

Fabian as Investigative Style

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Johannes Fabian. *Memory against Culture: Arguments and Reminders*. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2007. xi + 191 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$21.95. Paper.

If Johannes Fabian were reviewing this book I fancy he might start with its title, “memory against culture” and ask himself what was to be inferred from the use of “against.” Perhaps, as he does on occasion here, he would explore what happened when the title was translated into French, German, and Swahili. Would the connotations in those other three languages be as broad, even shifting, as they are in English? Falling far short of his facility in the first two languages, and with no Swahili at all, I nonetheless have my doubts. “Against” is used to open out two debatable terms in a typically Fabian way. No advocate of fixed systems or classifications, Fabian has always preferred good questions “against” definitive answers. One way of reading “memory against culture” would be dialectically, and this would capture something about the book, but it would ignore this reader’s sense that memory emerges as the winner, if only for the time being, from these dozen, mostly occasional, “arguments and reminders.”

Although we might approach an ethnographic question via either of them, memory is a more challenging frame than culture. The likely pitfall of organizing our curiosity through culture is the tendency for it to coalesce in ways formally similar to national culture. It doesn’t have to do this; we can pluralize public culture, popular culture, elite culture, and so forth in an effort to reflect the complexity of our contemporary subject matter. But slipping back into a conception of culture as over-integrated, and overly connected to proclamation of some essentialized identity, is a constant danger. The contrary danger arises from channeling our interests through the conceptual pathway of “memory”: the harder we think about it, the more everything becomes an aspect of memory, or begs memory as a condition of its possibility. It is typical of Fabian’s thought that he prefers to risk fuzziness around an area of inquiry than to court reification. (I’ll come back to memory later, since it is the heart of this collection and key to the development of Fabian’s ideas in the quarter of a century since his name became known as the author of one of anthropology’s most famous late twentieth-century books—*Time and the Other* [1983]—a source of kudos to a scholar then in his mid-forties, but a reputation trailing a burden of expectations.)

At one time or another, I must have read most of Fabian’s major writings, and by now I bring anticipations to them: I have a partial sense of how they work. (By “partial” I mean both *my* sense of how they work and my feeling that this sense is only part of how their author intended them to work; full appreciation of these dimensions would involve an intellectual trajec-

tory, particularly through continental philosophy, closer to his than mine has been). This sense of the limits to one's own familiarity occurs only for those authors whose writings we deem it worthwhile to read deeply. Fabian's works (using that term advisedly) typically involve the creation of an intermediary, textlike object of analysis—one that can be (to some degree) shared with his readers in what is (at least relatively) a preanalyzed form. This may be a found object (existing independently of his researches) or one jointly worked on with African interlocutors; the difference between the two matters, but it does not include a distinction between a textlike object and its amenability to further analysis. Fabian's method requires his readers to experience the object of analysis in some independence from its analysis. This is immensely difficult (both practically and theoretically), but the emphasis Fabian places on this method is evident from his determination to make his sources available.

In his analytic approach, Fabian tends to move upstream of his source: he poses questions about the conditions of the production and performance of the textlike object. Doing so is a practical corollary of the epistemological interest he has in coevalness: there is performativity both in the production of textlike objects and in their analysis. Two moments of coevalness are involved—in the objectification of the source and in its analysis—and it is striking how many of these analyses were literally performed as public addresses.

It follows that in practice two things interest Johannes Fabian less than they do many of his contemporaries: reception theory preoccupies him less than theories about creation; and currently fashionable theories of embodiment hardly concern him at all. Fabian's subjects tend to be coeval discursive subjects. The element of consciousness in the production of culture is central to his interests.

Listing some of the intermediary objects of analysis that serve as grounds for Fabian's theoretical inventions indicates their textual (or textlike) nature. *Jamaa: A Charismatic Movement in Katanga* (1971) strikes out from a Swahili text dealing with instructions for initiation to the movement. *Jamaa*, the familylike relationship fundamental to the form of Catholic Christianity which spread among miners in Shaba, influenced Fabian's view of the reciprocal character of encounters. *Power and Performance* (1990) examines how a theatrical performance was devised to respond to Fabian's interest in an enigmatic proverb: "le pouvoir se mange entier." *Remembering the Present* (1996) illustrates Tshibumba Kanda Matulu's history of Zaire, as recorded in 101 genre paintings on flour sacks, following a commission from Fabian that gave the Luba painter the opportunity to set down and comment upon his "rememberings." Mounted en bloc, like a cartoon strip, and accompanied by Tshibumba's commentary, these images have discursive character that is, for Fabian's analysis, more crucial to their analysis than their painterliness. *Out of Our Minds* (2000) treats the memoirs of early travelers in Africa, translated and quoted in substantial sections, as evidence for their

encounters with alterity (in many senses). In the travels of these Victorian adventurers, when do moments of human copresence break through the prejudiced and (even within these terms) not always rational mindsets of these men? Then there is his ongoing project to collect annotated Swahili texts on the Web site “Language and Popular Culture in Africa”—a project that has absorbed a large part of Fabian’s energies in recent years.

Like many essays in his previous collections, those anthologized here, in *Memory Against Culture*, mine these ethnographic works to critical purpose. Such shared objects are made to contest the pernicious outcome proposed in *Time and the Other* and restated here: that “modern constructions of alterity emerged when spatial and temporal distancing merged to form the basis of a denial of recognition (of contemporaneity, or modernity)” (60). This outcome was not arrived at without effort—that is, from a simple epistemological failure; rather it was a product of repeated works of remembering and forgetting, close analysis of which puts human agents back into the picture. These ideas are the focus of four articles in part 3 of this collection—the most brilliant and most important in my view—in which Fabian examines traces of forgetting that might be as slight as the recurrent use of “et cetera” by an interlocutor to skip over an enumeration that would spark recollections (87). Forgetting and remembering are the human activities that underlie the epistemic qualities of time. Rooting his reflections in particular encounters is also a way of responding to some of the more facile appropriations of *Time and the Other* as a critique of the viability of ethnography. Fabian goes back upstream to human encounters and to the hard work of understanding; he strives to turn himself into a coeval both in the production of the object of his anthropology and, through reflection on his practice, in its analysis. For Fabian, rather than posturing, it is the hours involved in transcribing and annotating a Swahili text that demonstrate respect for others and their cultured products.

This collection would not be the easiest place for a new reader to begin to appreciate the implications of a Fabianist style of investigation. The reader of this journal might be more immediately engaged by *Remembering the Present* or one of the other African descriptive works mentioned earlier (even more than the classic *Time and the Other*). But those already familiar with his writings will be grateful for these reminders offered to us in his seventieth year.

References

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