

Sarah Nuttall, Carli Coetzee, eds.. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998. xii + 300 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-571503-3.



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Published on H-SAfrica (January, 2000)

South Africa's reemergence into contemporary polemic was significant to international thinkers, writers and the lay-public. It also posed huge cross-dynamics and discussion about new realities.

One of these was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which, like the Nuremberg Trials in the Holocaust's aftermath, was set up to redress imbalances and injustices imposed by apartheid. The TRC began its hearings in 1996 and the layers of truth that emerged from it are the primary focus of this anthology. Academics from a wide range of specialist fields in South Africa's Cape region have contributed to this book, which has been sensitively designed and put together. It has no pretensions to be "the final word on memory, nor does it aim to define or theorize memory in one particular way" (1). Instead, it is an exploratory examination of the possibilities of this focus, given that South Africa, realistically, is still undergoing parturition.

It covers a range of fields from art history to linguistics, political studies to feminism and would be valuable for the specialist as well as lay

reader. Given the international realities of psychological genocide and racial disturbance, this book is relevant in South Africa and abroad.

Divided into four sections, essays have been orchestrated to flow on from one another demonstrating meticulous briefing and careful selection of contributors. Each section deals with different roles of memory. This textual interplay flows above and beyond the book's sections, making it less of a strictly academic (and potentially obscure) text and a more cohesive view of the polyvalence of memory in the South African paradigm.

Much of its focus is on creatively extrapolating meaning from apartheid. This has been extensively examined in the museum/gallery context. Unfortunately it contains few images.

The first section explores the philosophical and actual complexities inherent in memory and the act of relaying the remembered truth. Here the reader will find issues surrounding the semiotics, grammar and choice of word to inform, to describe, to make sense of questions being addressed by the TRC. The section is headed with a

piece by Njabulo Ndebele which sensitively examines pain inflicted by apartheid and how addressing it through the TRC has had to be worked through carefully and often in an improvised manner. It has been coupled with Andre Brink's contribution that addresses the strength and momentum of narrative as truth-telling device.

Anthony Holiday and Ingrid de Kok's pieces close the section. Holiday formulates his argument against a philosophical framework, while de Kok considers how language is memory-shaped with reference to two local exhibitions. Historical installations rather than art exhibitions, they aimed to address the questions raised by complicity through language, and participation in a reconstruction of something that is gone through happy memories of it. They were put together at a time and in places which would have been impossible at any other time in South African history. The section closes with a broad rubric on the understanding of the diverse nature of the concept of the truth and the dangers inherent in too narrow an understanding.

Part two is entitled "The Remembered Self". Here the reader is offered a selection of articulated thought from a diversity of backgrounds with a central focus on autobiographical awareness counterpoised against the greater narrative of South Africa. It begins with a provocative piece by Sarah Nuttall which examines how deeply collective memories intersect into the individual's identity. She looks at the "place between public resistance and private healing and between private resistance and public healing" (76) in a brief analysis of diverse autobiographical texts. Her observations are complex, enmeshed in post-modernist thought and an awareness of the difficulties of simplistic answers. The analysed texts are dealt with rigorously and the outcome is a meaty examination of the issues which serves as an introduction to the section.

Nuttall's piece flows easily into that of Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, dealing with testimony,

evidence and historical memory through oral and written recollections of the machinations of the period under review. They conclude their incisive and critical piece with the assertion that "[o]ral transcripts, their construction and their representation in history typically reflect a process of selecting, editing, embellishing, and deleting the material of individual memory into an identity intimately bound up with the stages of modern domination and resistance" (99).

While being a pertinent conclusion to the piece, it opens Michael Godby's essay, which follows.

Godby presents William Kentridge's film, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) as an art historical document and a commentary on the TRC and South African memory. He begins with a synopsis of the film's narrative, including a couple of stills from it, and then examines its position in the larger questions, placing Kentridge within his own local context as well as his method of examining these texts and sub-texts through his drawings. Godby considers Kentridge's character, Soho Eckstein, who epitomises the greedy (white) businessman, product of an apartheid era who is ultimately engulfed in its problematics. The motif of Eckstein points toward complicity amongst the white populace in the face of the scourge of apartheid and how this needs to be redressed.

Carli Coetzee and Steven Robins bring the section to a close with their separate contributions. Very different, but bearing comparisons, these two essays examine diverse peoples for whom South African meant very different things. Coetzee writes of Krotoa, the Khoikhoi woman who has been recognised apocryphally as the mother of Afrikanerdom and one of the roots of South African 'coloured' people. The story is richly laced with suggestion, supposition and hypothesis because of the ways in which time nullifies the memory and priorities. It is a moving piece and contributes to an awareness of a body of literature and tradition which has not yet been fitted

into a mainstream awareness. Robins' accent is on two very different groups of people. On the one hand, he is looking at Jewish Holocaust refugees that came to South Africa; on the other, at the Griqua peoples and their roots. This leads him to consider "Miscast", the exhibition curated by Pippa Skotnes in 1997 at Cape Town's South African National Gallery and the different levels of controversy which it engendered. This essay closes the section and although written succinctly, and explained adequately, does seem to deal quickly with more subjects than its short capacity warrants.

Part three focuses primarily on "Miscast", with essays drawing comparative material and analogies from across the academic board. Unfortunately, we are not exposed to images at all in this section, but rather just a rehashing of the polemic debates surrounding it. Because "Miscast" was a very visual exhibition, this lack does make some of the argument lose thrust. Sub-themes and spinoffs abound in these four chapters, written by, inter alia, Patricia Davison, Harriet Deacon, Martin Hall, Kerry Ward and Nigel Worden look through the issues raised in "Miscast", to amongst others, the position of the KhoiKhoi; Cape slavery; and Robben Island as a vessel for museological development.

Remaining with the visually impactful, but veering away from the directly historical, Eve Bertelsen's essay heads the final section of this anthology. She examines trends of 'black' advertising and the sub-culture of women's magazines, aimed at a middle-class black market during the height of political transition in South Africa. Bertelsen very thoroughly examines the polemics under which advertising is structured, as well as the subliminal influence that it may have on mainstream perceptions of social expectations. The final two pieces by Sinfree Makoni and Eduard Fagan respectively, focus on the complexity of language and the place of the constitution in remembering apartheid and hone the shape of this an-

thology to one that is forward looking while being thoughtful, contemporary while remaining academic.

Although obviously dating, this book is highly recommended. It contains the voices of young academics and thinkers, presenting an array of political and philosophical approaches, richly indicative of the complexity of the Rainbow Nation that has come to constitute South Africa.

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Citation: Robyn Sassen. Review of Nuttall, Sarah; Coetzee, Carli, eds. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

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