haraway's trajectory from "The Cyborg Manifesto" to "Making Kin". Concepts like freedom and human rights have produced similarly robust and necessary scholarly conversations. A key catalyst in many of the conversations in postcolonial studies has been the insight that genuine emancipation from colonialism demands a reckoning with colonial philosophical, legal, and economic structures like modernity and capitalism that present themselves as universalisms, even as they are predicated on the continuing oppression of colonized and subaltern populations around the globe.

Mukti Lakhi Mangharam's *Literatures of Liberation: Non-European Universalisms and Democratic Progress* offers a deeply researched and theoretically innovative intervention into this continuing work on universalisms. As Mangharam points out early on, most discussions of universalisms seem to take for granted their grounding in the European Enlightenment. Wherever they proceed from there, "all these responses put the familiar Eurocentric story at their center, assuming that Enlightenment universalisms alone are responsible for modernity's inclusive as well as hegemonic manifestations of social change" (3). For Mangharam, this move erases concepts of the universal produced from outside the European tradition, concepts that might have interacted with and even been appropriated by European colonialism and capitalism, but which are not reducible to them. Mangharam seeks to investigate the role these "contextual universalisms" have played in anti-colonial liberation struggles.

Literatures of Liberation pursues examples of such contextual universalisms in two contexts: India and South Africa. In the first two chapters, Mangharam traces the continuing influence of the 15th-century South Asian poet Kabir's concept of the internal divinity of all people on contemporary Dalit activism, as well as the deployment of classical Sanskrit drama's concept of "emotional agency" by 19th-century actress Binodini Dasi and even, in a more compromised form, in contemporary Bollywood film. The final two chapters follow the ongoing reference to *ubuntu*, or "a person is a person through other people" (133), from early mentions in Zulu proverbs, *izibongo* (oral praise songs), and 19th-century critiques of Shaka's leadership to the massive union-organizing movement of the late apartheid moments of the 1980s. What links these two disparate examples is that their emancipatory ideas are expressed through oral, performative forms that engage the cognitive and emotional energies of the community towards their progressive ends. Thus,