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Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton (Ed.), *Babel Unbound: Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life*. Publisher: Wits University Press, 2020. 272 pages. ISBN # 9781776145935.

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This evocative collection of essays published in 2020 has a long and interesting history behind it. The volume, co-authored by two eminent academics, could easily have attracted an epilogue or postscript to capture the global events of the last two years including the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated events such as anti-vaccination protests across the world. The editors were probably happy with the rich content already available for the book. The book, as is, gives us an opportunity to absorb the deeply stimulating reflections across the ten chapters which are weaved together by well-presented and thought-provoking introduction. The conception and genesis of the book is traced back to 2004 and it covers global events such as the 2008 global economic meltdown.

The editors, Cowling and Hamilton, introduce the collection of essays by situating them in a process of co-production of knowledge. They recognise the importance of inclusion in the process of knowledge making and duly give credit to many others who informed their intellectual journeys and this volume. The editors place the book firmly in the realm of its central thesis: public life as premised on the ideals of people, interactions and the production, exchange, and use of ideas. They draw attention to the complex ways in which the concept of public life has been framed through time and space.

The collection of essays takes the concepts of public life and public engagement through a series of reflections including self-reflective and introspective critiques. By locating the reflections deeply in the everyday life of South Africa and South Africans, the editors and authors bring out the multi-faceted and interconnected aspects of these concepts. The essays draw on a rich tapestry of research and practice, and teaching and learning including every day socialisation events to provide an idea of the public sphere from a very South African perspective located in and relevant to a worldview.

In the introduction, Cowling and Hamilton bring forth the key concepts which run through the chapters. They are especially careful to highlight the contributions made by the different authors and the concepts which have been used in scholarly debates about the public sphere. They interrogate the theoretical

and methodological issues which call for a more nuanced reading of the idea of public sphere and public engagement. Among these are the contestations around the idea of a public sphere or space. The public sphere is a contested space whether one approaches it as a physical or ideational space. Many of the chapters bring forth robust examples to illustrate this point.

The authors draw on their collective intellectual experience to give context to their essays. In this regard, the editors use their academic spaces and expertise in media, historical and cultural studies to highlight how the media studies and the study of archives and histories have contributed to our understanding of the public sphere. They draw on their multidisciplinary academic experience to thread what could perhaps be disparate themes to a well threaded reading of the idea of the public sphere. They also cast their lens into the future through the present to highlight how some of the changes in technology and communication have informed and influenced the idea of the public sphere.

One such major transformation is the role of the internet in disrupting traditional understandings and protocols of the public sphere and public engagement. As they point out, there are "ruptures of collective engagement currently under way" (15). These include the creation of what they call "fluid publics," and more unstable spheres which emerged from the explosion of social media and new technologies globally. What is evident from the introduction is that this book and the projects which inform it were informed by deep and carefully studied intellectual ideas and the rich experience of all who contributed to it.

The editors, as authors of the first chapter, elucidate further on the core concepts of the book. One of these concepts is the idea of democracy as a critical value underpinning public engagement. However, the authors also problematise the idea of democracy given the elusive nature of "the public". They highlight how conceptualising public engagement is fraught with challenges especially where dominant publics can silence or disenfranchise others. In this context, the authors present the public sphere as socially imaginary (24) which can take on many shapes and form and can also be reconstituted by different publics. The idea of publics also highlights the need for a critical lens when critiquing the subject of the public and public spheres.

Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the complexity of these concepts particularly in the way global publics played out and continue to play out in respect to anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests among others. The idea of counter publics, or those publics which resist silencing and suppression, has dominated public discourses over the last two years since. Against the outbreak of the pandemic, many have emerged with diverse causes including the infamous publics storming of the Capitol publics.

Further, the emergence of capillaries (32) and public critical potency (Hamilton et al Chapter 2 p 40) was also brought into sharp relief following the publicly captured killing of George Floyd by a law enforcement officer in the

USA. The global 'hashtag publics' which emerged thereafter continue to be a force in the public imaginary and quest for social justice globally. As argued by the authors, whether local or global, these events shape new forms of public engagement and can change the public imaginary and ways 'democratic societies mediate collective life' (36).

