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Changing the Game: Public History and the Space of Fiction

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Abstract:

In this article I argue that we need a more plural, diverse and theorised historiography for public history. In the developing methodology associated with this approach we will need to be keenly aware of international, domestic, and glocal audiences.

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In my work over the past decades I have been most interested in the way that cultural forms contribute to public history and public memory.¹ In particular this has led me to look at the consumption of popular historical products, such as film and television series. I call this popular history, the ways in which history in popular culture enables and articulates an historical sensibility. Since beginning working in this area the scope has become increasingly international. Indeed, I have often felt that my own approach – mainly Anglophone texts – has been quite provincial, regional, partial, domestic, limited in focus. My ideas about film, television, museums, performances, and novels have been narrowed by my own experience, language, epistemological assumptions, philosophic positions, historiographic biases.² However public history is increasingly an international discipline. I have spoken at conferences and attended workshops in a number of very different cultural contexts, from Russia to Japan, from Brazil to Germany, from Ireland to Poland, from South Korea to Australia. Often I have been taken aback at the ways in which my work and those of others has meant different things in those contexts. It is clear to me that “history,” and “public,” and the purposes or definitions of “public history,” vary enormously worldwide. Concepts of memory, time, generation, and the academy all differ from culture to culture. Understanding the *Secret River* debate in Australia demands thorough recognition of the varieties of discourse being contested, and that debate holds within it discussions of authority, memory, and identity.³ Public History practice in China will be very different from that in Northern Ireland.⁴ Watching *Русский ковчег* (*Russian Ark*, Alexander Sukurov, 2002) in Melbourne might be different to watching it in Helsinki.⁵ Questions and debates about public history might be considered folklore in one country, or policy in another; definitions of the popular shift between countries and cultures.

We need to recognize the huge difference between models of the “public,” between concepts of “the past,” and indeed interrogate thoroughly the relatively humanist, privileged, Anglophone, progressive, liberal, White underpinnings of historiography of the discipline of public history itself.⁶

How, then, to think about this thing that we call public history in an international context? Can such a project truly exist? Is there any kind of common approach, or useful set of theoretical and methodological paradigms?

Considering such issues has prompted me to think about what “international” public history might be, and its value and limitations as an approach. We still struggle with a truly theorised version of public history, and need to develop models for thinking about this intellectual work in an international context. We need, particularly, to be able to take account of different models, contexts, and cultures, and not simply to replicate the centering of public history practice and scholarship around largely Anglophone epistemologies and historiographical assumptions.

In a famous critique Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that the concept of “Europe” is the historiographic and epistemological barrier to real history:

insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, ‘history’ as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, ‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on.⁷

For Chakrabarty “Europe” remains the dominant, central, focal, master discourse and pattern. This is replicated in scholarship and methodologies around the world, and public history is not immune from it. The institutional construct that is “history” cannot conceive of anything else:

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There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'. In this sense, 'Indian' history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.⁸

Chakrabarty seeks a way to disavow this Eurocentrism, wants new methods of articulation, and looks for new models for conceiving of "history". Chakrabarty argues that new modes and new approaches are demanded by the past:

the plurality that inheres in the 'now', the lack of totality, the constant fragmentariness, that constitutes one's present [contrasts with] the historicist or ethnographic mode of viewing that involves the use of a sense of anachronism in order to convert objects, institutions and practices with which we have live relations into relics of other times.⁹

The challenge for a new way of knowing is clear. Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze agree that

History is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is Nomadology, the opposite of a history.¹⁰

Their suggestion is a fragmenting of epistemologies, a challenge to structure and form. Ato Quayson develops Chakrabarty's point, suggesting what is necessary is a practice that articulates within it the postcolonial critique:

I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenship in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity.¹¹

To what extent public history might be part of this critique, or part of the solution? How might public history within an international context be conceived of, and to what extent will it stage and respond to the debates prompted by Chakrabarty and Quayson? How might we understand the concepts of both "public" and "history" as both local and global; and, how is this expressed aesthetically? Is there such a thing as "glocal" public history? How can we theorize the phenomenon of historical fictions that are about a non-familiar past, the history of another nation or region? Might public history be something that contributes to what is sometimes termed "cosmopolitanism?"

For my particular purposes it is important to consider to what extent this is reflected in fictions about the past: film, novels, games and television. Looking at popular historical texts I have begun to wonder about how they represent the past of different cultures and how this contributes to an historical imaginary. Is it possible to study the notion of intercultural exchange through popular historical texts? How much can we use these to conceive of the relationship between cultures? In particular, how might these texts stage the encounter between differing types of history? In a globalized world, with streaming and online services bringing incredibly diverse content together, how might we think about cross-border history? Is "history" itself something that is encountered as other?

To what extent might movies or novels or TV series allow us to undertake the kind of critique that Chakrabarty and Quayson suggest is necessary to decolonize and provincialize history, and more particularly, the theory of public history? Can popular histories in fiction provide a means for interrogating the ways that the "past" has been used to control and repress? How do we account for a globalized historical product like a Hollywood film? Whilst they participate in popular historiography, revealing their own status as cultural versions of the past and seeking to enfranchise their viewer, they also often underline particular stereotypes and caricatures.

