
Based on fieldwork conducted between 1996 and 1998, and in 1999, Christopher Nelson explores the various avenues of memoration pertaining to the Okinawan war experience in *Dancing with the Dead*. He demonstrates how Okinawan experiences of war, oppression and colonialism are remembered and re-interpreted in the light of present day circumstances. Departing from extant works on war memories that deal directly with traumatic pasts and with important issues of reparation or reconciliation, Nelson adopts a more subtle but poignant approach towards unravelling the different forms of remembering in this ethnography of memories. While Nelson's first encounter with Okinawa took place in the 1980s in his capacity as a Marine Lieutenant, he later returned as an anthropologist who was interested in the following: “How do Okinawans understand their past? How do they recall the horrors that they endured, the pleasures that they renounced, the sacrifices that they made? How do they reflect on the practices that they have maintained and abandoned? What do they do with their memories — those they struggle to recall, those they work to accept, those they allow to fade into oblivion?” (p. 2). These queries readily sum up the direction that the author takes in this ethnography.

The various sites of memory, to borrow Pierre Nora’s notion, have been addressed in chapters that focus on storytelling (Chapter 1), plays/narrative performance (Chapter 3), poems (Chapter 4), and eisā/dance (Chapter 5), interspersed with the author’s own travels and journeys in meeting with different individuals and groups involved in these memory ‘productions’. In his engagement with these memorialisation avenues, a few recurrent threads may be discerned, to be comprehended within the larger literature on social memory, and with remembering at the individual and collective levels (p. 5). Broadly, the memory works of individuals such as students, construction workers, welders, and others, may be interpreted as a challenge to the “totalising national narratives that account for everything in the embrace of the Japanese nation-state” (p. 16). It follows that remembering, as Nelson puts it, encompasses a “creative and reflexive engagement” (p. 18) with the past where it involves the working through of unresolved past experiences and casting possibilities of transformation toward the future. In these processes, the author also actively participates in memory-making through the avenues of eisā and of being a drummer for a year.

Through storytelling, relationships between survivors and their ancestral spirits are being recreated. Storytelling incorporates elements including monologue, dialogue, folk ritual, as well as the testimony of war survivors (p. 37). In Chapter 1, Nelson provides ethnographic details of the performance of storytelling and decorum, interspersed with reported speech or direct quotation (pp. 47–48). The performance is very much influenced by the genre of war remembrances. Overall, the author suggests that storytelling remains open-ended, thereby providing room for further interpretation. At the same time, broader conclusions concerning the transformability of the past that is also tied to inherent contradictions has to be understood within the backdrop of tradition and Japanese militarisation.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Nelson explores the works of Fujiki Hayato (comedian and storyteller) and Teruya Rinsuke (‘Terurin’; Okinawan artist who engages with the Japanese academic discipline of native ethnology or minzokugaku). By presenting Fujiki and Terurin as memory-makers, Nelson makes it a point to labour over each of their biography, performance styles and intended interpretive agenda of the past. Generally, Terurin makes a com-
parison between Japanese and Okinawan cultures or practices, using each other as a foil towards comprehending the dynamism of Okinawan culture (e.g., p. 87), while Fujiki is interested in the possibility of change and transformation. Through his familiarity with native ethnology, Terurin presents himself as a native ethnologist through his performances, merging storytelling and popular song with ethnographic research, delivered in the style of an academic lecture (p. 67). By doing so, the author analyses the implications of Terurin speaking as an ethnologist; through the latter’s ‘ethnographic authority’ (p. 72), he invites a rethinking of folklore, suggesting a re-evaluation of Okinawan culture and a reconfiguration of native practices (p. 88). By synthesizing popular performance with academic forms of expression, Nelson raises a need to analyse the relationship between the ethnographer’s authority and the native’s competence.

While Terurin is interested in recovering native competency and is concerned with claims of authenticity, Fujiki’s experiential methodology involves an engagement with the possibility of change and/or transformation. In his capacity as a teacher, Fujiki asks his students to be acquainted with scholarship about Okinawa and also encourages them to conduct fieldwork and assigns them a play to enact, to be guided by their older relatives in order to be apprised of the possibilities of heteroglossia. Other genres of memory making that were discussed in Fujiki’s seminar include children’s songs and folktales, which lent further insight into wartime experiences and how they were recollected. Essentially, these two chapters raise important issues in memory production pertaining to the problematic of representing experience; as Nelson puts it: “There is a tension between the need for expression and the inadequacy of language and gesture to capture the actuality of the experience. What’s more, there is always the possibility that one could misappropriate the suffering of another or diminish the tragedy of the event” (p. 124).

Nelson’s discussion about the relationship between the living and the dead (ancestral spirits) is further elaborated in Chapter 4 through the poems of Takara Ben, the importance of tombs as inscribing “history into the physical space of the community” (p. 144) and as “sites of ongoing production of relationships and reinscription of memory” (p. 145), and in Chapter 5 through eisā — a dance meant to escort spirits and to incorporate them into social relations (see, for example, pp. 200, 211–212).

Overall, Nelson does a good job of introducing his respondents and providing further details on each of their background and how they have come to be interested in Okinawan history, including the various avenues through which their historical knowledge and/or experiences are presented. In this manner, he accords a glimpse into the lives of these memory makers and their memory ‘texts’ — which is a welcomed approach towards understanding how the past is engaged by different individuals. Oftentimes, readers are presented with analyses of memory texts as secondary data, where further information concerning the intent or agenda for remembering is missing in the absence of the researcher’s contacts with memory makers. Dancing with the Dead is therefore an ethnography that forms a fresh departure from and complements extant studies on memory and its wide-ranging avenues.

Although Nelson seems to eschew or present in modicum amounts, the usual academic discussions on social memory and the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, his approach of foregrounding actual experiences and acts of remembering, together with conveying an understanding or interpretation of the past, somehow works as an ethnography so as to provide an emphasis on how remembering actually takes place, to be learnt and appreciated within and beyond academic deliberations. One minor quibble that I have is the