

Beilharz in South Africa – jottings

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May 2008

Almost out the door of an office at Macquarie University, where I'm teaching for three months, a colleague, Lloyd Cox, calls out, 'I hear you're on your way to Melbourne. Would you like to meet Peter Beilharz (PB)?' 'What kind of a question is that?' I holler back, 'Of course.'

A late convert to critical and social theory, I've become a devotee of the journal Thesis Eleven, from which I have learnt a lot, especially from reading PB.

Cox, who wrote his doctorate at La Trobe under PB's supervision, makes a call. It's settled.

Hours later, a taxi drops me outside 13 Tanner Grove, Northcote, Melbourne . . . I knock on the door. PB opens it.

In a crowded lounge, with page proofs cluttering the table, we talk for three hours: he about Marx, Materialism and Stuart Macintyre; I tell him about South Africa's Marxist tradition; the country's embrace of Market ideology; and, of course, Nelson Mandela.

Will this interest him in South Africa? Will he visit, if asked? I ask him and then worry about that old conundrum; how to fund such a trip?

August 2010

A quick drive through the Addo Elephant Park: luggage-less, PB has arrived for a conference on the Humanities in distant Bloemfontein. This time, the Academy of Science of South Africa resolved the travel funding issue.

We talk about family and retirement, but mainly, about the decaying state of universities worldwide. To brighten things up, we turn to social theory and exchange notes – and a little gossip – on luminaries. He tells me that he once had to choose between attending a lecture by Michel Foucault and having dinner with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

Approaching a rise, we encounter two teenage 'Ellies' engaged in rough-and-tumble. They poke each other and, almost giggling, rush at each other head-on before tumbling into the Eastern Cape thicket.

At a waterhole, we're welcomed by those whose home we've invaded – small herds, charming calves bossed by mothers and even two lonely bulls. Such a complicated social structure . . . what can we learn from them?

This park has over 400-odd creatures, but they have roamed this valley for millennia, evolving alongside hominids. We know this because, not far from Addo, rock art drawn by San/Bushman/Hunter-gatherers depicts elephants and humans in both combat and social ritual.

Two days later

From the university town of Grahamstown (soon to be called Makhanda), PB and I set out to explore rock art – it's before 6.00 a.m. We will leave for Bloemfontein in two hours, and this was the only time we could find for this particular adventure.

En route, we pass through a village famed for its cricket field and church – the picture-post scene is more English countryside than Eastern Cape scrub. But this place gained notoriety as the setting for JM Coetzee's 1999 Booker Prize-winning novel, *Disgrace*. We exchange views on Coetzee's writing – acrid, austere, even acerbic.

It's hard going (and icy cold) as we scramble up crags towards a tunnel at the mouth of a cave. Rock Art in this region is thought to date back 25,000 years. But not all from the same period, and 'newer' ones cover 'older' etchings. No elephants are depicted on these walls, probably because the mountainous terrain has kept elephants away from this site. Shades of Wittgenstein, this: what you've never seen, you can't know and can't draw!

But, clearly decipherable are images of a buck and, perhaps, a lion. Smaller animals are difficult to identify . . . they may be what locals call 'dassies' – rock rabbits – said to be the closest living relative of elephants who, like their mammoth cousins, live in egalitarian communities.

December 2015

Under the shimmering sun of a plush Cape Town suburb . . . it's Christmas Day.

PB (and Sian Supski) have just completed a five-month stint at the country's premier research centre, STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study). Their joint project is 'Modernity and Modernism in Everyday Life – South Africa and Australia in the Twentieth Century'. In addition to travelling through the country, they have poured over family diaries, old magazines and the like.

They leave for Melbourne tomorrow – this lunch doubles as a farewell.

Much water has flowed under the proverbial bridge since my visit to Northcote 15 short years ago – PB has become a regular visitor to the country and (with others in the Thesis Eleven community) has visited neighbouring Mozambique. The journal has run issues devoted to South Africa and carried additional pieces on the local scene; it has also interviewed the country's foremost thinkers and writers. Moreover, several ancillary partnerships have taken root and reciprocal visits – to Australia and beyond – seem commonplace these days.

Building academic links is said to be back-breaking work – but this experience shows it is easy if framed by old-fashioned words like curiosity, camaraderie and comradeship.

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Reference

Coetzee JM (1999) *Disgrace*. New York: Vintage.

Author biography

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