This paper discusses the concept of memory as a form of humanist activism in the autobiographies of Nelson Mandela and Edward Said. Mandela and Said were chosen because they dedicated their lives to the cause of freedom in South Africa and Palestine. Their engagement with the political causes of their countries turned into a concern with worldwide struggles for human rights and racial equality. While Mandela emerged as a vital force against apartheid in South Africa, Said was a well-known and influential Palestinian critic and intellectual whose writings tackle the Palestinian struggle for justice within the worldwide experience of imperialism and its binary oppositions of white/black, male/female, superior/inferior. I argue that these autobiographies bear witness to the plight of Black South Africans and Palestinians as both a shared memory resistant to erasure and a call for justice. Mandela and Said used their personal memories and life stories to construct a public reading of the meanings of the events that shaped them. Here I focus on the concept of humanist and political activity in the two autobiographies.

Keywords: memory; action; political humanism; non-violent resistance

Introduction

Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority.¹

In Humanism and Democratic Criticism, Edward Said argues that ‘humanism is the only and the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history’.² For Said, ‘the essence of humanism is to understand human history as a continuous process of self-understanding and self-realization, not just for us, as white, male, European, and American, but for everyone’.³ Said perceives humanism as a secular, hybrid form of activism
linked to a process of developing individual awareness. Humanism is not only an admission of the diversity and equality of human beings and human cultures, but also an objection to any violation of the right to equality of the self and the Other. Although humanism is essentially an individual attitude, Said argued that ‘a fair degree of my own political and social activism has assured me that people all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality’. He thought that a human tragedy or an act of violation could bring collective support or protest worldwide. In suggesting that ‘the core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women and not by God’, Said appeals to human beings, regardless of their ideological, religious or cultural backgrounds. It is a humanitarian, yet utopian idea, one that is ‘centered upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and approved authority’ and it is ‘sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods’. Said confirms further that ‘there is no such thing as an isolated humanist’.6

In the forthcoming analysis I argue that Nelson Mandela’s and Said’s autobiographies adopt humanist attitudes and perform acts that enhance understanding of racial difference and diversity, thus promoting the politics of coexistence and the peaceful settlement of struggles, rather than hostile and violent methods. However, the two thinkers posit justice as a precondition to peaceful citizenship. They utilise their growing national consciousness as a means of deepening and enriching their individual agency and transformation into a consciousness of social and political activism and self-liberation. At the same time both Mandela and Said think of the interests of the Other in order to find common ground. Thus, they represent a perfect, practical model of Said’s idea of humanist activism as a form of ‘inner faith’, ‘will’, ‘emancipation’ and ‘political activism’.7

The insider memorises suffering: humanist, armed action in the Long Walk to Freedom

Mandela concludes chapter three of his autobiography, ‘The Birth of a Freedom Fighter’, with the announcement that ‘I was prepared to use whatever means to speed up the erasure of human prejudice and the end of chauvinistic and violent nationalism. I did not need to become a Communist in order to work with them. I found that African nationalists and African Communists generally had far more uniting them than dividing them.’8 I argue that, since his emergence as a freedom fighter in 1951, Mandela’s autobiography evolved into a humanist effort for change and re-evaluation of the concepts of identity and resistance.

Imprisoned, tortured and abused by the ruling white minority, Mandela symbolises what he described as ‘the grave plight of the black people that compels them to resist to the death the stinking policies of the gangsters that rule our country’.9 As an insider Mandela could not detach himself from the sufferings and systematic process of assimilation, subjugation and dehumanisation of the black natives in South Africa. While in prison Mandela described how apartheid policies were designed to break one’s spirit and destroy one’s resolve in the sense that ‘the authorities exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality – all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human and each of us who we are’.10 Through these
words Mandela throws light on the imperialist cultural notions that dominated the South African political scene after the end of British occupation. Being themselves the victims of British imperialism, Afrikaners were now capable of exploiting blacks and running the concentration camps within which they themselves had once had to suffer. The Afrikaners go from being the oppressed to the oppressors by inventing and enforcing the apartheid system, with the maintenance of the same discriminatory cultural myths, namely of being different, superior and hence isolated from the allegedly barbaric Blacks.