I suggest in my work that historical fictions might provide the model for thinking about how public history could address some of the issues raised here. This is largely because of the diversity and plurality that they encompass within them. Popular historical texts stage within them a discussion not only of the content but the form of history. As Alison Landsberg has written of my own and others' work: "Historians such as Hayden White, Alun Munslow, Frank Ankersmit, Jerome de Groot and Robert Rosenstone have been at the forefront of rethinking history's epistemological basis, in part through a careful consideration of form."¹² Through a consideration of the ways in which fictional histories work we might begin to address some of the knotty methodological and ethical questions raised here.

Do fictional texts do enough to stage within them the critique of "history" and centralising narratives that Chakrabarty seeks? Almost certainly not. Yet can their version of the past introduce the sophisticated challenge to western epistemologies that Quayson suggested were necessary?

Perhaps.

Through their rejection of order, structure, linearity, and a concomitant challenging of history as an authoritative mode these fictions critique the real and our ways of constructing it. They provide a different set

of models for presenting the past and critiquing the way that past is constructed. Whilst discussing realism as reflective of political orthodoxy Theodor Adorno posited that Franz Kafka resisted through form and purpose: “[Kafka’s novels] do not permit themselves to be brought to an end as the totality of a rounded temporal experience.”¹³ This rejection of “rounded” temporality is inherent – for Adorno – in fiction’s experimental, fragmented, political way of perceiving the world. Likewise I argue that specifically historical fictions play a role in communicating the indeterminacy and unknowability of history to the reader and through culture to society as a whole. The alterity of the historical fiction and its ability to “open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (despite – simultaneously with – its often innate conservatism) – brings it within the compass of the suite of texts, ideas, theories and positions that have been thought to destabilize discourses of dominance, counterfactual, alternative.¹⁴ Fictions are innately haunted by the strange, uncanny, unsubstantial dream of the “other” that is the “actual” past. The historical novel therefore is “a haunted text that offers a subtle queering of both temporal normativity and the sequential temporal logic that heteronormative culture is contingent upon.”¹⁵ These alternative histories provide what Carolyn Dinshaw seeks: “a history that reckons in the most expansive way possible with how people exist in time, with what it feels like to be a body in time, or in multiple times, or out of time [...] a *queer* history.”¹⁶

Take, for instance, Colson Whitehead’s prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad*. This novel shows how the form of historical fiction queries and subverts the “real” in order to profoundly reconfigure engagement with the past. Whitehead’s celebrated novel presents a counter-narrative of nineteenth-century America and its games with temporality, point of view, and fantasy allow its incredibly hard-hitting political message to work effectively. The novel looks at slavery in the 1800s, following escaped slave Cora and those she comes into contact with. Whitehead’s novel is written in realist style but presents a narrative that is counter to the “known” events of slavery: fantastical, counterfactual, science fictional. The Underground Railroad is a physical thing, somehow snaking underground from state to state, with stations and drivers. Moreover, each state that Cora the protagonist visits once she escapes her plantation in Georgia has a particular character and way of treating the black population – ghettoizing them, experimenting upon them, executing them – and each episode presents a complex set of arguments about the working of slavery, about white violence, and about the make-up of the United States. “Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” is a regular refrain, and Whitehead knits his narrative of the country together using the Railroad as a connecting structure – something that seems to have drive and linear purpose, but which is used here to connect episodes of meditation and allegory.¹⁷

Similar to Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) the novel suggests that the proper response to the abomination of slavery (and the trauma of the past) is something fantastical and transgressive, excessive and vengeful, haunting and violent. The past is strange and horrible, and it is somehow better and more profound to engage with it through aesthetic complication. Whitehead essentially argues that rather than focusing upon the “facts” of slavery readers might be more moved and engaged by thinking about the ways in which culture worked to enable the institution, and how those caught up in it might attempt to live. Like Morrison, he is interested in the ways that trauma might manifest and be conceived of as material, “real,” things; to witness through recognizing the horror. Whitehead therefore challenges temporality and realism as ways of rendering past experience. His novel suggests that we might do better to focus upon emotion, violence and trauma than to try to write “accurately” about something so horrific. The text resists “historizing.” Whitehead challenges received “history” and “mainstream” accounts of the past. Rational, historical discourse is a way of attempting to control the horror of the past, rather than to let its violence affect you in the present. In this light, historical fiction becomes a political act of remembrance that critiques “history” and comfortable discourses of the past. The alternative narrative here, the ugly reflection of American history and its endemic, continued, structural racism, is not “historical” but all the same has a power of accuracy. “His work suggests that our ways of thinking about slavery and understanding it might themselves inscribe the very problematic discourses that allowed it. He presents an alternative to a kind of humanist historical modernism. The novel undermines the heroic idealized version of the Underground Railroad, politicized commemorations which might suggest that there was some hope and idealism even in the horror of slavery. Instead it bleakly concludes that any idea of hope in the midst of such huge historical trauma is misguided and ethically wrong. To avoid the “real” by focusing on the heroic is to seek to misremember. His America is fundamentally racist, flawed, and likely to repeat its mistakes: “America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all [...] This nation shouldn’t exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are.”¹⁸

