Review Article


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There is an argument that South Africa or its story, like that of colonial Latin America, missed the eighteenth century, moving directly from Dutch mercantile colonialism of the early seventeenth century to pre-industrial British imperialism in the early nineteenth. David Johnson suggests not only that post-apartheid South Africa is rediscovering the Enlightenment as a phenomenon bearing on contemporary polities, but also that Enlightenment thought engaged with South Africa in significant ways. His book offers a reading of ‘the histories and literature of the Cape Colony during the period 1770-1830 through the critical lenses of the post-apartheid South African nation’ (1). The book is structured around its entry into two distinct but related debates: first, how, and whether, metropolitan (‘northern hemisphere’) ideas of nation, particularly those of revolutionary United States and France, were transmitted to the colonies.

Benedict Anderson is an important reference, but David Johnson raises two objections to Anderson’s argument for ‘colonial nationalisms’. There are indigenous, pre-colonial imaginations of community and it was the British Empire, rather than the USA or France, which gave South Africa and its other colonies and dominions their models of national identity. The second debate, which enters directly into contemporary politics, asks how our reading of the colonial past is informed by our sense of the post-apartheid present. In his introduction David Johnson quotes Benedict Anderson’s expression of his dismay at the post-Cold War ‘decay’ of Third
World nationalisms, and he is aware of the difficulties of juxtaposing the Cape colonial past with the post-apartheid present, which requires both an ‘understanding of the intervening years’ and a reconciliation of the general theoretical formulations with ‘the specific histories and literatures of the Cape Colony’ (5). Both writings offered as fact, history, and texts offered as fiction, literature, can be said to construct Frederic Jameson’s ‘national allegory’ rather than simply to embody or represent it. Perhaps because he is concerned with ‘consciousness’ (see Landau) and with the implications of these writings and texts for South Africa now, David Johnson is not concerned to distinguish between ‘sources’ and ‘histories’ (Hamilton et al 2010:2).

In 1510 a flotilla of Portuguese ships returning to Lisbon from Cochin put ashore at the Cape for water and met and bartered with a group of Khoi. What followed is unclear, but in a skirmish the Khoi prevailed, driving the Portuguese back to their ships, and killing 65, including the retiring Viceroy Almeida. President Thabo Mbeki in 1999 declared that this ‘victory … has lit our skies for ever’ (10). In a reading of accounts of the event which stretch from sixteenth-century Portuguese chronicles through Robert Southey to André Brink’s The First Life of Adamastor – whose narrator T’Kama bears a name perhaps transliterated from da Gama – David Johnson shows that Mbeki’s invocation of Almeida’s defeat displaces da Gama’s mythical encounter with Adamastor in Camões’s Lusiads ‘with the indigenous history of the first moment of black anti-colonial struggle’ (28).¹ The conclusion is that the rhetorical and political contexts ‘obscure the dissonance between the inclusive ideals of the African Renaissance and the structural exclusions generated by South Africa’s economy and the ANC’s commitment to capitalism’ (31).

Johnson’s illustrative coverage of the history, literature and anthropology of the Cape by European observers continues with his focus on the Cape ‘Hottentots’ through the lens of a sequence of French eighteenth and nineteenth century writers, not all of them visitors, including the Enlightenment’s Jean-Jacques Rousseau and François le Vaillant. Early accounts of the ‘Hottentots’ suggest an anarchistic resistance to proto-capitalist work timetables; although le Vaillant’s account is inconsistent, he acknowledges the Hottentot communities’ egalitarianism and lack of greed. David Johnson quotes Kolb’s story, taken up by Rousseau, of a ‘Hottentot’ convert rejecting Christianity, to the disappointment of van der Stel, with the words: ‘My resolution is to live and die in the religion, customs, and usages
of my ancestors’ (43).

A retrospect from post-Apartheid South Africa comes again from Thabo Mbeki. At the funeral ceremony held for the reburial of Sarah Baartman at Hankey in 2002, the then president attacked French colonialism and racism while in the next year, in a speech to the French National Assembly, he aligned the anti-apartheid struggle with the ideals of the French Revolution. The history of representations of the Khoisan suggests that the humanity of the ‘Hottentot’, like that of their congeners the ‘Bushmen’, is only fully acknowledged as they are marginalised or disappear, until they are rewarded with emblematic distinction in South Africa’s coat of arms, where two San figures face each other on the central shield and the motto is in the /Xam language. On the ground in 2012 it was recorded, however, specifically in Smitsdrift in the Northern Cape, that the Khoisan community (some of whom had been SADF trackers in the border war), suffered from inadequate housing, water supply and healthcare: 40 residents still did not have identity documents.