In Chapter 2, Hamilton and her co-authors explore further the idea of 'public-making' through visual forms and multimedia. Drawing on specific examples from South Africa, the authors highlight how ideas can be enduring when present in multiple media formats and how they can garner new publics in how they are presented and re-presented through art. South Africa's history since the 1994 dawn of the new democracy has been interesting. From the iconic allure of Mandela (see chapter 5) to the public outcry against state capture during the Zuma presidency captured by artists like Ayanda Mbulu and Brett Murray, public engagements have held leaders under scrutiny with visceral power and enduring debates. As the authors note, visual forms have 'the capacity…to precipitate public engagements, through the interplay among their form, content, genre and the conditions of their circulations.' (40).

The artist Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro) has been an iconic figure offering a critique of South Africa's democracy through satire often attracting the ire of politicians and other publics. The authors draw on the artistic installation of Miscast (49 -51) which deftly illustrates how publics and public engagement can evolve when multiple media formats are used. The Miscast project continues to trigger global outrage in respect to human remains in museums. A case in point is the El Negro (Parsons and Segobye 2009)* and Sara Baartman stories which led to their return and reburial in Botswana and South Africa respectively. Further, the current global discussions on the return and restitution of cultural properties from the global north can be seen as offshoots of the 'pollinate effect' projects like Miscast have on our collective consciousness.

Continuing this discussion on the role of the media, Cowling and Mwale draw attention to the intersections of new media, the public(s), and public engagement. They highlight how media orchestration and agenda setting, traditionally associated with the fields of journalism, media, and communication have dramatically been changed by social media. The thesis of 'entanglement' (Hodder 2012) best illustrates the intersection of ideas in this chapter. The idea of 'babelisation' (p77) has been visible in South Africa's 'media politics' through the interplay between the state, institutions like the SABC, publics, and media practitioners over the last five years (see Krige 2019 on the SABC 8). The metaphor of 'Babel' is a potent description of South Africa's experiences through time and space including current lived experiences, the potency and volatility of everyday life, and intersections of race, gender, and class.

Chapter 5 (de Lanerolle) expounds on the idea of volatility in public spheres when exploring how publics are made or shaped in the age of social media. South Africa provides a powerful imagery and case studies from the 1976

youth protests to more recent protests such as the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMust Fall movements (94-95). The 1976 uprising of young black learners across South Africa gave rise to potent global movements and 'affective publics' which became the force behind South Africa's liberation struggle. Technology has enabled greater convergence of publics across time and space enabling contagious and contiguous networks of publics as seen in the post-2015 social movements.

An important thread which runs across the chapters is the cautionary reminder that 'public making' and publics are not static things. They can be imaginary and fluid, conflicted and disparate in their origins, intentions, and visions. A good reminder of this is the reflective essay on Mandela (Chapter 5) which highlights how the mythification of Mandela during the apartheid period continued throughout his life to his deathbed. Despite his protestations that he was no saint, he became a global icon elevated to the status of a saint. In this chapter, Modisane eloquently narrates the 'making of Mandela' in a specific historical moment drawing on historical and archival materials.

Hamilton expands this subject in Chapter 6 when critiquing the idea of the archive. Mandela's archive(s) have ensured his public presence beyond his life. His archives have been central to public debates about his life. His image as a public figure continue to invoke contestations and dissonance in public opinions and beliefs. Hamilton notes that

> Archival collections are reframed and refashioned over time, both affected by and resistant to the ebb and flow of reinterpretation, and in turn affecting interpretation.' (139).

This vulnerability of the archive includes how intellectuals and the public conceptualise the archive. Archives are critical in the study of histories and knowledge production, especially in a country like South Africa where dominant narratives were made to underpin the flawed and brutal ideology of apartheid. However, the 'capillaries' of the past continue to surface in the public domain in the flare ups of encounters about race and class in the public sphere (99). These threads remind us that the façade of objectivity which we often imbue on the archive or human beings we seek to immortalise or monumentalise should not lose sight of their vulnerability and subjectivity.

Molins Lliteras amplifies this romanticisation of the archive when reflecting on the Timbuktu archives (Chapter 7). Timbuktu has long captivated the public imaginary through its (mis)representation in colonial and post-colonial imagery and writing. The author subtly plays on the irony of Timbuktu as a powerful yet vulnerable 'affective archive' which also highlights contestations of powerful ideologies in current global geopolitics. Discourses on culture, religion, and identity continue to exploit claims some of which were to fuel conflicts which have devastated communities, like Mali and the Sahelian region as a tragic example. As with other chapters, the author tries to balance the role of the academic/intellectual in navigating such contested terrains which emerged in the

making and framing of narratives and counternarratives. The selection and choice of language, methods and theories including storylines and ideas by journalists and scholars are issues which this volume debates with sensitivity (Chapter 8).