In his Acknowledgements Whitehead cites the Federal Writers’ Project collection of “life stories of former slaves” as well as the work of various key American historians, the writings of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, and contemporary sources from the collections of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. This blend of testimony and historical work, as well as the punk and new wave bands that he also cites as influences, suggest much about the hybrid, strange, and aesthetically complicated nature of his response to the “past” which is seen in the text. Whitehead’s novel suggests that modes of accessing and representing the past

– realist, humanist, authentic – are something to be queried and possibly critiqued. His fantastical-horror-anti-genre text seeks to make something *new*. He challenges all those who engage with history to rethink the ethics, biases, purposes and violence of that entity.

Fiction, therefore, provides a template for thinking about the past in international contexts – a querying, queer-ing, intersectional, multi-temporal, complex and living thing that resists our understanding and attempts to pin it down. Fiction resists temporality, challenges order, undermines what is fixed or what might attempt to do the fixing:

Today I realised that what I wrote yesterday I really wrote today: everything from December 31 I wrote on January 1, i.e. today, and what I wrote on December 30 I wrote on the 31st, i.e., yesterday. What I write today I'm really writing tomorrow, which for me will be today and yesterday, and also, in some sense, tomorrow: an invisible day. But enough of that.¹⁹

Fiction can open up a space whilst attacking that space, undermine and critique the concept of history, suggest that any attempt at fixing meaning is itself doomed to failure and repression:

Nothing will produce Bad History more directly nor brutally, than drawing a Line, in particular a Right Line, the very Shape of Contempt, through the midst of a People,- to create thus a Distinction betwixt 'em,- 'tis the first stroke.- All else will follow as if predestin'd, unto War and Devastation²⁰

At Quayson asked for “a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices.” My contention is that much – all? – historical fiction undertakes this at a fundamental level, or can be shown to do so despite seemingly being conservative, closed up, or limited.²¹ Fiction opens up a space that might be shared and contested simultaneously; it is inherently experimental, expansive, and welcoming. Novels as different as Rabih Alameddine's fantastical *The Angel of History* (2017), Chimanda Ngozie Adichie's realist *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), or something nightmarishly proleptic like Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2014) open up expansive vistas, introduce new cultures and ideas, possibly problematically speak on behalf of the (historical) other, challenge and make anew. Films as diverse as *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003) or *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) or *X-Men: First Class* (Matthew Vaughn, 2011) or *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2015), strange and complicated though they might be, similarly stage intra- and intercultural encounters while discussing issues of temporality, translation, authority, ethnicity, identity, nationalism, authority, duty and power. They provoke questions about ethics, knowledge, difference and tolerance. In considering their impact upon the historical imaginary, analyzing their enabling of multiple temporalities, and meditating upon the popular historiographies they might allow, we might begin to outline the basis of an ethical, nuanced, complex theoretical model of “public” and popular history within an international context. Indeed the idea of “nation” dissolves here, bent out of shape. In this imaginary and imagined diversity and complexity we might find the shared space of an international public history – not a transcultural, anodyne, deracinated locus, but a place of genuine radical possibility and transformative power.

Notes

1 See *Consuming History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) and the edited collection *Public and Popular History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

2 See the efforts of Franco Moretti to make scholars look at the bigger and wider context of texts, in particular *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2004).

3 See Inga Clendinnen, “The History Question: Who Owns the Past?”, *Quarterly Essay*, 23 (2006), 1–72.

4 See Na Li, “Public History in China: is it possible?”, *Public History Review* 21 (2014), 20–40 <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/phrj/article/view/4135/4602>.

5 Jerome de Groot, “Consuming Public History: *Russian Ark*” in *Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), in press.

6 This has not been undertaken particularly much in the past decades, although see for instance Catherine Lewis, Jennifer Dickey, Samir El Azhar and Julia Brock, “Exploring *Identities*: Public History in a Cross-Cultural Context”, *The Public Historian* 34:4 (2012), 9–29 and Rebecca Conard, *The Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Des Moines: University Press of Iowa, 2002).

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, 243.

10 *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MS and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 23.

11 *Postcolonialism* (London: Polity Press, 2000), 48.

12 *Engaging the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 11.

13 Theodor Adorno, “Notes on Kafka”, *Prisms* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 265.

14 Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

15 Maria Mulvany, “Spectral Histories: The Queer Temporalities of Emma Donoghue's *Slammerkin*,” *Irish University Review*, 43:1 (2013), 157–168, 158.

- 16 Carolyn Dinshaw, "Temporalities" in Paul Strohm, ed., *Twenty-first Century Approaches: Medieval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 107–123, 109.
- 17 *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016), 304.
- 18 *The Underground Railroad*, 285.
- 19 Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives* trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), 527.
- 20 Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 615.
- 21 I wrote about this at length in *Remaking History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).