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James Currey. 2019. xiv + pp. 250. ISBN: 978-1-84701-188-6

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To cite this article: Connie Rapoo (2020): Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa, by Hedley Twidle, African Historical Review, DOI: [10.1080/17532523.2020.1720141](https://doi.org/10.1080/17532523.2020.1720141)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17532523.2020.1720141>



Published online: 10 Mar 2020.



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Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa, by Hedley Twidle

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One of the latest instalments in the African Articulations series from James Currey, Hedley Twidle's *Experiments with Truth* is a compelling exploration of documentary practice in post-apartheid South Africa. This book is a seminal work on the genre of life writing, or non-fiction writing that adds critical and theoretical perspectives on engaging with contemporary South African literature. Questions of re-presentation, memory and memorialisation, and ways to theorise literary non-fiction are at the core of the discussion in this work. The carefully selected case studies from biography, literary journalism and reportage, oral history, emerging autobiographical reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation narrative, as well as political and personal testimonies provide a fresh lens on how to work with phenomenological forms of archiving history within a context that is itself in a process of self-reflection and socio-political transition. The work is a courteous gesture to a phenomenological appreciation of "truth" as reflected in contemporary narrative non-fiction from South Africa.

The book's main insight is applying historical and theoretical approaches to interrogating non-fiction literary writing and techniques of using non-fiction traditions to understand processes of social transformation in post-conflict contexts. Critical tools of analysing non-fiction are offered to elaborate on how such works emerge as forms of encountering and representing the South African apartheid past on the one hand and, on the other, ways of inscribing South African modernity with the past. The non-fiction archive in contemporary South African literature, according to Twidle, "takes its place among a variety of global documentary traditions that refract moments of historical rupture or social reckoning." These are literary articulations which—through re-readings,

subversions, contradictions, reproductions, and textual echoes—depart from the master narrative depicted in public discourse. Three texts are offered as the bedrock from which contemporary South African documentary literary works draw inspiration. These are Solomon T. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like* (1978), and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). Twidle foregrounds these texts in his project of tracing a genealogy of South African narrative non-fiction. These and the current influx of non-fiction writings do not only elaborate ways of archiving and historicising experience in South Africa, but also illustrate writing that interprets the local idiom of witness narratives for a global audience.

The chapters in *Explorations with Truth* are woven together through tropes of confession, culpability and collaboration to corroborate Twidle's arguments about the role of life writing in exploring "truth." The preface and introduction provide a rationale for interrogating narrative non-fiction. Historical and theoretical approaches are introduced and expounded on and co-relations drawn to the fields of literary and cultural studies, historiography, and post-colonial theory. Twidle also problematises the debate about truth as reflected in fiction and nonfiction, and underscores the importance of utilising the imaginative mode to recall and archive the past. The discussion is reminiscent of American scholar Joseph Roach's exploration of memory and historicisation, of embodied forms of archiving experience, and "genealogies of performance."¹ Twidle's discussion here underscores the significance of using creative work to reimagine South Africa's past and future. More importantly, it draws attention to narratives of power, as well as colonial legacies and histories of representation, noting that these are integral to projects that seek to uncover truth.

The chapter on "Unusable Pasts" points to gaps in official South African historiography and opens the window into the politics of inclusion and exclusion surrounding the apartheid archive. Twidle argues convincingly that state-sponsored archives omitted certain historical figures and events from the national imaginary in order to advance the narrative of collective state experience. The author maintains that literary non-fiction in South Africa fills in the gaps in apartheid archives by making certain figures and events relevant and "archivable," re-imagining and re-presenting them and thereby elevating the relation between biography and social history. He elaborates this through the story of Demetrios Tsafendas, an assassin whose narrative is recorded in creative formations but conspicuously downplayed in official historiography and dominant national narratives. Three literary non-fiction scenarios are examined in detail to show how the texts reinsert the figure of Tsafendas in public consciousness. A close reading of the official government report of the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd, Henk van Woerden's biography titled *A Mouthful of Glass* (2000), and *Obscure White Messenger* (2010), a short film by Penny Siopis, reveals the author's assertion about how narrative non-

1 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

fiction might render the previously individualised unusable politically usable. His notion of historical recuperation underscores the argument about how the unusable past can be re-invented and used to advance the formation of a new democracy. The chapter anchors *Experiments with Truth* as a multi-layered exploration of textual inferences, demonstrating how non-fiction traditions invoke, re-imagine, and appropriate other archives in engaging with truth.

“Literatures of Betrayal” examines non-fictional texts that express a post-TRC aesthetic. These texts, the book indicates, emerge as a veiled comment on the South African post-transitional present. The analysis centres on memoirs and novellas in which the authors reflect on the history of political activism and betrayal, highlighting dramas of confession and complicity in these non-fiction archives of political resistance in the South African past. Hugh Lewin’s *Stones Against the Mirror* (2011) and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) are illustrative. Twidle highlights departures from the official historical archives that the texts depict. The rest of the chapter examines in detail the confessional narrative of “I Gave the Names” by Adrian Leftwich, specifically pointing out the complexities of coming to terms with culpability through the mode of life writing.

The next chapter investigates the project of nostalgia and remembrance in documenting truth. Borrowing Svetlana Boym’s notion of restorative and reflective nostalgia, Twidle proposes to analyse the role of nostalgia in Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009). Regrettably, the spark of the argument about the language of betrayal and its link to the narrativisation of nostalgia in Dlamini’s works dissipates, buried under a focus on the idioms and lexicon of global analogies. The discussion of the specificities of truth here is not compelling.

In the next chapters, the book interrogates the complex relationship between biographer and subject, and examines the ethics of life writing. Ronald Roberts’s *No Cold Kitchen* (2005) and Mark Gevisser’s *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (2007) are used for illustration. These biographical narratives are read as narratives of superabundance, specifically showing the construction and reconstruction of “truth” in reading and archiving the identity and lived experiences of Nadine Gordimer and Thabo Mbeki. *Experiments with Truth* thus shifts gears to demonstrate the process of producing biographical narratives, bringing out questions of narrative authority, narrative unreliability, and the limits of propriety in narrating the lives of others.

The question of narrative contrivances and ethical challenges in literary journalism is the subject of the next two chapters, both of which examine the writings of Jonny Steinberg. Here Twidle elaborates on the invention of truth and the deployment of creative abundance in certain forms of narrative practice. Steinberg’s *The Number* (2005), according to the author, demonstrates how a work of memory can combine creativity and social recollection—including legends and oral mythology—to echo the experience of political struggle in South Africa. These writings can be read as sub-cultural creative works that parallel the corpus of the South African prison book archive. Twidle also reads

the valences of fiction and non-fiction in Steinberg's other works, *Midlands* (2002) and *Three-Letter Plague* (2008). The analysis raises questions of narrative ownership, the consequences of tampering with the "real," and the quandaries of releasing information and maintaining confidentiality in journalistic writing.

Experiments with Truth concludes its exploration of South African non-fiction narrative with a discussion of the dialectic of self-assertion and self-negation in *Memoirs of a Born Free* (2014) and *Nobody's Business* (2014), two contemporary autobiographies produced by new-generation South African writers. The chapter brings to light the challenges of self-representation, identity construction, and meditations on the notion of reconciliation in the context of a democratic South Africa.

Extensive research has gone into this book, making it a compelling read about the archival processes of non-fiction narrative and how these can be metred against state-orchestrated processes of re-presenting democracy and nationhood. It will appeal to scholars and students of history, cultural studies, comparative literature, post-colonial theory, and literary studies on the post-colony.