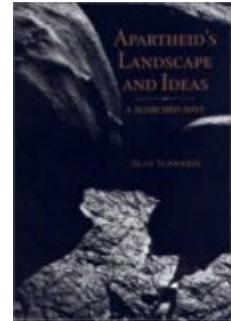


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Schwerin. *Apartheid's Landscape and Ideas: A Scorched Soul*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001. xv + 318 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58046-080-4.

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## Encountering Pre-Apartheid

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The physical landscape of apartheid (1948-1994) comprised officially designated exclusive spaces for black and white people. At the national scale, territory was reserved for the various African tribal/linguistic groups. The Bantustans (euphemistically called Homelands) were spaces of exile. The “resettlement” camps were dumping grounds. In border zones, African people worked in decentralised (white or foreign-owned) factories. In South Africa’s cities, residential racial zoning created townships for African, Indian and mixed-race people, and suburbs for white people. There were sanctions on property ownership and access. Some African workers lived in single-sex municipal hostels and mining compounds. Others lived in “sky-locations” on top of office blocks or in rooms in the backyards of white suburban homesteads. Countrywide, exclusionary signs and barriers marked out the racially segregated spaces of “petty apartheid” in public buildings, bridges, transport vehicles, parks and restaurants. In various ways, on many occasions, it has been shown that the core of apartheid was radical racialisation of the lived and worked landscape. The visibility of the apartheid landscape was remarkable; its aesthetic was searing. Its essences were boundedness, difference and exclusion.

It is only at the end of his edited compilation that Alan Schwerin confronts these landscape elements and the mappings of racialised territoriality. An indistinct 1881 map (on which it is difficult to locate places mentioned in the text) predates apartheid. His own superb

photographs are mostly close-ups of architectural and biotic detail. The few rural landscape shots do not resonate with ideas or visual expressions of apartheid. The text, mostly a miscellany of nineteenth-century writing, also predates apartheid. It is a curiously titled book.

There are four intriguing parts to the work. One of these, “The Sea,” looks odd in a book about landscape. Did the torrid journey of the white settlers predispose them to selfishness? What about the contours of their pre-embarkation lives in Europe? Evocative chapter titles (“Early Voyages,” “Cape,” “Garden,” and “Wrecked”) anticipate tantalizing headings in other sections. A second part, “The Land,” contains chapters on “Elements,” “Trekking,” “Mining,” and “Dorp and Veld.” Farming is absent. The two-page chapter on “Dorp and Veld” omits benchmark landscape writing of the apartheid period by such authors as Nadine Gordimer, Olive Schreiner, Alan Paton, J. M. Coetzee, Peter Abrahams, Eskia Mphahlele, Christopher Reeve and Bessie Head. A third part, “The People,” refers to “Savages,” “Missionaries,” “Boers,” “English Settlers” (the Afrikaans word “uitlander” incorporates a splendid reference to land) and “Conflicts.” Part 4, “The Ideas,” contains chapters entitled “Light and Darkness,” “Slavery,” “Language,” “Administration,” “Conceptions and Apartheid.” The contents page that lists these sharply identified aspects of the South African past is truly enticing.

The chapters comprise prose and poetry. Reports (including inventories), diaries and speeches predominate. The letters that appear were private, not the pub-

lic readers' correspondence that newspaper editors published as revealing social barometers. The writers are white administrators, politicians, ranking military officers, settlers, travellers and missionaries. In the main, details of (primarily male) authorship are confined to name and date. Details of the writer's age, social and educational background, and the authorial context, are overlooked. Curious inclusions include attributions to David Livingstone and Albert Schweitzer whose familiarity with South Africa must have been slight. Some text refers to Angola and Mozambique.

The poetry is more contemporary than the prose. It includes a piece that refers to the Soweto township of Jabavu (which many general readers might easily mistake for a person). The poetry does include African voices. Each item of prose and poetry is headed with an extract that Schwerin has chosen. The phrases are pertinent if not always the best distillation of content. Read sequentially, they do not tell a story. The reasons behind the arrangement of pieces within each chapter is not specified.

In what is part compendium, part photo-essay, Schwerin has interleaved forty-three original black-and-white photographic studies with the text. Each generously occupies its own single page. His photographs from the 1980s are presented as artistic counterpoints to the textual sentiments. They do not always relate obviously to text opposite or nearby. Some captions (e.g. "Look right" and "Barricade") are obscure. The photographs are wonderfully decorative, but their particular location in and symbolism of contested African landscape (or segregational seed) is seldom self-evident. In the same way, the printed extracts are not always obvious in addressing the apartheid landscape theme. Many selections tell of personal hardship, barbarity, cruelty, rawness, harshness and bitterness that might arise in non-apartheid situations.

In the first of four insightful introductions to parts of the text, Schwerin states that his objective is to use the textual extracts to trace the long roots of apartheid in white fear, self-righteousness and presumed cultural superiority. There might indeed have existed mental landscape prefigurations, but most cited here are aspatial otherings. Writing which ranges across several hundred years does illustrate the long trajectory of separatist notions, prejudices and discourse. Whether the

assemblage proves the continuity and tenacity of attitude, incident and outburst is another matter. The case presumes a lot about interpolation in time and space as well as the monolithics of purpose and practice. In some South African places, at certain times, white people were writing, thinking and interacting differently. The case may also rest too uncomfortably on a presumption of apartheid as original sin, whereas racist thinking evolved. Apartheid was the end point of segregationalism, but it was also its most extreme expression. Its distinctiveness from preceding practices, which were variable and more or less spontaneous, is not made apparent or explained. Roots are neither stems nor branches. It is hard to sense that victims challenged or connived with the apartheid project.

In an opening paragraph, Schwerin writes that his book is one of fragments, a silent mosaic. Perhaps it is too fragmented, too silent. There is no standard of perfection against which to judge any selection of writings for an edited collection, but those made on the basis of internal consistency and emotional appeal might have been focused and interrogated more explicitly. Most of the texts are fascinating in and of themselves, but they are not all digestible in the (impeccably preserved) original syntax. Scorching they may be, but they are certainly not all transparently appropriate to the landscape theme. Conceivably Schwerin wished to work in metaphorical mood. Provocation and suggestiveness may be integral to impressionism, but too much is being asked of the literal reader. It is sometimes difficult to know what to make of the extracts and photographs, while the unthreaded citations create a lumpiness. The book is better dipped into than read. It is, for example, a wonderful source book for obscure original printed work on seafaring to the Cape, and on oxcarting.

Alan Schwerin, who lived in apartheid's landscape and visited it as an outsider, has put an immense amount of effort, time and care into his book. A fulfilling personal odyssey through libraries and landscapes will have an even more potent outcome when he composes a closely reasoned argument and/or sensitive account entirely in his own words. It would be a particularly welcome contribution if the philosophically schooled and aware author were in future to apply his talents to engaging with post-modern work on the makings and meanings of South Africa's past cultural landscapes.

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