

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## **Kelly Jean Butler, *Witnessing Australian Stories: History, Testimony and Memory in Contemporary Culture* (Transaction Publishers, 2013)**

The use of memory as a historical medium has been growing in popularity since the first Holocaust survivors told their personal accounts. While it can be problematic to question the authenticity of personal stories told with passion and pathos, the stumbling block of veracity remains. Even if the criteria for historical truth-telling is reduced to the transmission of emotions, rather than facts, then how does a historian determine if a mood has been appropriately captured? This is particularly important if the subject is contentious and has more than one viewpoint expressed by those involved in events.

Yet merely examining the veracity of a personal account can call into question the memory and even identity of the person relating the story. This is even more complicated if seen through a postmodern lens that regards every opinion and point of view as valid, regardless of any competing external information.

While Kelly Jean Butler, in *Witnessing Australian Stories*, laments the problematic relationship between history and memory studies, this book does little to address the different approaches used by the two fields. In fact, she avoids addressing the concerns historians have with a methodology which does not compare oral history with available records. By linking witness to trauma, and more specifically the Holocaust, with the treatment of Aboriginal people, Butler invites an emotional response from the reader, rather than an intellectual one.

Butler concentrates her study on Australian cultural memory to attitudes towards Aboriginal people and asylum seekers. Limiting the scope has the advantage of making the subject matter a more manageable size, but it also situates her study in a particular political framework. This is an intentional decision by Butler, as she concentrates her study between the bookmarks of Prime Ministers Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd, both of whose leadership she praises as a 'demonstration of ethical Australian citizenship' (3). This period also covers Prime Minister John Howard, who Butler claims 'worked to discredit the truth value of "other" voices in the public sphere' (p 4). Butler is keen to assign blame for events, not just to assess them. She applauds Ann Curthoy's contention that, 'All non-indigenous people share the situation of living on someone else's land' (10).

This political framework is reinforced by terminology which is far from neutral: for example, 'settlers' for non-Aboriginal Australians. In addition, those who are perceived as disagreeing with Butler's stance are given labels which are unnecessarily polemic. For example, Andrew Bolt is described as a 'tabloid journalist' (28), and 'conservative' is never linked to attitudes or actions of which Butler agrees, thereby imbuing the term with imputed shame (e.g. 187, 202, 209).

These value statements set the tone of Butler's analysis and influences both her choice of material and conclusions. Butler's use of descriptors such as 'witnessing', 'truth-telling' and 'testimony' invite the reader to accept at face value any oral history and she avoids assessment of the authenticity of the examples she relates, preferring to examine how they have shaped cultural attitudes and self-identity in positive ways (see 22, 24, 28-29). Butler equates the failure to unequivocally accept indigenous testimony with a lack of empathy and even with violence against a group (209). If, as she asserts, 'national memory has become the ground of key political and ethical debates in which witnessing and truth-telling have become tied to the production of civic virtue' (23), then this assessment of its effectiveness is determined solely by Butler's assumptions of what constitutes civic virtue.

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This is a shame, as the chosen events are described in detail and the discussion of the value of fictional and autobiographical accounts as historical testimony (which Butler calls ‘creative witnessing’) is engaging and insightful. More neutral language would have enabled her arguments the opportunity to stand on their own merits and made them more accessible to a wider readership.

Particularly disappointing was Chapter 5, which analyses cases of autobiographical fraud, specifically Norma Khouri’s *Forbidden Love*, and disputed accounts of the South Australian Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair. Butler’s choice of well-known and accessible topics had the potential for lively and insightful analysis. Her discussion of the fracturing of the pact between reader and narrator is excellent. However, this section is again distorted by Butler’s political views and there is an overuse of inverted commas to indicate the parts of the debate with which Butler disagrees.

Butler introduces the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair to discuss the accusations that Ngarrindjeri women were lying about the spiritual significance of the island. Butler acknowledges the existence of a dissident group of Ngarrindjeri women. However, she sidesteps the potentially interesting analysis of two groups with apparent equal community standing disputing each other’s claims about the land. Butler thus privileges the testimony of the group with which she agrees and dismisses without comment that of the opposing women. In my view, she is committing the same rejection of Aboriginal oral testimony that she deplores in ‘settler Australians’.

Butler’s obvious political standpoint slants her assumptions and assessments and makes her study opaque to anyone who does not share her views. She writes with the assumption that all intelligent, right-thinking, ethical people agree with her, which betrays a lack of engagement with the complexities of the issues discussed and thus detracts from her argument. A more even-handed assessment of what are complex issues would have made this book a more useful addition to the field.

**Jennifer Hein**