

BOOK REVIEW

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SCHLUNKE, K. M. (2005). *BLUFF ROCK : AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A MASSACRE*. FREMANTLE: FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE PRESS.

Katrina Schlunke's book *Bluff Rock: autobiography of a massacre* urges non-Indigenous readers to consider "the possibility of an ethical, embodied relationship with the past, not a final story" (Schlunke 2005:14). It examines the history of Bluff Rock in New England, New South Wales in the 1840s when many Indigenous people were shot and/or thrown to their deaths over the Rock by white settlers. Written as an autobiography, Schlunke considers her own white family's entanglement as German settlers in the region with its history of Indigenous massacres. She writes that despite the fact everyone in the town knew about the massacres, she "didn't know about the connections between massacre and stolen land and people. [She] didn't know how to ask how some of their land had become [her family's] farm" (Schlunke 2005:13). It is this search for answers to questions about the past and its connections to present racialised privileges, which forms the central argument of this book.

Through this autobiographical form of writing, this book contests the field of Indigenous histories dominated by the 'Aboriginal history wars' spearheaded with Keith Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Windschuttle 2003). A critique of Windschuttle's politics and historical pedagogy has been developed in Bain Attwood's book *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (Attwood 2005) and

Bluff Rock is not a further addition to this historical discourse. Indeed, it challenges the written ethos of these wars by showing readers what is left out of the debate – the embodied whiteness of the male academic historians writing about Indigenous histories.

Schlunke is critical of this disembodiment of whiteness from its writing of Indigenous histories. In its description of the Rock's massacre, the tourist leaflet reads: '[t]he truth of the day remains clouded by many conflicting versions' and '[t]he truth will be forever in the bosom of one of the most impressive landmarks along the New England Highway'. Schlunke interprets these sentences as offering "two poles to move between: the truth of multiple truths and the truth of knowing that no human will ever know the truth" (Schlunke 2005:32). This reminded me of Suvendrini Perera's use of James Baldwin's idea of 'sacred ignorances' (Perera 2005). Perera argues that the power of whiteness is exercised by ignoring Indigenous sovereignties in the past and present. These manoeuvres of sacred ignorances are evident in John Howard's argument that in the 1901 Federation, Indigenous sovereignty had been transferred to the Australian state and would thus invalidate any present entitlement to a treaty (Perera 2005:32). In this argument, Howard ignores the fact that Indigenous people had been excluded from the discussions of federation in the lead up to 1901 (Perera 2005:32). By highlighting the power of white historical ignorance, we can see how occupying the contradictory position of claiming to know and not to know the precise truth of this history,

places the memory of the massacres as part of a “fossilised past, a past that cannot change, a past that we cannot change” (Schlunke 2005:35).

In the very act of remembering the massacres at Bluff Rock, the tourist industry immortalises this history as part of the past, so that “we will never remember the cars and the roads and the reservations and the barristers and the cities which made the systematic dispossession and the dispersal of the Aboriginal people possible” (Schlunke 2005:122). Remembering the past of Bluff Rock as non-Indigenous people often means the erasure or ignorance of present racialised privileges as non-Indigenous people. This remembering Schlunke argues, is itself part of a system of the “colonial taking of land [as] a ‘practical rearrangement’” (Schlunke 2005:120).

It is the way these memories circulate as ways of dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their lands that is one of the book’s many strengths. It is not just that remembering are forms of white forgetting of Indigenous massacres that is the central argument of this book, rather memories function also as ways of ‘practical dispossession’. This argument is developed through an analysis of letters written between white locals and land-owners at the time, such as Thomas Keating and Edward and Leonard Irby. Schlunke shows readers how these written accounts were born out of the silencing of Indigenous resistance through poison (see Heffernan’s account in 1857 (Schlunke 2005:112)). This book argues that the processes of practical rearrangement of taking land and Indigenous resistance that placed white settlers in “danger of being speared”, is silenced through the performance of memory and the poisoning of flour (Schlunke 2005:112). Thus, remembering and the practicalities of dispossession go hand-in-hand in a process that forgets

this systematic dispossession as a system of whiteness as possession. Whiteness becomes isolated, and so not part of a continuing system, but as a remembered past that happened. Schlunke writes: “How useful and ‘practical’ to believe that *that* is where it all happened” (Schlunke 2005:122).

As a queer Asian male reader of this book my relationship with the history of Bluff Rock is different to that of Schlunke’s. Negotiating my multiple subjectivities (Moreton-Robinson 2000) as queer, Asian and male, means that I am often required to slip in and out of whiteness. Remembering this past of white people killing Indigenous peoples historically excludes my racialised presence as Asian. However, I make multiple connections with Schlunke’s autobiography through her queerness and whiteness experienced as racialised privileges. Thus, although written Australian history is dominated by a black/white binary, Schlunke reminds us that we ought to think about how this history informs and produces our present racialised privileges as non-Indigenous people. By not engaging with this history as an autobiography, I could not as a queer Asian male reader have made these multiple connections with whiteness and racialised privileges.

This book complicates the impasse of the Aboriginal history wars, which assume and naturalise the process of white knowingness and remembering of Indigenous histories. These contested Indigenous histories, remembered through the professional egos of white male academics, are dominated by notions of ‘historical truth’. Schlunke shows us how it is not the ‘truth’ that matters, but how this *truth* is articulated and remembered in and through the privileges of whiteness. The experience of remembering the past is itself always premised on experiencing the privileges of the pre-

sent. Schlunke questions the whiteness of her own writing:

Am I writing white? This is the historical threat of whiteness, its all-encompassing power to get me, to give me something I may not even want. I can't see the white except when it is contrasted with its own shadows, but there is often too much light for shadows to occur. I can't believe I *am* white.

Chorus moans: GET REAL! (Schlunke 2005:227)

This book unsettles us by locating our family histories as intimate connections with ourselves and each other that is also a remembering of the past that simultaneously forgets our racialised privileges of the present. It is an important reminder that as non-Indigenous Australians we must see our possession not only as a dispossession of Indigenous lands, but as a possession of words, emotions, and memories. Non-Indigenous Australians must acknowledge the multiple forms of their racialised privileges in a way that does not remember a past of dispossession that happened, but remembers a past of dispossession that is happening.

Author Note

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