

Book review:***Under Construction: 'Race' and Identity in South Africa Today***Reviewer: *Eva Franzidis*

Under Construction: 'Race' and Identity in South Africa Today

Editors: Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn

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As a person whose heritage is a confusing mix of Italian, Greek, Maltese and Irish, having been born in England, raised in South Africa and then Australia, finally returning recently to Cape Town, I am very interested in (and perplexed by) notions of 'race' and 'identity'. These terms, which, for so long have been treated as 'given' biological or historical 'facts', are truly problematic and contestable concepts that need to be interrogated and explored. This anthology is an attempt to do just this in a particularly South African context, as this is a nation that has an inherent preoccupation with categorising people into groups such as 'black', 'white', 'coloured,' and so on. These immutable categories have long denied people their individuality and ignored the diversity that exists within them. In post-apartheid South Africa – the much-touted 'Rainbow Nation' – there is an urgent need for discussion on the structures that have and continue to define and dictate limiting representations, conceptions and treatment of people.

The editors of this book, Natasha Distiller and Melissa Steyn, initiated a colloquium in December 2003 at the University of Cape Town on various issues arising out of the key concepts of 'race' and 'identity' in South Africa. This collection of writings is a direct result of the colloquium, and in their introduction Distiller and Steyn establish that it, "is intended to help to address the need for a vocabulary of 'race' and 'culture' in South Africa today". Their approach defies the notion that 'identity' and 'race' are fixed, rather they are seen as performances that need to be analysed and interrogated. Employing the writings of theorists such as Judith Butler, they assert that 'race', like 'gender' is something that we *do*, or *enact*. Thus, they, and almost all of the contributors within the book, have placed terms like 'race', 'black' and 'white' in inverted commas since they are concepts under discussion, that are being deconstructed and debated, in an attempt to defamiliarise the terms and question their meaning.

The contributors to this compilation are predominantly academics from numerous universities around South Africa (as well as one from Canada) and represent a variety of disciplines, such as English, Psychology, History, Anthropology, Film and Media, Sociology, Art History, Political Studies, Language Studies and Geography. There are also poets, creative writers, visual artists, cultural analysts and musicians represented. The latter's works are interspersed between the academic essays in a way that is reflective of the interdisciplinary approach that has been taken, which is vital to eking out as full a discussion as possible on what is essentially the lived experience of being a 'South African' today.

Therefore, as the editors note, the book can be read in a "piecemeal" way; one does not need to follow the consecutive chapters, but can choose to enjoy the varying styles, comments and

approaches at one's discretion. Ultimately, the discussions span a variety of focal areas yet are joined by their common interest in exposing the underlying structures that make up our society, both globally and locally. While there are too many components to discuss at length individually here, I will attempt to give a reasonably comprehensive overview of most of the arguments presented in this anthology.

Sandra Swart's essay entitled, "'Race' horses: horses and social dynamics in post-apartheid Southern Africa", is an intriguing investigation into the history of horses in South Africa. She takes into account the sociological and ideological implications of these creatures from 1652 to present, and identifies "the body of the horse as (a) symbol of power and site of struggle". Through specifically focusing on the practice of breeding, she reveals a process where 'racial purity' is desired and constructed, which has a particular resonance in the context of South Africa's social history.

Swart's piece is followed by Helene Strauss's essay on creolisation, a term that, like hybridity holds different meanings to various scholars, and is debated and contested widely in theoretical circles. Strauss first gives an overview of some of the debates surrounding creolisation both within South Africa and abroad, and then gives her own interpretation of the term. As Strauss relates, one scholar's understanding of "creole cultures" is "those which draw in some way on two or more historical sources, often originally widely different. They have had some time to develop and integrate, and to become more elaborate and pervasive". Strauss's own contention is that she sees "creolisation more broadly as a complex process of subjective meaning making in a culturally heterogeneous and unequal society". While others focus on the celebratory aspects of creolisation, Strauss emphasizes the painful elements that emerge in this process, a process in which identity is formed through the *loss* and *uniting* of a multitude of traditions and 'cultures'. She recognizes that creolisation often takes place in a context of violence and suppression, and that society's treatment of 'creoles' is often judgmental and restrictive. Finally, Strauss uses the example of two post-apartheid South African works (one a book, the other a performance) that "engage imaginatively with the subjective acts of meaning making", that she believes, "to be central to the processes of creolisation".