Chapter 8 presents perspectives on the Marikana massacre. Marikana highlights the complex and intertwined ideas, practices, and histories of South Africa's democracy. The Marikana story represents the convergence of ideas and practices steeped in histories of wrongdoing and abuse of power. The chapter goes beyond the Marikana story which captivated media reportage in 2012 to focus on other actors who played powerful roles during and beyond the events of August 2012. It offers a critique of how academics and the media presented the Marikana story. The author focuses on 'hidden actors' and omitted perspectives in how the Marikana story came to be consumed in the public domain. As with previous chapters, the author draws attention to the role of journalists in agenda setting and orchestration of selected perspectives.

The Marikana case study remains a potent reminder of the interplay between power, politics and publics and invokes 'rage beyond reason' when considering that those who continue to suffer the most have not seen justice to date. These include the continued squalor and insecurity miners, and their families endure in South Africa and the world. The unfair labour and employment practices of rich multinationals and state actors undermine the livelihoods of workers and demonised them to defend extractive economic activities. Using public relations and media narratives, they often justify brutal repression of the poor at the hands of law enforcement agencies. The theme of brutal repression is continued in chapter 9 where the author explores the response to student-led protests in the #RhodesMustFall social protests in 2015 starting at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

The globalisation of student-led protests following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMust Fall movements illuminate concepts advanced in this volume. The idea of publics and public spheres which emerge, rise, ebb, constitute and reconstitute in multiple spaces, including virtual spaces, is cogently summarised in this chapter. The author shows how the reaction of those in power, can have the effect of transforming public spheres into more powerful and potent forms including kindling new forms of engagement which draw on other energies and can take unexpected directions. The chapter highlights how assumptions made about heritage and monuments can miss the opportunity to provide pathways towards healing especially when dealing with imperial subjects like Cecil John Rhodes. As the author ponders 'what to do with the visual signifiers of a violent imperial history of colonialism and racial segregation in South African public spaces' (218) remains the elephant in the room of a young democracy trying to prove it has moved on and embraced change and modernity.

The attempt to present South Africa as the 'rainbow nation' is has been ruptured by violent racialised encounters which play out in public and private spaces. As a young nation grappling with its difficult pasts, South African society

moves through multiple spaces of rage, reason and thinking all the time trying to constitute and reconstitute itself. The rejection of Afrikaans as the language of education by the youth of Soweto in 1976 unleashed the 'babel factor' which unfurls every so often unravelling the sanitised narrative of a nation at ease with its new identity.

The story of South Africa is neither unique nor peculiar and highlights the importance of post-conflict reconstruction including dialogue and engagement on issues of race, class, and gender. Garman's concluding chapter alludes to the political ruptures which draw on racial tensions and other forms of public anger and resentment. The COVID pandemic drew attention to the 'pandemic within a pandemic' in respect to gender-based violence and femicide which was exposed by the media and gender activists across the world during the lockdown periods imposed by governments to stop the spread of the virus.

This collection of essays has been carefully crafted with rich citations, footnotes and a comprehensive index and reference lists to provide a timely reflection on critical scholarship and engagement in South Africa and globally. The chapters compel us to pause and think deeply about how we use concepts and how we craft our scholarship and engage with ideas and tools of scholarship. South Africa is a microcosm of the human experience, and the challenges of nation building resonate with other human experiences globally. Apartheid separated people using race, gender, ethnicity and class and the aftermath of these violent systems continue to afflict people including how they engage at many levels. While the authors draw largely from historical texts and events, the perspectives presented are not just a lesson in history but a celebration of the historian's craft in the use of archives to situate archives in contemporary and future intellectual work.

The editors were deliberate to ensure that all the concepts they draw on are subjected to deep reflection and substantiation by the authors who contributed to this volume. As a volume, the book embodies the wishes of many scholars to weave theory and methods while ably demonstrating the importance of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to scholarship. The book lends itself well to being a teaching text as well as a practitioner's reference text.

The book highlights how the creative arts are relevant to intellectual knowledge production whether in their current form or as archival and historical texts. The convergence of art and social life in academic practice debunks the artificial divide being imposed across disciplines. Babelisation remains a thought-provoking idea as disasters threaten our humanity and human-machine convergences increase our vulnerability as a species. I trust it will appeal to readers across disciplines including STEM fields.

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* (https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-saartjie-baartman)

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