For Mandela, then, the major evil of apartheid is that it is a ‘culturally dehumanizing force, for it compels one to adapt by becoming more self-contained and insulated’. In commenting on the Afrikaner cultural myths about their survival in the face of British colonialism, Susan Gallagher describes how Afrikaner culture ‘glorifies isolation and separation’. Consequently Afrikaners not only embrace ‘disturbing colonial ideas such as flogging, death and extended punishment as being required when the colonized or in their case the barbaric blacks misbehave or become rebellious’, but also implicitly conceive of ‘institutional violence and injustice structures’ as a right and natural way to control and deal with the Other.12

In this way Mandela’s struggle is not merely a political effort but also a cultural one. He has first to ‘know the enemy’s purpose and interests before adopting a strategy to compromise with them’,13 and, second, to convince his people that ‘their survival depended on understanding what the authorities were attempting to do to them, and sharing that understanding with each other’.14 In order to overcome the sense of separation and hostility on both the cultural and political levels, Mandela continues that ‘the masses now had to be prepared for new forms of political struggle’,15 through which the oppressed people and the oppressors reckoned that ‘the forces of freedom and those of reaction are not very far off’; hence ‘truth and justice will prevail’.16 Put this way, Mandela declares that his target is ‘the creation of one nation out of many tribes, the overthrow of white supremacy, and the establishment of a truly democratic form of government’.17

In commenting on Mandela’s autobiography, Bill Keller affirmed that it shows ‘a practical man who chooses tactics over principles’ and a ‘shrewd balancer of honour and interests’.18 He is ‘neither a messiah nor a moralist nor really a revolutionary’. I partially agree with Keller that Mandela was a pragmatist to the core. Throughout his struggle for freedom, Mandela adopted different strategies. In 1953 he was among the first of the African National Congress (ANC) leaders to argue for a shift from peaceful civil disobedience to armed insurrection. Even after his colleagues rejected violence as premature, he arranged an unauthorised mission to China to request weapons for the cause,19 writing that ‘nonviolence was not a moral principle but a strategy; there is no moral goodness in using an ineffective weapon’.20 In 1961 the ANC leadership endorsed armed struggle a few weeks after Mandela was acquitted on charges of treason. Mandela explains that ‘the armed struggle was imposed upon us by the violence of the apartheid regime’ and that ‘if the oppressor uses violence, the oppressed have no alternative but to respond violently’.21

Mandela argued that, since the apartheid government was not only pursuing its standard divide-and-rule strategy in attempting to separate Africans from Coloureds and Indians but was also eager to show the international community
that they were being treated properly, oppressed South Africans had the right to
defend their ‘dignity’. There were stories in the press about the inhuman condi-
tions on Robben Island, about how the prisoners were being assaulted and tor-
tured. These allegations embarrassed the government and, even when it tried to
deny them, Mandela spotted the positive side of collective oppression in South
Africa. He claimed that locking Blacks together in prisons and camps, ‘rein-
forced their determination. They supported each other and gained strength from
each other. Whatever we knew, whatever we learned, we shared, and by sharing
we multiplied whatever courage we had individually.’

Mandela’s autobiography describes the power, determination and honour of the black leadership in
fighting against oppression. Throughout these years, Mandela’s tactics of negoti-
ation with people of racial difference like Indians and Coloureds, and with indi-
viduals of theoretical difference like communists, were a ‘sign’, bell hooks
emphasises, ‘of [his] privileging of a model of integration, wherein allegiance to
blackness was abdicated in the interest of erasing race and promoting an ethos
of humanism that would emphasize commonalities between blacks and other
races in South Africa’. However, in 1990, Mandela negotiated with different armed parties in South
Africa, ‘laying particular emphasis on our resolve to cause no more harm to
human life’. He supported the ANC’s decision to suspend the armed struggle,
declaring that ‘we had to recognize international realities’. Since the ANC faced
‘international marginalization’, Mandela supported the initiative to de-escalate
sanctions imposed by the European Community. In 1991 and during the ANC’s
first annual conference, Mandela underlined the demanding tasks before the
ANC, namely to transform itself from being an illegal underground liberation
movement to a legal mass political party. In doing so, he endorsed peaceful set-
tlement and just political transformation in South Africa. His efforts were
crowned with the first democratic elections in 1994, which the ANC won by an
overwhelming majority.

