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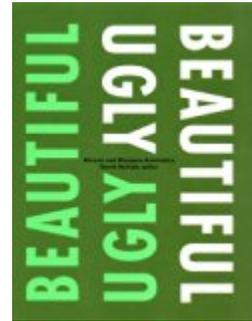


Sarah Nuttall, ed. *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. 416 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3918-2.

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On the Precarious and Mutable Concepts of Beauty and Ugliness

In *Beautiful/Ugly*, Sarah Nuttall brings together eighteen essays on the concept of beauty and ugliness in Africa and its diasporas. This collection challenges Western-based philosophical constructs of beauty by examining the very mutability of beauty in its relationship with ugliness. More particularly, Nuttall's introduction and several contributions respond to Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), a book based on her 1998 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Harvard University. In her introduction, and especially in relation to Scarry's reflections on beauty, Nuttall calls for a broadened understanding of aesthetics from a global perspective, leading to a more fluid understanding of the precarious boundaries between beauty and ugliness.

One of the greatest strengths of this edited volume is that a genuine dialogue emerges. This sophisticated dialogue is sustained on different levels throughout a number of the essays. Cheryl-Ann Michal's reflection on the "slippery" nature of food as a cultural referent responds to Françoise Vergès's analysis of food and hybrid identities in the postcolonial context. Rita Bernard, in "The Place of Beauty: Reflections on Elaine Scarry and Zakes Mda," offers the most direct critique of Scarry's talks on beauty, using this critique as a framework for the analysis of Mda's post-apartheid novel *The Heart of Redness* (2000). Bernard's essay and a number of other pieces in the collection serves to develop a nuanced discussion on aesthetic philosophy initiated in Nuttall's introduction. Two stories by Mia Couto ("Two Stories: Old Man with Garden at the Rear End of Time and The Fat Indian Girl") are

addressed in Isabel Hofmeyr's essay "Seeing the Familiar: Notes on Mia Couto." Hofmeyr contextualizes Couto's stories in postcolonial Mozambique and turns to William Kentridge's essay in the book, "Two Thoughts on Drawing Beauty," as a framework for her reading of Couto's texts. Kentridge, in turn, reflects on the act of transcending ugliness in arriving at the rendering of beauty. For Kentridge, and indeed for the essayists in the volume as a whole, beauty and ugliness are not seen as binary opposites, but instead are interwoven concepts, inseparable from one another.

The unification of the individual texts within the volume, then, serves a number of the essays well. Patricia Pinho's "Afro-Aesthetics in Brazil," a nuanced discussion of the construction of racialized concepts of beauty and ugliness, certainly stands well on its own. However, the significance of Pinho's essay and particularly her discussion of Scarry's work in relation to issues of power and Afro-aesthetics in Brazil is expanded when considered in the context of Nuttall's introduction and other contributions to the book. Michelle Gilbert's "Things Ugly: Ghanaian Popular Painting" has been revised from an earlier publication, and the author seems keenly aware that her analysis of popular paintings depicting horrific and shocking subjects takes on new significance in the context of this volume.

The essays are tremendously diverse, representing the voices of artists, journalists, writers, and scholars. The authors draw on the methods and sources used in

fields of study as diverse as anthropology, art history, cultural studies, gender studies, history, literature, political science, and sociology. While this diversity in the scholarship is one of the strengths of the book, it is also its weakness. The accessibility of the essays varies widely, and so the intended audience is difficult to define. Some essays will be quite useful for a general audience or advanced undergraduate students in any of the disciplines mentioned. A number of essays, though, are more anecdotal and less rigorous from an academic standpoint, or, alternatively, the texts are more deeply immersed in theoretical discussions and the scholarly debate in particu-

lar fields of study and therefore apparently intended for a more specialized audience.

The book itself has tremendous aesthetic appeal with its rich and diverse color illustrations. Nuttall tells us that the project was conceived with Cheryl-Ann Michael, who is also a contributor to the volume, and that the concept emerged from the 2001 symposium held in Cape Town, South Africa. A book production such as this, built around a dialogue that is developed throughout the text, illustrates the effective intellectual debate that a symposium can achieve when its participants are given space and time to grow.

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