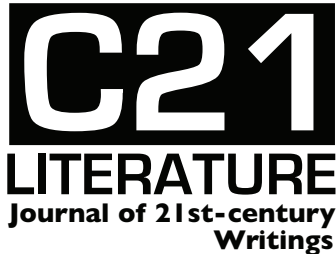




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## Review

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## REVIEW

# *South African Writing in Transition* Edited by Rita Barnard and Andrew Van Der Vlies, (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), ISBN 9781350086883, Hb £85.00, Pb £28.99

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*South African Writing in Transition* is a collection of essays on contemporary South African writing, co-edited by Rita Barnard and Andrew Van Der Vlies. Consisting of ten essays, an introduction written by Rita Barnard, and a conclusion by Tisi Jaji, the volume promises to be a text which explores the main themes of transition and temporality which traverse the essays. The essays are written both by early career researchers and established scholars in their field, who all delve into the problematics of what it means to write within an elusive time frame, postcolonial and postapartheid, as evidenced by the titles, which refer to either 'temporalities', 'time', 'past', 'future', 'returns' and 'history'.

Thus, a central concern of this collection, as Barnard deftly and beautifully reminds us in her informative introduction, is the nature of 'transition', which is 'open for consideration' (2). Charting the 'progress' from Nelson Mandela's release, to the 'stasis and acceleration, the paralysis and hope of postapartheid experience' (3), Barnard reminds us that time is an important factor to be considered in a discussion of 'world literatures' (5). Drawing on Pheng Cheah's work *What is a world?* (2016), Barnard examines the need to shift to the 'temporal' (6) as opposed to David Scott's *Omens of Adversity* (2014) which she argues is 'deeply interested in the period-specific

character of any given time-sense' (7). For Barnard, the latter's theory is significant to this volume since many of the contributors speak of the 'conditions of waiting, stuckness, disappointment, nostalgia they variously diagnose in postapartheid literature' (7). Equally Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) provides another angle from which Barnard sees the lost of plot and the 'precariousness' which is at the centre of so many South African narratives (8). The autumnal image Tsing gives adds to the temporal turn on which this analysis hinges, and which one of the contributors, Brenna M. Munro, discusses in the collection. Barnard's summary of the essays in the collection is excellent as she groups them under themes of 'transition', 'heterogeneity and incompleteness' as concepts (10, 22), the feelings of 'hope and betrayal' (12), 'mellowness and vulnerability' (15), 'trauma and nostalgia', the categories of 'criminals and queers', and ends on general reflections for what comes after transition in the future with 'scholarly futures' (25).

The essays in this collection hinge upon a unifying theme: that of the lack of movement or stasis which pervades South African writing in the postapartheid era. In clear and concise prose, each scholar attempts to examine this theme in a range of ways, without deviating from the central theme. Thus the works in this collection reflect a concern with the inability to move, even in 'revolutionary times' like the Cold War as Monica Popescu asserts in her essay. Analysing the ways in which past and present tenses are used in the narrative of Zoë Comb's *David's Story* (2000), and Mandla Langa's *Memory of Stones* (2000), Popescu discerns a form of 'narrative reversal' (33). Examining Mongane Wally Serote's novels, the critic underlines that the narratives look to the future while at the same time displaying a form of reactionary writing style, a 'literature that participates in the struggle' (48).

Similarly, Annel Helena Pieterse's essay 'explores the struggle for meaning that has taken place in the wake of the Marikana massacre of August 16, 2012' (55). Taking the theme of 'betrayal' as a starting point, the chapter explores the ways in which a new form of 'lived temporality' emerges (55) in a range of novels. The chapter examines the ways in which the African National Congress (ANC) has dealt with the aftermath of the massacre. For Pieterse, recent narratives are 'something like

a feedback loop' since they 'bring these violent events to the fore, re-reading the national narrative through the lens of these betrayals' (62). Pieterse's conclusion is that time remains suspended in these narratives and the 'future is foreclosed' (72).

In a similar vein, Katherine Hallemeier emphasises that postapartheid narratives deploy a range of themes which testify to the fact that we are still waiting for a future which does not seem to arrive. The novel she analyses ends on the notion that the narrator of Nadine Gordimer's 'Amnesty' (1990) like all the others in their position is 'still waiting to come back home' (77). Equally responding to a concern with the notion of waiting in her chapter, Sarah Lincoln asserts that what she is most concerned with is 'a different temporal orientation, one in which the future is neither secure nor predictable' (100). Lincoln's essay examines disease and the body's vulnerability in a time of change, which is ironically marked by the unpredictability of the future for those who are dying, while underlining the significance of the community in precarious times.

By contrast, Erica Still's chapter sees the site of trauma as a 'site of possibility' insofar as reckoning 'with the past' can lead to a form of recovery (123). Drawing comparisons between slavery and apartheid, she highlights the need to 'honor the past without forfeiting the present/future' (127). Nonetheless, storytelling has its own limitations as writing can fail (134). Yet, as Still asserts, telling the story of a trauma 'keeps alive multiple meanings and possibilities for understanding' (140). Thus, Still provides a potential way out of the stasis, the 'stuckness' of the narratives, unlike Erica Lombard whose edifying chapter explores nostalgia. Since nostalgia is a 'yearning for unity and continuity of time and identity' (145), it does little for the feeling of being immobile which pervades the narratives. Yet, Lombard reads the texts as a form of complex telling of time as the reader knows that the future hoped for in the texts, is not realised and actually 'greater upheaval' awaits them (158).

Notions of despair and loss are foregrounded as Andrew Van der Vlies, the other editor of the collection, discusses queerness in postapartheid South Africa as a mode of suspension. The impossibility of 'escape' which marks the narratives he discusses is shown by deferment but also by the rupture and disjuncture of translation and 'locatedness' (197). This calls into question South African identity through juxtaposition

and correlation of English and Afrikaans. Mapping queer spaces, Van der Vlies argues that writing itself effects several returns in the narratives he examines, culminating in 'the ending is the writing itself – a writing that can only imagine the imagined writer's own end' (209). The cyclical nature of time is thereby foregrounded here with Lily Saint's reading of History in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004). Saint discusses the 'myriad formal strategies' the author deploys 'to make manifest the difficulty of narrating the contemporary in South Africa' (219). Saint's chapter ends with the notion of the incomplete, which leads nicely onto Christopher Holmes's analysis of the 'unfinishable work of Ivan Vladislavić' (240), underlining the structural unity of this volume as a whole. Through the use of 'not yet' and multiple adjectives with the prefix 'un', Holmes presents transition as mirroring the elusiveness of democracy. The concluding chapter, penned by Jaji, prompts a look at frontiers and the possibility of an ongoing transit space.

Barnard's introduction raises many questions and draws on theories which are very interesting and I feel some of these essays would have benefitted from these critical frameworks. In particular, Cheah and Tsing seem to resonate with a number of the analyses referenced by Barnard. Nonetheless the collection of essays presents a vivid and dense critical interpretation of time, space, place and the feeling of being in transit, not yet attaining the goal which was set. Each essay problematises transition in different ways and it is due to this richness in material that I see the potential in it to appeal not only to a readership interested in South African studies, English, Postcolonial or World literature but also anyone interested in studies of time and the dichotomy of time and space. The particular resonance of time stopping and the process of mobility and stasis in mobility leads to very interesting and well-argued essays which would be informative for students and scholars alike.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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