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Indigenous resurgence, collective ‘reminding’, and insidious binaries: a response to Verbuyst’s ‘settler colonialism and therapeutic discourses on the past’

Scott Burnett^{a,b}, Nettly Ahmed^{b,c}, Tahn-dee Matthews^b, Junaid Oliephant^b and Aylwyn Walsh^{b,d}

^aAfrican Studies and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, USA; ^bIlizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba, Graaff-Reinet, South Africa; ^cSupport Centre for Land Change, Graaff-Reinet, South Africa; ^dSchool of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay intervenes in the on-going debate over the power-knowledge entanglements of classifying emic Indigenous resurgence accounts of the past as “therapeutic history”. We refer to how “therapeutic history” was defined by Ronald Niezen in his 2009 book, *The Rediscovered Self*. We argue that despite the important refinement of the concept made by Rafael Verbuyst in his application of the term in his work on Khoisan resurgence in South Africa, we believe it to be a problematic category, especially in Western knowledge production about Indigenous people. Our reasons are that the term conflates the use of history with its recovery, unfairly maligns Indigenous knowledge keepers as self-serving and uninterested in the truth, and introduces an insidious binary which has unwelcome discursive effects, in that longer chains of equivalence ultimately place Indigenous storytelling and knowledge keeping on the other side of an epistemological divide from “proper” history-writing.

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When marginalized communities narrate their own histories outside of academic contexts, what would be an ethical approach for researchers to engage with such practices? This and related questions are raised both by Rafael Verbuyst’s (2022) mobilization of the category of ‘therapeutic history’ (see Niezen, 2009) in the course of his ethnographic account of Khoisan¹ resurgence in South Africa’s Western Cape, and our rejection of the term in our discourse analysis of the memory activism of the Gamtkwa Khoisan Council (GKC) in the Eastern Cape (Burnett et al., 2023). As the issues addressed in these articles are of importance to collective memory scholarship dealing with Indigenous resurgence specifically, but also relevant to critical discourse studies more broadly, we believe that it is valuable to outline some of the reasons why, given Verbuyst’s (2023) argument for retaining ‘therapeutic history’ as an analytic term, we remain uncomfortable

CONTACT Scott Burnett  auschi@gmail.com 015H Sparks, University Park, Pennsylvania, PA 16801, USA

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with using it in our own analysis. This is not because we dispute the existence of 'therapeutic history' as a phenomenon, but rather because we believe that when wielded by discourse analysts, anthropologists, or historians it furthers a power/knowledge project rife with pitfalls and dead-ends for Indigenous scholarship and activism. In this reply, we thus briefly lay out our reading of the original disagreement, before explaining why we think the concept of 'therapeutic history' might create more problems than it solves.

Resurgence, therapy, and the 'truth' about history

In our article on the 'politics of reminding' (Burnett et al., 2023) we argued that while it is possible to critique the account of South African history presented as part of the Khoisan revivalist work of Chief Hettie and other GKC elders, it would be misleading to classify their retelling of the past as 'therapeutic history'. This term was coined by the Canadian anthropologist Ronald Niezen (2009) to refer to history in which the 'main criterion for determining the truth is the subjective experience of group affirmation' (2009, p. 150). In short, therapeutic history takes *affect* and not *evidence* as its guide when distinguishing fact from fiction. We did not choose to avoid the term because we felt that history was not being *used* therapeutically by the GKC. Tzvetan Todorov's (2001, p. 49) distinction between 'the *recovery* of the past and its subsequent *use*' (emphasis in original) is helpful here. As a collective, we have frequently witnessed the power of *using* historical narratives to conscientize communities about the historical roots of present injustices. We chose to avoid calling the GKC's version of history 'therapeutic' because, by Niezen's definition, this would have implied that their mechanism for *recovering* the past was merely to affirm the virtues of their group, and not to seek out the truth. In our view, therapeutic history conflates recovery with use, in that the stories that are used for group solidarity and belonging are immediately suspect, as they are assumed to be the products of a tendentious, self-serving method. We felt that this would have been an analytical mistake, while undermining the GKC's claims to knowledge about their own history.