The Scottish Enlightenment enters this account of the South African past first in the persons of Adam Smith and John Bruce, to whose writings on the Cape David Johnson addresses three questions. How was the relation between nation and colony to be politically constituted? Was the colonial economy to be conducted on principles of free trade or protectionism? How were new colonial indigenes to be integrated into the imperial economy? Smith died in 1790 and it was the more protectionist ideas of Bruce (patronised by Henry Dundas, Secretary for War and the Colonies, and sometime suitor of Lady Anne Barnard) that prevailed at the Cape. However, between them the three Scots writers, eliding colonial violence, see a future in which British governance acknowledges the humanity of the indigenes and foresees ‘a progressive/developmental journey from ‘Savages to Scotsmen’ (85).

In 1792 the *New York Journal* welcomed the election of John Adams as US President as ‘propitious to the spirit and intention of our late revolution, and to the true dignity, peace and happiness of the people of our empire’ (92). This combination of revolution and empire seems to have sustained US foreign policy ever since. Benjamin Stout, a US patriot, survived shipwreck on the Eastern Cape coast in 1792, and, with his crew, walked the 500 miles to Cape Town. Stout argued in a letter to President Adams for the US colonisation of the Eastern Cape, by means of ‘capitalist land appropriation’ (110). As a counter to Stout, David Johnson discusses Robert Semple, Boston born to Scottish loyalist parents, who from 1798 to 1803 was a
successful merchant at the Cape. Among his other achievements Semple made a journey on horseback from Cape Town to Plettenberg Bay and back, and looked to the British Empire as the appropriate coloniser. Despite superficial differences, Stout’s and Semple’s accounts of the Cape agree that the Cape ‘is ready to be transformed by capitalist agriculture’ (110). While Stout seems to suggest that the land should be cleared of its indigenous inhabitants to make way for US settlers, Semple imagines the indigenes being incorporated as workers (‘Hottentots’ and slaves) or farmers, merchants and citizens (the Dutch). Both writers’ Romantic aesthetic depopulates the landscape in imagination. These prospects of US or British colonisation lead David Johnson to a brief and melancholy review of South Africa’s post-apartheid land restitution programme.

When the British arrived to annex the Cape in 1795, in response to the Dutch Patriots’ revolution against the House of Orange, they had to deal with the revolution of the burghers of Swellendam and Graaff Reinet against the VOC. The rebels claimed to represent the Volkstem, wore the tricolour and identified with the Dutch Patriots of the Netherlands. This revolt was soon suppressed, but the memory lingered and David Johnson reflects here on how the story of the rebellions has been retold as part of three successive myths of Afrikaner identity: the imperialist denigration of John Barrow and others, the Afrikaner sense of self as God’s chosen people, and the self-image of the post-apartheid Afrikaner ‘designated ‘the Promethean Afrikaner’ by ex-president Thabo Mbeki (116). The inclusion of the Afrikaner in the ANC’s neo-liberal New South Africa, on the basis of identity politics, may have been achieved, but at a price.

Few first person accounts survive of the experience of South African slavery, whose most moving record is in the archive of the Court of Justice, which has been extensively drawn on in recent years by both historians, and in their turn, novelists and dramatists. David Johnson traces this re-telling from the anti-slavery debate of the earlier nineteenth century, through the years of segregation and apartheid to the post-apartheid stories of ‘subjectivity, sexuality and restitution’ (149). His conclusion is that these fictions are less exposés of Cape slavery than wrestlings with and sublimations of ‘the anxieties and concerns of their contingent political present(s)’. The point is tellingly made by André Brink’s novel A Chain of Voices, whose hero Galant accepts that ‘perhaps freedom can never really be other than this, a small and private thing’ (148). These fictions do not seem able to imagine ‘resistant forms of collective subjectivity’ (152). More rewarding was the
stage presentation *Cargo* (2007) directed by Mark Fleischmann, commemorating the bicentenary of emancipation, and incorporating the discovery of slave skeletons in a prime residential area of Cape Town, to address immediate issues confronting the urban community.\(^2\) David Johnson’s argument here raises the question: were the Cape slaves a community? Paul Lovejoy argued in *Transformations in Slavery* that ‘slaves wanted a status other than that of a slave…The aim of slaves was freedom…’ (245). Perhaps it is only in rebellion that slaves can form a community. The Mozambican slaves and descendants of slaves who in the nineteenth century ‘formed a substantial and clearly defined community at the Cape’ (190) succumbed to the oppression of state segregation and blended in with the ‘Coloured’ people, who had a place on the chart and may have maintained their sense of communal identity over the centuries.

