

## Book Reviews

### *South African Writing in Transition*

By RITA BARNARD AND ANDREW VAN DER VLIES, eds.

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Brilliantly conceived and expertly realized, *South African Writing in Transition* raises the bar for edited collections of scholarly writing. The book exhibits an extraordinary unity. That unity is partly a function of the volume’s literary-historical focus—South African literature since the end of apartheid—but it also results from a striking intuition shared by the book’s contributors. Each contends that South African writing is “in transition” in the sense of indexing a failure of transit; each explores the disappointment of South Africans’ hopes for a social order in which inequality will have been eradicated and structural racism overcome. The works discussed in the chapters are thus largely about being *stuck* in transition. This exploration of stuckness, the book argues, can teach us things about historical time that the narrative shape of a “transition to democracy” has tended to obscure.

One such thing is a kind of complicity. Narratives of transition often rely on the very chronopolitical assumptions that underlay colonial domination. They construe the colonized and the racially marked as constitutively belated, incapable of entering fully into that “homogeneous, empty time” which (according to this view) is the condition of modern-political subjectivity. The literary works discussed in this volume respond by resisting the progress narrative implicit in the transition that preoccupies them. They conceive of time less as the linear passage “out of” one condition and “into” another than as the critical disruption of that narrative by heterogeneous shards of meaning that the narrative has failed either to expel or to absorb into its Story.

Among the names that the essays give to this dis-ease are these: betrayal, waiting, precarity, melancholy, queerness, and transition itself. The sheer variety of the vocabulary signals that, within the overarching problematic of a stalled linearity, the contributors engage in a refreshingly plural exploration of transitional time. The resulting nuance and sophistication mean that the book should have a wide readership—not only scholars of South African literature but those concerned with (hetero)temporality; with postcolonial literature and theory; with global capital and neoliberalism; and with imagining utopian futurity will learn a great deal from its pages.

The volume’s unity-in-variety is best approached by describing some instances in detail. Annel Helena Pieterse’s “After Marikana: The Temporalities of Betrayal” examines the representational legacy of the post-apartheid government’s massacre of striking miners at Marikana in 2012. Pieterse focuses on a documentary film, *Miners Shot Down*, alongside two literary depictions of betrayal in the ranks of the ANC: Niq Mhlongo’s

*Way Back Home* and Jacob Dlamini's *Askari*. In all of these cases, betrayal cracks open the unity of our present to highlight a blurring of the Black–White binary by the movement of Black resistance fighters across political-racial lines. The time of “betrayal” is thus for Pieterse one that reprises the past in a way that puts the present out of joint with itself. It defies the linear certitude of transition by tracing continuities between past and present that invite (and demand) a collective reckoning.


A similar dynamic emerges in Andrew van der Vlies's “Queer Returns in Postapartheid Short Fiction: S. J. Naudé's *The Alphabet of Birds*.” Here the arrested transition makes visible a set of queer desires that are difficult for the familial metaphors of national identity-formation to accommodate. Van der Vlies draws on the strand of queer theory associated with irrecoverable negativity, which he braids together with Walter Benjamin's meditations on redemptive futurity. The braiding of models permits a recovery in the present of shards from the forgotten past that show themselves to be replete with queer-utopian potential. Such shards of possibility lie athwart the logic of linear “transition”; in Naudé's stunning stories, they index a proto-utopian recalcitrance to the “narratives of freedom and progress” so central to “the ... postapartheid nation's constitution” (210).

Finally, Sarah Lincoln's “Precarious Time and the Aesthetics of Community” sounds a variation on these themes. Lincoln draws on Judith Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity—between a universal, transhistorical condition of vulnerability (precariousness) and the *surplus* precariousness (i.e., precarity) imposed upon those whose lives do not quite “count.” She brings this theorization to bear on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*. These texts propose that the dilatory character of the transitional moment engenders an aesthetics of “affirmative precarity,” “a willful submission to the vulnerabilities of corporeal life in the face of otherness” (101). Precarious time is then the temporality attendant on this procedure: a time that contests the superfluity of (Black) lives through a confrontation with radical finitude, and in which improvised rituals of survival prefigure the possibility of a life lived in common.

I've chosen these chapters practically at random: really *any* essay in the volume could serve to represent its manifold strengths. Readers will be equally compelled by Lily Saint's stunning account of the relations among modernity, literary genre, and the fictions of racial “identity” in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*; by Katherine Hallemeier's analysis of works (by Nadine Gordimer and Njabulo Ndebele, especially) that trouble the constitutive relations between “waiting time” and nationalist narration; by Christopher Holmes's discussion of unfinishable fragments in Ivan Vladislavic's work as aesthetic enactments of democracy-*as*-transition; and by Erica Lombard's suggestion that contemporary South African writing evinces a “reflective” nostalgia—a fantasy of lost wholeness whose recovery is constitutively deferred.

The range and depth of the essays make one grateful for Rita Barnard's superb introduction. The piece not only offers deft, incisive summaries of the individual chapters, but connects those arguments in lucid fashion while explicating the theoretico-historical terrain on which they meet. I found myself wishing at times that the contributors had made richer use of the archive on alternative temporalities that Barnard engages—Pheng Cheah, David Scott, Jennifer Wenzel, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. I wished, too, that some writers absent from these pages or referenced only in

passing had merited detailed attention. Zoë Wicomb and Achmat Dangor come immediately to mind. But these omissions came to seem part of the fruitfulness of the current volume, committed as it is to exploring the “almost-times” of South Africa’s historical incompleteness.

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*Postcolonial Biology: Psyche and Flesh after Empire*

By DEEPIKA BAHRI

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In *Postcolonial Biology* Deepika Bahri sets out “to look beyond biologically deterministic conceptions of racialized difference to porous, pliable, and plastic bodies and psyches as critically embattled zones of conflict in the wake of imperial modernity” (viii). Postcolonial biology is thus defined in ways that repeatedly merge into the cultural, drawing our attention to the messy entanglements of nature and nurture that colonial thinking sought to police. Indeed, as Bahri’s introduction makes clear, the driving force to her argument is a sense that these “zones” and entanglements must be revisited in order to address both scholarly and social challenges that we face today. Bahri argues: “We [in the humanities] are inured to surrendering not only the word but also the concept of ‘biology’ to science, thus instating a false divide between biology and culture on the one hand, and race and culture on the other, as if the former were the circumscribed preserve of science, and therefore objective and stable, while the latter was to be embraced as the legitimate province of the humanities, since it can be assumed to be less rigid, less categorical ...” (9). It is only fitting then that at the heart of Bahri’s argument is the idea of hybridity. Hybridity emerges not only as a philosophical trope guiding discussion but also as a point of investigation in the three novels that serve as test cases for Bahri’s argument.

Bahri opens with an extended discussion of her terms: “plasticity,” “hybridity” and “postcolonial biology.” This discussion is grounded as much in the traditions of the Frankfurt School as it is in postcolonial studies, with Adorno, Bhabha, Fanon, and Horkheimer as key coordinates in this mapping of her field. These coordinates also guide the ensuing critical readings of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, and Julian Barnes’s *Arthur and George*. Bahri explains that her choice of texts, with their focus on India and Indians enables her “to locate intercultural traffic within particular histories of race, class and chromatism,” cognizant of the tendency of “references to *the* civilizing mission ... to obscure its local variations” (33). Each chapter, then, focuses on a single text, to provide an account of how the hybrid bodies and psyches of the novels’ protagonists navigate the (post)colonial worlds they move through, and how those hybrid bodies and psyches are read by those they encounter.