In his response, Verbuyst (2023) agrees that aspects of the GKC's memory work constitute a valuable and critical intellectual endeavour simultaneously aimed at truth-telling, collective liberation, and group cohesion. He concedes that he had not sufficiently acknowledged the extent to which knowledge production is taking place in Khoisan revivalism more broadly (Verbuyst, 2023, p. 10). He then argues that activist histories might better be described as 'emic' (whether therapeutic/academic or not) and opposed to the 'etic' accounts of people who are not directly engaged in Khoisan resurgence. He makes clear that the distinction between emic and etic accounts does not map onto lay vs. academic histories, as evidenced by academic historians who write about Indigenous nations to which they belong and in whose resurgence they are involved. In the conclusion to his response, however, he stops short of eschewing 'therapeutic history' entirely, arguing that it is still useful as an analytic term.

The usefulness that Verbuyst attributes to the concept is based on his endorsement of Niezen's (2009, p. 155) claim that academics face an 'unresolved dilemma' in deciding the extent to which one should 'promote, ignore, or critically engage with the collective self-knowledge of marginalized peoples that dispenses with widely recognized academic procedures (some would say responsibilities) of critical assessment and self-correction, while

instead asserting the interests of collective pride and emotional affirmation'. In both Verbuyst's and Niezen's account, when faced with a 'therapeutic' claim by an oppressed group, academics must thus choose between undermining collective healing, and undermining the academic project. One can't avoid both evils: one must grasp at least one nettle. This, then, is the theoretical purchase of 'therapeutic history': to pick out the conditions where the (tacit) conclusion is motivated that one should always side with the 'truth' about history: with criticality, with evidence, and not with people's feelings.

Verbuyst (2023) illustrates this dilemma in the practical (and in present-day South Africa very salient) scenario of the difficulty of adjudicating conflicting claims about land ownership:

How should (Khoisan) academics proceed when (conflicting parties of) Khoisan activists for example articulate a land claim through the register of therapeutic history, thereby obfuscating the differences between sources and methods and perhaps foreclosing criticism from outsiders who do not share their experience? (Verbuyst, 2023, p. 13)

The answer – quite clearly – is that the Khoisan historian would engage with both groups, and others not party to the conflict, record and take seriously their narratives, consult with various oral and written sources, weigh the evidence, and bring the conflicting accounts into sharper view. But this option is foreclosed, as we are asked to accept that this scenario is a dilemma for the researcher, who must accept that they will either hurt people's feelings, or participate in perpetuating untruth. Both groups cannot be correct. The one horn of the dilemma is sharpened by the assumption that any contradiction of the activists' self-affirming narratives would constitute an affront to their group identity and self-image, while the other is honed by the belief that historians are in the business of making firm commitments about who is right or wrong based on solid evidence.

Neither of these suppositions is particularly solid, as we argue in the penultimate section below. But this scenario becomes even more problematic when we consider that therapeutic history is presented as a 'register'. Registers are distinct styles of speaking or writing that have broad recognition, and are generally associated with specific settings or types of people (Agha, 2007; Eckert, 2016). If therapeutic history is understood as a manner of speaking, the academic historian is clearly not making judgments about the method through which a statement came to be regarded as true by one group or another, but rather only about its surface form as text or utterance. Much like a discourse analyst, the academic historian would have to work with the textual warrants available to them. Arguments made in a rhetorical style deemed 'therapeutic' by academic historians might thus be taken less seriously than those which are made using a register associated with openness to correction and the careful weighing of evidence. The academic's role is then to sift claims made in an appropriate academic register (and which present no dilemma) from those which are suspected of therapeutic excess (and thus do).

This approach to dealing with conflicting activist groups would, of course, be a recipe for error. The work of colonial scholars implicated in historical genocides and land thefts may have employed an academic register, and opposition to colonialism by land protectors and knowledge keepers may have used a spiritual or ancestral one, but this difference says nothing at all about the validity of the claims made. This is clearly not a consequence which anticolonial and antiracist scholars such as Verbuyst or Niezen would endorse. But because Niezen has set up such a stark binary, adding the tag 'therapeutic' to history has

the unfortunate effect of turning it into a metonym for a larger cultural corpus of mystification, superstition, self-interest, fable, and non-science. It is thus not necessarily that 'therapeutic history' does not exist but that its construction as a binary reflects a power/knowledge project with very unwelcome consequences.