The most articulate expression of community (as distinct from individual and national) identity comes in David Johnson’s discussion of histories of the Griqua related by Andries Waterboer (1789-1852) and Hendrick Hendricks (1795-1881). Campbell in 1815 reports the people adopting their name Griqua but their identification dates from at least Kolb in 1731. Lichtenstein wrote of them as a half-wild frontier ‘horde’ in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and they have since then been ‘a people…a mixed race…a nation…a tribe…a clan…a group’.\(^3\) Burchell saw the Klaarwater community as a ‘tribe’, as ‘the Mixed Race’ (perhaps to avoid using the term ‘Bastard’), and as one of the ‘wild nations’ and ‘a wild independent people’ (165). In George Thompson’s *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa* (1827), edited by Thomas Pringle, the Griqua are ‘a herd of wandering and naked savages’ (169). Waterboer’s *Short Account* (1827), partly a defence of himself as the choice of ‘the universal voice of the people’, endorses for the Griqua ‘democratically elected government and centralised state power’ (173). Hendricks’s ‘Oppression of the Griqua’, published in *The South African Commercial Advertiser* in 1830, is an appeal to the British for the right of the Griqua to their land and for the integrity of their patrimony. While Griqua and English are ‘creatures who are destined by the same God of us all to remain on the earth’, the Griqua ‘think it better to be naked and free than to wear clothes and be oppressed’ (175,176). British rule has restored to the Griqua the chance of holding on to the land, taken away from them by the Dutch. Moffatt claimed that Andries Waterboer ‘had heard little else than the principles of law derived from the Bible, the best foundation for the law of nations’ (168), yet in 1702 the Dutch sea-captain Abraham Bogaert allowed
that the Khoikhoi ‘hold freedom very much to heart…will obey no laws than those of Nature’ and ‘keep the law of Nations so unimpaired that they can rival the most civilised peoples of Europe’ (16).

The last Griqua story David Johnson discusses is AHM Scholtz’s novel, *Vatmaar – ’n Lewendagge verhaal van ’n tyd wat nie meer is nie*, translated into English by Chris van Wyk as *A Place Called Vatmaar* (Cape Town: Kwela, 1995, 2005). Scholtz’s sophisticated, nostalgic account of an imagined community on the outskirts of Kimberley in the early twentieth century recaptures many of the elements of Griqua history, but the Vatmaar folk can never ‘constitute a ‘national community’. Rather they form a loose assemblage of resilient characters who are sometimes united, sometimes divided, in the struggle against poverty’ (183). They are prefigurative, too. The case for the Griqua as the latest descendants of the Khoikhoi discussed elsewhere in this book, aligns David Johnson with Paul S Landau, who has argued that ‘If we consider the Western Cape as a point from which shifts in thought emanated, Khoekhoen were surely critical’ (407). In this respect David Johnson is touching on an issue raised by the revisionist historiography of the late 1980s (Cobbing, Wilmsen), ‘the creolization of identity’ (Hamilton et al 2010:56).

*Imagining the Cape Colony* sustains a clear argument without overstating its case, and its selective focus highlights moments of Cape history with authentic reverberations in the present. David Johnson says early on that ‘in studying the forms of political community imagined at the Cape from the late 18th century onwards, my inquiries are principally concerned with understanding the relationship between political discourses and modes of economic production’ (5). We seem always to be looking to the future for where we want to be, but perhaps, David Johnson suggests, we should look in our past and in our imaginations. Our history offers many examples of flexible, tolerant and just community, which we can learn from, even on the national scale. 2014 is the twentieth anniversary of South African non-racial nationhood, and we have much to celebrate, including this rich and generous book, which nonetheless offers a critique of any triumphalism or complacency in the rhetoric of the currently ruling party.

**Notes**

1. David Johnson quotes John Purves, who in two essays in *The State* in 1909, claimed *The Lusiads* as ‘not only the first but the greatest of South African poems. It is our portion of the Renaissance’. (26) Purves included Sir Richard Fanshawe’s translation of the Adamastor episode (V.37-60) in his *South African
Book of English Verse (1915), which also included passages from Donne’s The Progress of the Soul, Milton’s Paradise Lost, and Dryden’s ‘Annus Mirabilis’, for their references to the Cape of Good Hope.

2. The Judah Square Rastafarian Community of Knysna Annual Earth Festival celebrates Emancipation Day (August 1, 1838).

3. I take this sequence from the Dictionary of South African English.

4. The sub-title ‘A living story of a time that is no more’ chimes with the tendency of David Johnson’s argument.

References


