

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

The Story-Takers: Public Pedagogy, Transitional Justice, and Italy's Non-violent Protest against the Mafia

by Paula M. Salvio

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In her latest book, *The Story-Takers*, Paula M. Salvio investigates the “landscape of memory and non-violent protest” (p. 14) of antimafia educators and activists. Through six case studies, she elucidates the complex ways in which mourning, resistance, and memory influence the ways in which we remember the past and (dis)engage in the present. *The Story-Takers* complicates the role of storytellers, storytelling, and the re-making of story in the context of communities in political transition. Salvio argues that communities who continue to be infiltrated by mafia crime and oppression are not necessarily in a “post-traumatic state” (p. 11). Consequently, as a state that continues to be trauma-informed, citizens are invited to mourn the historical injustice that precedes them – and to use this historical consciousness to feel politically implicated in the present.

Overview of Chapters

The Story-Takers begins with an introduction to the frameworks of *story-taking*, wherein story-takers are collaborators and facilitators in the act of (re)telling historical events. Importantly, Salvio suggests that a story-taker is not one who claims ownership over the story, as to appropriate it, but is one who engages in “an ethical deal so that the outcome – an entity, a story – might compel listeners to ethical, non-violent action” (p. 4). The Introduction also situates the role of public pedagogy and the challenges of transitional justice in the context of antimafia activists in Italy. Chapters 1 through 6 present six case studies that speak to the complexities, contradictions and commitments to action that

exemplify historical and contemporary antimafia activism and remembrance. By way of example, Salvio dedicates Chapter 1 to unpacking the commemorative practices of public remembering. The public spontaneously erected a shrine, affectionately known as the Falcone Tree, to memorialize the 1992 assassination of Italian judge and antimafia advocate, Giovanni Falcone. Salvio carefully interrogates the ritualistic memorialization of Falcone, wherein in one vein the shrine resulted in an unprecedented public act of resistance against mafia control of Italy, and served as a vehicle for their collective grief. Simultaneously, however, the shrine also entraps participants in a *hyper-remembering* that reduces Falcone's work and identity to a singular narrative of martyrdom. Such hyper-remembering, in turn, does not ask citizens to assess their relationship to this "sad past," nor to claim responsibility for their shared present under mafia control. Subsequent Chapter 2, however, also calls attention to the assassination of Francesca Morvillo, one of Italy's first female judges, who evidently does not receive even half the public commemoration as her husband, Giovanni Falcone. Salvio argues that a Facebook page dedicated to Morvillo's legacy is a site of her "double death – both biological and social" (p. 45) insofar as her death is eclipsed by a racialized, gendered legacy, which precludes her from the same memorialization as her husband. Chapters 3 to 6 continue to offer poetic and insightful interpretations of public pedagogies of remembrance in an antimafia Italy, such as the role of an anti-extortion tour company, Addiopizzo, and the literal and figurative significance of archives such as Letizia Battaglia's photographic records of mafia violence.

Wherein arguments spill over into subsequent chapters, a close reading of the arguments in chronological order is recommended. With this, a lecturer or casual reader who may wish to handpick individual chapters for reading may find this a difficult exercise. The dedicated reader who reads the book in its entirety, however, will be rewarded with a rich and multifaceted insight into the field of transitional justice, memory studies, and public activism in the face of trauma and healing.

Significance

Salvio's insight into public pedagogies and critical remembrance is inherently international in scope. For Salvio, the experience of trauma should not, or rather cannot, be placed behind us in some forgotten past. With this, she argues that we "need not slide into denial or rely on consoling narratives that forget past atrocities in the name of a happy ending" (p. 138). In pursuit of a public curriculum that "tarries with grief" (p. 37), Salvio's work offers us the language to lean into difficult knowledge and grief, so long as it is premised on the refusal to stay silent in the face of injustice. As we have seen with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, focused on unveiling the atrocities of the Indian Residential Schooling system, a community in transition must turn to the past to create an ethically implicated future – the applicability of Salvio's work here is significant.

In conversation with the work of Freud, Britzman, Arendt, and Simon, students of psychoanalysis will find *The Story-Takers* to be an invaluable commentary on the role

of grief, mourning, and re/membrance in transitional communities. Students of history will also appreciate Salvio's conceptualization of resistance and her refusal to victimize or generalize narratives. Lastly, educators who seek to be critical and accountable advocates who teach to historical injustice will benefit greatly from this work. As such, *The Story-Takers* will appeal to students of psychoanalysis, history and memory work, and educators of all disciplines who need a reminder of the possibilities of activism and ethical citizenship in their work.

Salvio strategically balances the line between detailing theoretically heavy concepts with examples that bring to life the realities of antimafia advocates and everyday citizens, or "commoners," of antimafia protest. She positions herself as an intellectual within the well-established fields of grief, resistance, and memory, while also attending to some contemporary concepts such as *slackivism* in the age of the new arm-chair social media activists. Salvio brilliantly draws new readers in with interest of mafia and anti-mafia resistance, but without romanticizing or glorifying the mafia narrative. Instead, she consciously prioritizes the voices of non-violent anti-extortion activists. Throughout *The Story-Takers*, Salvio hints to the roles of educators, but primarily through the lens of public educators (activists, public figures) as compared to professional educators (teachers, curriculum developers). She leaves much to the imagination as to how educators can take up this work – and yet, Salvio reminds us that we often crave certainty most when we should be wrestling with our uncertainty. Perhaps this missing link is really a call for educators to "be open to a valuable mode of unknowingness" (p. 37). In an age of political uncertainty throughout North America, where the ghosts of historical trauma are ever present, Salvio's *The Story-Takers* is timely and necessary.