Imperialism, genocide, and power/knowledge

What is at stake both in our original article and in this response is how one engages in collective remembering in the face of colonial land-grabs, genocides, and attempts at erasure. Niezen is keenly aware of this challenge in his own work and is wrestling precisely with the importance of history for decolonial and anti-racist social movements. He acknowledges the historical abuses of Western knowledge production as a tool of imperial domination and epistemicide, citing Frantz Fanon's (2008 [1968], p. 210) observation that colonialism does not merely oppress a people, but also 'distorts, disfigures, and destroys' their past. This is exactly the problem that Verbuyst (2022) so carefully deconstructs in his critiques of the 'Khoisan extinction discourse' which undermines the agency of revivalists claiming an Indigenous identity. And yet when it comes to defining academic history, Niezen (2009, p. 160) claims that the critical approach which doubts just-so stories about the past arises from an 'Enlightenment' value, thus backgrounding the possibility that other peoples in other times and places might have held (or continue to hold) similar beliefs *not* handed down by Western imperialists (who, needless to say, were not exactly exemplars of self-doubt). And it is indeed difficult to square the legacy of the Enlightenment – variously constructed as plague and as cure, problem and solution – within academic spaces themselves so profoundly shaped by the thinking of that period.

If self-critique in this model is imagined as a European virtue, the European vices of racial enmity and virulent ethnonationalism are understood as potentially taken up by Indigenous 'therapeutic historians'. Niezen's sketch of the 'dark side' of therapeutic history presents it as no less than a gateway to fascism. He cites Todorov (2001) to explain that because the therapeutic historian is closed to critique, they 'abuse' memory in the manner of twentieth century totalitarians. Just as the Nazis mythologized a German *Volk* in order to hail into being a loyal and passionate people, therapeutic historians praise only the achievements of the in-group while invalidating any knowledge that causes 'discomfort, inconvenience, the introduction of doubt, and the disconfirmation of self-image' (2009, p. 154). This is history in the service of national unity and heroism, and at the expense of truth.

While there may appear to be similarities between the way the past is used in Indigenous resurgence and in exclusionary ethnonationalisms, these are superficial. The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that Indigenous resurgence 'in its most radical form, is nation building, *not* nation-state building' (2016, p. 22 emphasis added). In her account, resurgence starts from a rejection of the violence of colonialism, aiming instead at social and political forms inspired by Nishnaabeg 'grounded normativity' (Coulthard, 2014, p. 60). This normativity is 'grounded' in the sense that it arises from an ethical system relating to land and place, yielding norms that are 'nonhierarchical, nonexploitative, nonextractivist, and nonauthoritarian' (Simpson, 2016, p. 23). By refusing to abandon lifeways and relations in the wake of

colonial and imperial genocide and land thefts, Indigenous nations thus take up for themselves a self-image that contrasts with the enduringly violent, oppressive, and ecocidal character of the colonizing West. But what the category of ‘therapeutic history’ asks us to accept is that any such crafting of a positive self-image from elements of collective memory is already suspect as a potential source of exclusionary ethnonationalism.

And indeed, far-right ethnonationalists have frequently invoked indigeneity to justify repression and exclusion. Zionist settler colonialism and the ethnic cleansing of ‘Judea and Samaria’ is a highly salient example (see Feldman & McGonigle, 2023). So too is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, which ‘presents itself as a “decolonial” force, returning India to an idyllic Hindu state before colonial disruption’ (Gopal, 2021, p. 891). The supposed ethnic homogeneity of this ancient Hindu past is projected onto the entire subcontinent as licence for the BJP and its followers to commit Islamophobic and anti-Dalit atrocities. As Gopal and others have pointed out, to grant the BJP the status of a decolonial movement is a category error. The BJP ideology of Hindutva reinforces ‘colonial binaries with the aim to justify violence against those minoritized’ (Menon, 2022, p. 49). This is not ‘grounded normativity’ but mimicry of the colonial project. To return to Simpson’s thesis – contained in a book that appeals in its title, ‘As we have always done’ to a shared Nishnaabeg past – resisting ongoing settler colonialism requires centring ‘Nishnaabeg intelligence’ as a ‘resurgent method’ diametrically opposed to making itself ‘palatable to whiteness’ (Simpson, 2017, p. 32). This is exactly the kind of suspicion of outside perspectives that would seem to lead to ‘exclusivism and political intolerance’ (Niezen, 2009, pp. 172–173). But it is a very blunt instrument indeed that equates the chauvinist Islamophobia of a nuclear power with Nishnaabeg struggles for resurgence in the face of Canadian settler colonialism. There is simply no symmetry between these cases, either in their material conditions or in their ideological formation.