The outsider retells history: humanist, cultural engagement in After the Last
Sky
In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said reveals that ‘although exile is one of
the saddest fates’ for intellectuals, it can stand for a median state of discovery
and quest for freedom and justice. As an intellectual exile, Said assigned him-
self the role of a marginal, an amateur, an outsider, a disturber of the status quo.
He took upon himself the task of ‘breaking down the stereotypes and reductive
categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication’. Unlike
Mandela, Said lived the majority of his life outside his native land. He was
neither a political prisoner nor did he experience physical harm or abuse. How-
ever, Said, like Mandela, spent all his life ‘speaking truth to power’. *After the
Last Sky* combines Said’s personal reflections – on exile, the plight of the
Palestinians, how they have been represented by others, and how they were
struggling to represent themselves with a critical evaluation of the process of
resistance in Palestine, the aim being ‘to integrate public and private realities,
and to apprehend the extraordinary variety of individuals and activities called
Palestinians with the aim to reach a just settlement with the Israelis’.
Said regarded Israeli politics as ‘a system of virtual apartheid, in which the rights of Arabs and Jews are legislatively unequal’. As a result, he suggested that Palestinians must learn from South African experiences by addressing ‘the cultural and political aspects of the Palestinian struggle’ worldwide rather than ‘locking it within feelings of rejection and armed resistance’. Said admitted that the Afrikaners and Israelis suffered under the unspeakable racist practices of British imperialists and the Holocaust, respectively. Yet he condemned their use of their tragedies to gain the compassion of the international community and to marginalise their inhuman apartheid policies against black South Africans and Palestinians. For Said, Israelis and Afrikaners, then, were indirect tools for strengthening US and British imperialist domination, respectively.

Said argued further that the passive image of Palestinians in international media plays a significant role in re-enforcing Israeli oppression. Said explained how Arabs do not usually control the images that represent them; they have been confined to spaces designed to reduce or stunt them; they have often been distorted by stereotypes which picture them as ‘so low, barbaric, and antithetical as to merit re-conquest’ and, after 9/11, as ‘the iconic terrorist’. As such, in Palestine ‘legal armed resistance’ ensues, with ‘the disastrous suicide bombings’, showing Palestinians, like South African rebels, as ‘terrorists’. Nevertheless, Said suggests that, as in South Africa, economic interdependence in Palestine can be utilised as a means of promoting values of just coexistence and acceptance of the Other, rather than a source of exploitation and subordination of Palestinian people. For Said hostility and violence in Palestine result from ‘the absence of secular and genuinely liberating ideas’.

Said suggests, therefore, that Palestinians have to work on the political and cultural levels to ‘promote their cause for the international community’ and to ‘integrate public and private realities’, emphasising that ‘the Israelis are not solely to blame, we are guilty’. Said, like Mandela, focuses on violence in Palestine, ‘whether it has been the violence of our uprooting and the destruction of our society in 1948, the violence visited on us by our enemies, the violence we have wreaked on others, or, most horribly, the violence we have wreaked on each other’. Sabra, Shatila and Bourj el-Barajneh – the ugly, sprawling Palestinian refugee camps lying just south of Beirut – have once again been besieged, bombed and ravaged in disgraceful acts of racism that should be used to increase international recognition of the justice of the Palestinian cause.