Other theoretical essays rely largely on interviews, and they deal mostly with aspects of 'whiteness'. These are quite revelatory of the various opinions held by 'white' South Africans; a divided group which encompass English- and Afrikaans-speaking persons. Melissa Steyn's work is based on findings from a leading Afrikaans newspaper, *Rapport*, in which she analyses and translates 437 letters to the editor. Dividing these letters into six categories, Steyn describes and illustrates with detailed quotes the different standpoints taken by the various sources. From the most steadfast 'Boer' with unabated faith in the past system of apartheid to those who are calling for a future where "whites and blacks can unite", Steyn outlines and discusses each group in an objective and enlightening way.

While the Afrikaners surveyed all asserted their definite opinions and a concrete belief in their 'identities', Don Foster and Theresa Salusbury's WESSA interviewees (White English Speaking South Africans) can be characterised quite differently. Through the various quotes and subsequent discussion, the authors highlight this group's feelings of not having a 'culture' as such, and from these comments deduce that "(i)t is only because WESSAs are free of seeing

themselves as cultured that they may see themselves exclusively as individuals”, and “(t)o claim culturelessness is to claim normalcy. By being culturally void, WESSAs may claim a far more powerful social position than would otherwise be possible, by asserting their distinctive group minority identity”. Through the authors’ additional findings (based on this group), it is asserted that there are, in fact, many elements shared by WESSAs that do ultimately link them into a recognisable ‘culture’ or ‘identity’. These relate mainly to how they see or *construct* themselves and others in relation to them. One striking point is that ‘whites’ see themselves as ‘naturally’ middle-class, so that material status (as opposed to ‘race’) is now the major definer of ‘identity’. Other commonalities include the need they feel to justify their presence in South Africa and (yet) their firm acknowledgement of their English/European roots. Interestingly, there is often a failure to recognise Afrikaners as having European roots. The English language as a site of privilege is also discussed: “those who choose to learn it ultimately reinforce its domination of those who are unable to. In this way the ideology of ‘whiteness’ is easily communicated through the English language”. Through their findings, Foster and Salusbury hope to “contribute in some way to WESSAs beginning to understand themselves as culturally distinctive”, and ultimately to “contribute towards a greater awareness that ‘white’ ideologies do not provide the only suitable norms for South African society at the present time”.

A further essay exploring the topic of ‘whiteness’ can be found in Richard Ballard’s, “Assimilation, Emigration, Semigration, and Integration”, which, as the title suggests, undertakes to cover a lot of ground. This he does through describing each of these processes (as well as segregation) within the context of South African society – both historically and contemporarily, focusing particularly on ‘semigration’, a term which he explains as “a hybrid of emigration and segregation”. A phenomenon that has increased post-apartheid, semigration refers to “partial emigration without leaving the borders of South Africa”, through either (‘whites’) relocating from Johannesburg to Cape Town, a more “congenial environment”, which as one scholar notes, “creates the illusion of ‘not really being part of Africa at all’”, or by setting up elaborate security structures to literally fortress their abodes. Thus, Ballard attempts to investigate the various “strategies” ‘whites’ have employed to set up their “comfort zones” prior to, during and post-apartheid. As someone who has recently undertaken a similar study of Australian society (a society which bears many similarities to South Africa), having emigrated *and* having lived in Cape Town in all my years in South Africa, there are many pertinent issues raised and explored in this chapter, making it a particularly interesting read.

Like Strauss’s essay, further chapters analyse particular creative works in an attempt to reveal certain structures in place within South African society – both during and post-apartheid. These include visual, literary, dramatic and musical works. In a rather brave move, Annie Gagiano’s chapter interrogates J.M. Coetzee’s “racial characterisations” that he makes in a range of works chosen over an extensive period. Gagiano states that her chapter addresses this author’s work “not exclusively or even primarily as that of a literary artist, but as that of a public intellectual: a very influential social commentator...who can, or even must, be held accountable for the views he foregrounds and gives weight to – even if it be claimed that they are *not* his own”. She proceeds to argue her case in a thorough and convincing manner.