Searching for the ‘therapeutic historian’

The reason for the bluntness of the instrument is that the figure of the therapeutic historian relies on a one-dimensional sketch which is hard to reconcile with reality. Instead of being alert to the complexities of the historical record, the therapeutic historian stands accused of considering evidence only in order to quell or ignore any contradictory data. All they seek is confirmation of the positive attributes of their group which are, typically, ‘social peace, egalitarianism, spiritual enlightenment, and harmony with nature’ (Niezen, 2009, p. 150). One of the examples Niezen provides of this is the trope of the ‘Ecological Indian’. As Krech (1999) argued, this reductive and romanticized figure places Indigenous peoples outside of history in an eternal and idealized past, where they have always existed in relations of equilibrium with their natural environments. This idea is shown by Krech to be a colonial projection unsupported by evidence. Referring to anthropological work with Penan people in Malaysia, Niezen draws attention to how the ecological fantasies of Western environmentalists are reflected back to them by Indigenous people in an ‘ethnographic hall of mirrors’ (Brosius, 1997, p. 63). The Penan see that the presence of medicinal plants in the forest is important to the etic environmentalists, and so they incorporate medicinal plants into their emic accounts of what the forests mean to them: in other words they ‘took note of the Western gaze on medicinal plants and obligingly turned it back to environmentalists’ (Niezen, 2009, p. 165).

While Niezen's purpose in invoking the 'Ecological Indian' is to draw attention to the negative consequences of ethnographic encounters that project Western Romanticism onto Indigenous peoples, it is noteworthy that the Penan are constructed here as 'obliging' and with limited critical engagement (under Western eyes at least) with their own practices and lifeways. A similar lack of criticality is imagined as having informed the AIDS denialism of Thabo Mbeki in South Africa, who supposedly rejected the biomedical consensus on HIV around the turn of the millennium because of a 'misplaced hope in the positive contributions of indigenous knowledge' (Niezen, 2009, p. 151). Scholars who have engaged more intensively with Mbeki's catastrophic mistakes have pointed out that these originated in part from accurate and evidence-informed analysis of the socioeconomic and psychological aetiology of HIV and AIDS in African contexts (Furman, 2020). Beside this, the key AIDS 'dissident' on whose expertise Mbeki relied is the German-American oncologist Peter Duesberg, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and not a practitioner of 'indigenous knowledge'. Niezen is thus taking liberties in presenting as the root cause of his AIDS denialism Mbeki's commitment to the idea of an 'African Renaissance' grounded in 'self-knowledge and self-reliance' (Niezen, 2009, p. 151). In the case of the Ecological Indian, one might observe that Krech's thesis was vigorously debated in Native American popular and academic journals. Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear's parting shot in her positive review of Krech (TallBear, 2000, p. 4) was to recommend 'reading it with the usual healthy skepticism that should be reserved for anthropologists writing about Indians, but also with a fair mind to consider the evidence presented and the manner in which it is presented'. It seems that wherever one scratches beneath the notion of 'therapeutic history' one finds not self-delusion based on idealization of the past, but critical engagements with evidence, controversy, and complication. In these cases at least, the therapeutic historian seems to be something of a straw figure.

Avoiding insidious binaries

People will often, in their recovery from the past, choose to tell affirming stories about themselves. This is obviously true. Niezen's list of the virtues of history-as-therapy for marginalized communities is sympathetic and compelling: it is 'an essential aspect of recovery from the lingering traumas of cultural genocide, a proven strategy of healing, a source of esteem-building in the face of prejudice, and a moral anchorage to the collective self in the face of rapid change' (Niezen, 2009, p. 149). There clearly is a large set of phenomena which fit into this category. And yet his purpose in defining the term is not to praise it, but to bury it, through extensively documenting its insensitivity to evidence, its lack of academic rigour, its self-indulgence, its surrender to fantasy, and its potential to serve as the pretext for ethnic hatred.

This model of therapeutic history places it on one side of a divide, with critical or academic history on the other. As discourse analysts, we tend to be suspicious of these chasms. As Derrida (1981, p. 41) pointed out, in binary oppositions we deal not with 'the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy'. However tempting it might be to classify products of collective memory produced by marginalized peoples in acts of resurgence as therapeutic, we must recognize that the descriptor that attaches most easily to this term is 'merely' (the objections of Verbuyst, 2023, p. 2

notwithstanding). The ‘therapeutic’ is clearly weaker, wronger, smaller, less worthy of respect, while all of this symbolic capital accrues to the ‘critical’ or ‘academic’. Furthermore, the opposition between therapeutic and critical facilitates the formation of longer chains of equivalence articulated from the elements of related hegemonic discourses. Thus may therapeutic attach too quickly to ‘Indigenous’, to ‘oral history’, to ‘lay’ historians, to auto – or ethnohistory, to narrative, tradition, or myth, or indeed to the ‘emic’ perspective Verbuyst is at pains to defend. On the flipside, that which is ‘critical’ can easily become conflated with that which is academic, steeped in the Enlightenment tradition of self-critique (as we have seen), written by professional historians who are outsiders and thus have ‘etic’ perspectives that are unaffected by personal commitments to Indigenous resurgence. The authority of etic histories is tied up with their ‘supposed impartial, dispassionate, critical, and objective pursuit of the truth through the study of primary sources’ (Verbuyst, 2023, p. 11). And it is precisely this supposition that we should be studiously and relentlessly calling into question, rather than the emic memory work of Indigenous knowledge keepers.