Inside occupied Palestine Said, like Mandela, supports ‘legal armed resistance’ and the first and second intifadas, and he praises ‘the solidarity of Palestinians in face of the hostile enclosure created around them’. However, he underlines the fact that Palestinians have become ‘creatures imprisoned by the affable international consensus telling us that, yes, we deserve self-determination, but that we must still be dependent on others, and still wait before we get it’. Said explains further how the rise of Egyptian President Abdel Nasser fired all Arabs – especially Palestinians – with the hope of a revived Arab nationalism but, after the Union of Syria with Egypt failed in 1961 and the defeat of 1967, Palestinians were ‘left alone to fight for existence’. Palestinian dependency on others, Said asserts ‘makes little sense to [himself as] an outsider’, who, unlike Mandela, has spent all his life analysing the mental habits of the coloniser. For
Said realities on the ground require Palestinians not only to ‘dog Israeli military might with their obdurate moral claim, their insistence that they would prefer not to leave, not to abandon Palestine forever, and with exposure of their atrocity or inhumanity’, but also to be ‘open to the Other’, rather than sinking into the ‘hostilities of our struggle’.  

Conclusion

In their autobiographies Mandela and Said represent themselves as products of the socio-political and cultural experiences of their families and countries. Both speak truth to power; both reconcile their aspirations for justice and freedom with the harsh realities on the ground and both uphold the right of the oppressed to resist injustice by all means. Mandela announced that ‘nothing is more dehumanizing than the absence of human companionship’. In their autobiographies Mandela and Said trace long journeys of suffering, resistance and success on the personal and national levels. They are positive figures whose personal success is inseparable from the national struggle of their countries for recognition and justice. The two autobiographies describe with pride, respect and understanding acts of suffering, abuse and collective oppression of Black South Africans and Palestinians. While Mandela takes armed resistance as a way to peaceful settlement in South Africa, Said focuses more on cultural resistance as a means of just settlement in Palestine. Yet both consider historical facts and the dominant attitude of the international community. The practicality and optimistic sense of their two books show trust in the justice of their cause and encourages their people to resist. The fact that Said mentions the South African experience as an example to be followed by Palestinians initiates a new and distinct trend in the Palestinian intellectual perception of notions of nationalism. Both revolutionised their cultural perception of the rights of the Other, before fighting to overthrow oppression in South Africa and Palestine.

In this way Mandela’s and Said’s autobiographies challenge colonial stereotypes of Black South Africans and Palestinians as either menacing rebels and terrorists or as wretched vagrants or refugees. In doing so, they not only represent new images and traditions resistant to colonial stereotypes about Black South Africans and Palestinians but also expose the complicit attitudes of the international community towards racial discrimination in the two countries.

Notes on contributor

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Notes
1. Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” 176.
2. Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, 26.
3. Ibid., 26.
4. Said, “Worldly Humanism versus the Empire-builders,” 3.
5. Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, 51.
6. Said, “Worldly Humanism versus the Empire-builders,” 3.
7. Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism, 51.
8. Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 73.
9. Ibid., 210.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Gallagher, A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee’s Fiction in Context, 156.
12. JanMohamed, “The Economy of Manichean Allegory,” 80.
13. Ibid., 210.
14. Ibid., 210.
15. Ibid., 210.
16. Ibid., 210.
17. Ibid., 210.
18. Keller, Bill. The Practical Mr. Mandela, 18.
19. Ibid., 11.
20. Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 93.
21. Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 210.
22. Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 210.
23. hooks, Killing Rage, Ending Racism, 241.
24. Ibid., 210.
25. Said, Representations of the Intellectual, p. 23.
26. Ibid., p. 23.
27. Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, 210
28. Said, After the Last Sky, 142.
29. Said, After the Last Sky, 12.
30. Said, “Israel, Iraq and the United States,” 20.
31. Said, After the Last Sky, 123.
32. Said, After the Last Sky, 7–8.
33. Said, After the Last Sky, 5.
34. Said, After the Last Sky, 12.
35. Said, After the Last Sky, 32.
36. Said, After the Last Sky, 49.

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