Liese van der Watt’s study on Steven Cohen’s performance art succinctly outlines the strategies employed by the artist, asserting that through his deliberate acts that “challenge and disrupt ideas

about heteronormative masculinity as it intersects with ‘race’, ethnicity, and class”, he “performs identity as visibly constructed, contingent, and importantly as contradictory, thereby exteriorising what has become...a distinctive quality of being ‘white’ in post-apartheid South Africa”. Referring to various performance art scholars, Van der Watt employs Amelia Jones’ interpretation of body art which is “post-structuralism in practice”, a process whereby concepts such as the ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are deconstructed and interrogated in a visual response. As a gay, Jewish, ‘white’ man, Cohen exaggerates these indicators in a society “apparently moving away from ‘white’ privilege”, where heterosexuality and Christianity are dominant. Through his performances he highlights the contradictions inherent in claiming ‘identity’ and exposes the contingent and insecure nature of making meaning through factors such as ‘race’ and ‘class’. In addition, van der Watt recognises Cohen as voicing “the contradictions and antagonisms that shape his minority subjectivity. His work is that of the perpetual outsider partaking in a number of minority discourses simultaneously”, thus, representing the reality of the fractured ‘self’ in today’s ever-changing, contradictory world. Through the striking visual images of Cohen in action, van der Watt’s coherent argument of where and how his work fits into the context of post-apartheid South Africa, as well as within the broader context of ‘body art’ itself, this essay encapsulates a main aim of this anthology: to reveal the *performance of identity*; its constructed nature is made transparent.

As these chapters indicate, there is very much a focus on ‘whiteness’ in this book, an area which has not received much critical attention until recently. Thus, the authors (who are mainly ‘white’) are exhibiting a self-reflexivity that is much needed. As a ‘white’ person, I have found myself particularly intrigued by these texts since they have caused me to confront certain aspects of my ‘identity’ (which is complicated further by the fact that I am, on many levels, an ‘outsider’ in South Africa) that I would not otherwise have considered. However, at the same time, as Liese van der Watt’s chapter reiterates, these are not essentialist arguments, but ones that encourage interrogation, reflexivity and the realization that ‘identity’ is not fixed; it is a problematic, complex term that needs to be disrupted at every level.

Other authors represented in the anthology that are not ‘white’, or that focus on issues other than ‘whiteness’ present arguments in the same vein: Pumla Dineo Gqola’s chapter focuses on Brenda Fassie’s subversion of typical ‘Blackwoman’ behaviour in South Africa, while Thabisi Hoeane contests the authenticity and viability of tribal and traditional structures in a ‘new’, changing society. She argues that “tribal identity” too is “evolving and constructed”, not remaining sacrosanct and untouched by societal changes, using various examples to illustrate her point. Natasha Distiller’s essay on Welcome Msomi’s play *uMabatha*, the ‘Zulu Macbeth’, highlights “how a particular performance of ‘Africa’ and ‘Africanness’, which can be traced to typical colonial discourses of African landscapes and people, is in one sense finally being capitalised upon by a specific class of Africans in post-apartheid South Africa”. She identifies the commodity value of the ‘new South Africa’ that is being profited from by many, focusing specifically on this play. Adam Haupt’s analysis of hip-hop lyrics of contemporary Cape-based groups is aimed at proving that “a specific set of new generation of ‘conscious’ hip-hop artists display a rather more nuanced understanding of the politics of ‘race’, identity and representation” than the work of previous artists, with an extended example of one artist’s lyrics presented directly following his paper. Haupt’s study indicates that musicians, like visual artists in South Africa, are progressing in a similar manner, as exhibitions such as *Decade of Democracy*

illustrated. One artist, represented here is Usha Seerjam whose contribution is a transcript based on a video installation, entitled *Two Rooms and a Kitchen*. Here, various 'Indian' men and women relate their experiences in South Africa, from childhood to adulthood. What becomes evident through these statements is the diversity of the people interviewed; their individual experiences and circumstances defying any stagnant categorization as one homogenous group (another issue explored at SANG last year, in the exhibition *A place called home – artists from the South Asian Diaspora*). Michelle Booth is another visual artist whose work is represented within this anthology and she provides a thorough statement on her photographic works, entitled *Seeing White*.

Finally, mention has to be made on the witty and biting cartoons of Zapiro and Anton Kannemeyer, interspersing the theoretical texts, as well as the poignant and hard-hitting poetry of Sandile Dikeni. The literary offerings of Tobias Hecht, Shaun Viljoen, Peter Merrington and Ashraf Jamal are, too, exceptional, often imbued with a delectably sardonic undertone.

As collection, and in its individual pieces, this book is a valuable tool with which to grasp many issues facing South Africans today. It is highly recommended that this anthology, inspired by a need made evident in Distiller and Steyn's university classrooms, be a core text in many students' curricula.