For their part, some ethnohistorians have avoided these binaries in productive ways. Frank Salomon (2002, pp. 491–492) for example rejects the idea that ‘native intellectuals’ are outside of the academic sphere. He takes seriously the different interpretations of the colonial processes that emerge from his Andean interlocutors, and avoids playing their version of history off against the academic one. Where there are (quite substantial and serious) discrepancies between the local history and other versions, he treats these as ‘interpretative, similar in kind to academic disagreements among researchers operating with different partial perspectives on unknown wholes’ (Salomon, 2002, p. 492). These differences deserve to be taken seriously and, as he shows, open interesting academic questions about our incomplete knowledge of the past, and how intimately our telling of it is interwoven with our sense of ourselves and our futures. We hold that it is precisely this kind of nuanced and epistemologically open engagement with Indigenous resurgence that is potentially prevented if we retain the category of therapeutic history.

Conclusion

Indigenous storywork is not necessarily a rejection of Western knowledge, but a decolonial recentring of the worldviews and experiences of colonized people (Xiem et al., 2019, p. 14). The kinds of stories that remind people about the past, which we document in our analysis, are part and parcel of any important political process which deals not merely with group-affirmation but also with knowledge production. When stories about history are told in a resurgent register, their valuable critical work is easily overshadowed if categorized as ‘therapeutic history’ – especially when the term is wielded by etic professionals from the location of Enlightenment academies. As Salomon’s method shows, the ‘truth’ about history is a very complex matter, and the historian’s role is not simply to arrive at authoritative versions of what happened in the past. Indigenous historians, including those not working in universities, have their own critical methods and do not shy away from engagement with controversy, and if ‘etic’ perspectives are seen as less valuable by them, this is often because they align so strongly with the imperialism of Western knowledge production which considers only its own

methods to be truly authoritative. In our original analysis, we cited the Lakota historian Nick Estes (2019, p. 18):

Radical Indigenous historians and Indigenous knowledge-keepers aim to change the colonial present, and to imagine a decolonial future by reconnecting to Indigenous places and histories. For this to occur, those suppressed practices must make a crack in history.

As these cracks are made, so too must epistemic authority be shared between academic historians and Indigenous historians engaged in acts of resurgence.

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Note

1. As we detailed in our original article, this term is a problematic etic portmanteau. Our usage, in line with Verbuyst's (2022) is based on its adoption by Indigenous revivalists in southern Africa who claim descent from Khoe and/or San people.

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Notes on contributors

Scott Burnett is Assistant Professor of African Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. His work focuses on the reproduction of hegemonic raced and gendered orders in environmental discourse, as well as reactionary white masculinity on social media. He is the author of *White belongings: Race, land, and property in post-apartheid South Africa* (Lexington, 2022).

Nettly Ahmed is a field worker at the Support Centre for Land Change (SCLC). She identifies as a Khoi-San woman, and her work with Indigenous communities in the Karoo focuses on water, land, belonging, heritage, and the ways in which people make sense of themselves in a hostile country. She is currently working towards a degree in Development Studies.

Tahn-dee Matthews is the managing director of Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba. She is an energetic social activist whose community connections in Graaff-Reinet and the broader Karoo serve as the basis for the storytelling work that she does together with Junaid Oliephant and Nettly Ahmed of SCLC. As comfortable in front of the camera as behind it, Matthews specializes in social action research and video ethnographic methodologies.

Junaid Oliephant, a.k.a. Blaqsheep, is the creative director of Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba. A passionate videographer and photographer, his latest films include *Rol hom op jou tong* (2022) and *Thyspunt: Khoisan Heritage* (2020). He counters the exclusion of radical narratives on mainstream media platforms by making his films available on the Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba YouTube channel.

Aylwyn M. Walsh is Professor at the University of Leeds in the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, where she is director of research. Her book *Prison Cultures: Performance, Resistance, Desire* (2019) was shortlisted for the David Bradby prize. She produces practice research and works across cultural studies and performance studies.

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