

transcultural analysis. The transcultural experiences and displacements that shape the unfolding effects of contact and de-colonization may serve as a rich ground for revising long-standing injustices. Cross-pollinating discussions with transnational feminisms also leap to mind, as a way to consider the relative and interpenetrating scales of global, national, cultural, interpersonal and subjective frameworks for imagining the transcultural lives. Migrations that skirt the west altogether also seem fruitful ground for transcultural analysis, as do interdisciplinary discussions of mediated social relations. The demands of negotiating relative velocities of change and shifting needs for personal and shared experiences of creative security suggest that the questions posed by complex transnational lives are critically informative to a wide range of social and creative projects and problems. This text will be of interest to interdisciplinary scholars of autobiography, and anyone who appreciates wide-ranging scales of critical reference in a shrinking world.

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Judith Lütge Coullie, ed. *The Closest of Strangers: South African Women's Life Writing*. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2004.

The title of Judith Lütge Coullie's book, *The Closest of Strangers*, offers us our first intimation of what to expect from this anthology of South African women's life writing—a glimpse into both the dissociation and the interconnect-edness of women's lives and voices over the span of the last century. Coullie writes in her introduction that

... the paradoxical intimacy and alienation embodied by the title is tragically apt and has resonance for each of the women represented here. But it also, in a sense, embraces every reader, for we are each alone in our selves. (3)

She explains in her introduction that the individual reader's sense of these women will necessarily be determined by his/her own life lived. Although these engagements can only be "partial, fragmentary and crude" (3), her objective is that the excerpts—encompassing oral and written texts, praise poems (*izibongo* and *izihasho*), narrative memoirs, extracts from full-length and short autobiographies, letters and diary entries—will "teach us to transcend our own narrow concerns" (3), engaging with the women on their own terms, and not merely as representatives of the various race groups in South Africa which would only reinforce the stereotypical racial divide, and echo apartheid's erasure of individuality.

It is interesting to view Coullie's arguments for concentrating on *women's* life writing in light of writings by feminist theorists such as Joan Scott who, in the words of University of Cape Town social anthropologist Fiona Ross,<sup>1</sup> "accuse feminist historians of simply adding women to existing discourses when the category "woman" becomes naturalized in law"<sup>2</sup> rather than engaging in discourse as to why women were excluded in the first place. Coullie acknowledges such exclusion by stating that, despite the adoption in 1996 of a Constitution which remains one of the most liberal affirmations of women's rights and gender equality in the world,<sup>3</sup> South African women are still suffering the consequences of "gender systems which retain as their central tenet the oppression of women" (10). Consequently, women's lives and contributions to history have long been obscured and "historical record is still disposed to keep men in the spotlight" (10). A collection of *women's* narratives, therefore, challenges any notions of an essentialised, universal femininity by not "simply adding" women's stories to a collection, thereby dispelling any chance of obscuring women's lives and contributions to history.<sup>4</sup> Since the collection includes post-apartheid writers such as Antjie Krog and Marike de Klerk, it would have been interesting to see Coullie further develop her argument for a collection of *women's* narratives by drawing an analogy with the failure of the TRC for women in its restriction of women's voices, and therefore distortion of historical record. Ross, for example, argues that the testimonial practices advocated by the TRC were particularly inappropriate for expressing the experiences of women during apartheid and that the TRC "homogenized" women's experiences, restricting "the range of expressions to give voice to experience ..." (Ross 162).

Coullie has divided the book chronologically into nine sections dating from 1895 to 2000, each section covering approximately nine to ten years of South African history profiling a contextual framework for the narrative excerpts which follow. She offers the reader a variety of texts by South African women of *various* races<sup>5</sup> as well as by immigrants to South Africa, revealing

an historical picture of the country as an intricately woven mosaic of colourful lives told through oral, written and visual discourse.

The twin threads of *duality* and *diversity* are evidenced throughout the book. The carefully chosen excerpts reflect the lives of both black and white women in a racially divided society, and we become painfully conscious of the differences in experiences and lifestyles as we navigate the vignettes. Coullie writes:

In my choice of texts, I was motivated by a desire to give a diverse range of women—the unemployed, illiterate and disempowered, as well as the educated and privileged—the chance to be heard. Although texts by white women continue to predominate in the literary field, I have intentionally included in this collection a greater number of pieces by black women, rather than duplicate the racially imbalanced patterns of textual production. (11)

Historian Cheryl Walker states that “women’s sense of community with other women, the basis of their perceptions of themselves and their political mobilization as women, was circumscribed by sturdy boundaries of language, ethnicity and the broader race consciousness around which South African society was organized” (*Strangers* 1). However, the testimonies of these *strangers*, according to Coullie, seem to reflect the “paradox of ubiquitous racism in that it has branded *all* South Africans, in a sense binding them together in their experiences ... of the extremes of segregation” (3).

Beginning with “1895 to 1910: The Birth of South Africa” and ending with the section “1990 to 2000: The New South Africa”, Coullie’s autobiographical selections exhibit a meticulous interrelationship between the introductory overviews and the texts. For example, the first section includes writers such as Afrikaaner Sarah Raal whose story records her suffering as a woman fighting alongside men in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902. Highlighting women’s tenacity and courage in the face of adversity, Coullie leads us through the period of the 1930s and early 1940s when “domesticity was a cornerstone in both settler and indigenous gender systems” (76), but her choice of writings reflect women’s resistance, such as the excerpt from Kesavelo Naidoo’s book “Coolie Doctor: An Autobiography by Dr Goonam.” Coullie relates that Naidoo, an Indian woman born in Durban in 1906, embarked upon an unprecedented medical career and led the 1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign against the Anti-Indian Land Act; however, her political activism resulted in numerous detentions and imprisonments.

