
J. A. Kearney. *Representing Dissension: Riot, Rebellion and Resistance in the South African English Novel*. Pretoria: U of South Africa P, 2003. Pp. vii, 340. \$18.90 US pb.

Contemporary reckonings with South Africa's colonial and apartheid past often approach the spectacle of politically motivated violence, as made manifest in acts of resistance or measures of "counter-insurgency," with a degree of caution. Perhaps most notable in this respect is Njabulo S. Ndebele's call in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* for a break from an ethos and literature of spectacle that sacrifices ambiguity and complexity and consolidates polar oppositions; that "indicts implicitly;" that privileges exteriority over interiority; that reduces struggle to violent conflict; that "provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought;" and that "confirms without necessarily offering a challenge" (46). In a similar vein, Mahmood Mamdani critiques the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's concentration on extreme manifestations of violence for obfuscating the more pervasive and less spectacular institutional effects of apartheid as well as the enduring privileges and complicities of its beneficiaries.

While registering cognizance of this prevailing critical sensibility, Kearney's sweeping study of representations of dissent in English South African novels from approximately 1906 to 1956 explicitly looks to fictional renderings of contemporaneous social upheavals as sites of imaginative and critical intervention in South Africa's unfolding history. Kearney posits such creative engagements with recent manifestations of social unrest (one criterion for a novel's inclusion in the study is that the events it treats have occurred less than a decade prior to the novel's date of publication) as registers of the distance between the lived reality and the desired ideal of a non-discriminatory society. In contradistinction to Michael Green's treatment of historical novels in *Novel Histories* (1997), which invokes Fredric Jameson's notion of "resistant form, or the noting of the past as a resistant presence, to gauge the value of re-created history in a novel" (xv), Kearney seeks to chart a "reverse process by which the present might enter into judgment upon the past," and identifies the controlling "resistant presence" in his study as "an ideal South Africa [sic] society in which the rights of all its people are not only constantly assured, but actively striven for in every aspect of communal life" (xv). To a certain extent, this self-avowedly utopian articulation of a liberal credo speaks to the prevailing concern for the ordinary and the everyday expressed by the likes of Ndebele and Mamdani, and to the necessity of ongoing internal cri-

tique in the space of any emancipatory project. Indeed, Kearney reads public manifestations of conflict as occasions that serve to heighten awareness of existing structural inequities as these are experienced, played out and ultimately addressed in the everyday lives of each novel's characters. However, the critical gesture of "entering into judgment upon the past" risks subordinating each artistic production to the retrospective agenda of the critical exegesis. Mark Sanders, in his discussion of theoretical engagements with the colonial precursors to anti-apartheid writers and intellectuals, issues a *caveat* that seems apposite here. Referring specifically to Olive Schreiner and Sol T. Plaatje, Sanders cautions against critiquing the ideological stances of such figures through a "post"-apartheid lens:

It is not sufficient merely to make a checklist of their positions on a restricted set of political issues. Although it is needful to know what sides they took and to expose any contradictory commitments, merely to do so is, in the final analysis, to pursue an anachronistic scholarly politics of strategic alliance insufficient for anything but a one-sided understanding of the intellectual as a figure of responsibility. (21)

A more sustained engagement on Kearney's part with the terms according to which novelists of the colonial and early apartheid periods undertook to explore and express their intellectual responsibilities would have strengthened the volume's theoretical apparatus.

Representing Dissension, however, is a valuable bibliographic resource and shows evidence of painstaking archival work at every stage of its evolution. While the survey of novels includes such classics as John Buchan's *Prester John* (1910), Laurens van der Post's *In a Province* (1934), Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) and Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* (1953), the majority of the primary texts on which it concentrates are out of print—some available only on microfilm—and had to be retrieved from libraries and special collections throughout South Africa. After narrowing the field of enquiry from a range of upwards of 1100 novels to a selection of just over sixty, Kearney subsequently undertook to identify correspondences as well as divergences between documented historical events and their fictional renderings. This phase of the project entailed an extensive survey of historical accounts of such events as the Bambatha Rebellion (1906), the Boer Rebellion (1914), the labour strikes of 1913 and 1914 including mass stay-aways by indentured Indian labourers, the Bulhoek massacre (1920), the Rand Revolt (1922), black rural unrest in the 1920s, the rise of fascism and Afrikaans nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, debates surrounding South Africa's role in

the Second World War, the Durban Riots (1949) and the Defiance Campaign (1952). Kearney has also unearthed, where possible, biographical details of the novelists under consideration. The appendices at the end of the volume provide a significant compendium of previously uncatalogued literary and historical reference materials.

Ultimately, Kearney clusters his readings of the primary texts around composite histories of the conflicts to which the novels make reference and of the movements out of which these historical crises issue, and supplements his narrative contextualizations with a selection of photographs. The result is a richly detailed and immensely readable literary history of the decades book-ended by the more substantially documented periods of the Anglo-Boer War and of the consolidation of apartheid policy and philosophy. The organization of the material enables even those readers unacquainted with the specific events and broader historical currents to which the novelists are responding to discern and evaluate the kind of interventions that each writer enacts in her or his fictional reworkings of recent manifestations of civil strife.

The mode of critical analysis is predominantly structuralist; Kearney offers thoughtful readings of the implications of particular narrative devices, strategies of character development and formulations of plot structure in order to assess the logics and motivations underpinning each novel's critiques of existing social relations and/or emergent protest movements, and, where applicable, the terms according to which any posited "resolution" to social upheaval is formulated. What becomes readily apparent is the variety of responses elicited by these events and movements as well as the shadings and gradations of the ideological positions that the novelistic responses reflect.

All told, *Representing Dissent* is ambitious in its scope and meticulously researched; its historical purview, detailed textual analyses and carefully compiled appendices fill a critical and bibliographical gap while laying foundations for a range of future scholarly projects.

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Works Cited

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