Attempts to challenge the dehumanizing apartheid regime are foregrounded in the section “1950 to 1959: Apartheid Escalates” through the texts of

writers such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Sindiwe Magona. Coullie recounts that “[r]esistance by women of all races in the 1950s was significant although this was not the first time that women had publicly protested” (135). While the apartheid regime seized every opportunity to oppose any manner of cross-racial sisterhood, the narratives by women such as Mandela and Magona, as well as Helen Suzman, Helen Joseph, Gillian Slovo and Ruth First illustrate women’s political dissent, formation of political alliances—such as the Black Sash organization—and of women’s extra-parliamentary bodies. The formation of the 1955 Federation of South African Women and Congress of Trade Unions culminated in the famous 20,000 strong march of women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa.

As Helen Joseph writes in her autobiography *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph*, whereas the 1950s had been a decade of protest, “the 1960s became the years of political trials, of detention without trial, torture and death under interrogation” (183). The 1970s are hailed by Coullie as the decade during which “The People Rise Up,” and writers such as Bessie Head, Mamphela Ramphele and Linda Fortune tell further tales of unrest, displacement, bannings and, in the case of Head, struggles to maintain mental and emotional equilibrium. The 1980s were a period of turmoil, with escalation of conflict beyond black/white hostilities when the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) reemerged under Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi as leader. Although the IFP publically denounced apartheid, 200 Inkatha operatives were given military training from the National Defence Force, thus forging ties with the apartheid regime. Clashes between the IFP and the African National Congress (ANC) resulted in loss of life on both sides. South Africa became, in effect, a police state and instances of deaths during detention began to escalate, along with numbers of activists who mysteriously disappeared or were murdered.

The texts of black women workers published under the title *Working Women: A Portrait of South Africa’s Black Women Workers* (1985) belong, Coullie explains, to a sub-genre of South African autobiography: the worker testimony (284). The author Lesley Lawson and editor Helene Perold, two white women, contextualize the women’s brief stories of struggles at work and at home. Coullie argues that these writings are part of an ongoing engagement with communities, affording “white academics or literary workers the opportunity to defy apartheid’s insistent denial of the individuality of its victims; in publicizing the life stories of apartheid’s oppressed, they asserted the importance of their lives and exposed the cost of apartheid in everyday, human terms” (284). Dolly’s narrative, for instance, tells of her choice of prostitution as a means of earning extra money when her husband was sent to jail:

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It's mostly white men I go with. I don't feel anything for them ... pay me first! But once they are used to you, they take advantage. Acting as if they haven't got money, or just dumping you in the veld. It's heartbreaking. We are not human. We've got feelings too. (295)

The final chapter entitled "The New South Africa: 1990 to 2000" highlights works which explore issues of violence, unemployment and of HIV/AIDS by writers such as Antjie Krog, Charlene Smith, Maria Ndlovu, and Marike de Klerk. However, even Smith's traumatic recount of her violent rape offers a message of hope that the dream of a "new—and wonderful—South Africa" (324) can still be achieved, despite the contradictions and uncertainties of a disfigured past.

Included in this section, too, are the *izibongo* or praise poems of Magumede, MaSithole and Bell Mshibe. It is of consequence that Coullie discusses the distinctiveness of *izibongo* as women's *self-representation* in an article published in 1999:

The subject is situated in an almost unpunctuated stream of time, from the past of the ancestors to the future generations who may invoke the subject through the performance of the praises. The whole subject—physical, psychological and spiritual—is hailed. A person is not construed in terms of Western separation of technologies of mind and body and soul ... Individual southern cultures conceive of being as a continuous state. (76)

The reviewer believes, however, that Coullie's arguments for inclusion of the praise poetry could be strengthened through further discussion of, or reference to, works on the oral tradition and orality such as in the writings of Joan Conolly and Edward Sienaert.<sup>6</sup>

Sociologist Paul Connerton states: "Knowledge of all human activities in the past is possible only through a knowledge of their *traces* [italics mine]" (1989: 13). In the telling of their stories, in offering glimpses—as *traces and fragments*<sup>7</sup>—of a contested history, Coullie's selection of women's narratives play a significant role in the reconstitution of a reclaimed past for South Africa. In the process of engaging with shared and divergent histories through the vignettes, these extraordinary women succeed where the TRC failed in offering us a means by which to *hear* women's voices.

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### Notes

- 1 Fiona Ross is a professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- 2 Excerpt from the reviewer's email interview with Ross: Nov. 24, 2007.
- 3 See <http://www.constitutionalcourt.org.za/text/rights/know/women.html#28> on a discussion of Section 9 of the Constitution on *Equality*.
- 4 See Smith on differences in approaches to life writing by men and women.
- 5 Coullie's focus, in the first pages of her introduction, is on differentiation between *black* and *white* histories; but the reader should bear in mind that South Africa is a country of multiple racial groups, with *black* historically referring to people of purely African descent. Interestingly, racial categorization is still an issue today, and the High Court in South Africa has recently ruled that Chinese South Africans, classified as *mixed race* under the apartheid government, are to be reclassified as *black*. This is in order for ethnic Chinese to benefit from government policies (Black Economic Empowerment or B.E.E) aimed at ending white domination in the private sector. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7461099.stm>
- 6 Conolly and Sienaert have written extensively on the oral tradition, and have translated works on orality by Marcel Jousse.
- 7 See Kadar 223–46.

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