



Experiments with truth: Narrative non-fiction and the coming of democracy in South Africa

by Hedley Twidle, Suffolk, Boydell & Brewer, 2019, 250 pp., \$99.00 USD (Hardback), ISBN 978-1-84701-188-6

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BOOK REVIEW

Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa, by Hedley Twidle, Suffolk, Boydell & Brewer, 2019, 265 pp., \$99.00 USD (Hardback), ISBN 978-1-84701-188-6

Hedley Twidle's *Experiments with Truth: Narrative Non-Fiction and the Coming of Democracy in South Africa* is the first monograph to offer a sustained analysis of post-apartheid narrative non-fiction. Twidle explores texts that grapple with the transition to democracy as an ongoing process rather than a finite event and that subvert dominant transitional or post-transitional narratives. In his words, he is drawn to "those works that seem to be in flight from, or writing their way out of, recognisable templates and pre-established narrative modes" (3). These texts address messy issues, such as betrayals and complicities, and their formal characteristics mirror their thematic messiness. They are characterized by a wide range of experimental features that resist straightforward readings.

Twidle himself is a writer of narrative non-fiction as well as a literary scholar, and his background as a creative writer shows through in the elegance of his writing, his sensitivity to tone and style, and his willingness to play in the messiness of unresolvability rather than pull the texts under discussion into neat conclusions. The result is a highly nuanced study that makes a valuable contribution to the fields of African literature and narrative non-fiction and, moreover, offers provocative insights for any literary scholar concerned with the politics and ethics of representation.

The introduction sets out three arguments:

1. There is a need for studies of non-fiction that center on literary form in ways that move beyond the fiction vs. non-fiction binary. Thus Twidle analyzes ways that non-fictions use forms typically seen as central to fiction, while at the same time he emphasizes the truth claims endemic to non-fiction.
2. The texts under discussion grapple with the past (and present) in ways that exceed and challenge dominant post-apartheid historiographic discourses.
3. Non-fiction always reflects relations of power, and South African non-fiction must be theorized in the context of the colonial project because colonial forms of knowledge production were used to justify and perpetuate political, economic, and social domination.

Each subsequent chapter analyzes a different constellation of texts (or case studies, to use Twidle's term). Chapter 2 explores representations of Demetrios Tsafendas, who killed Hendrik Verwoerd, prime minister and architect of apartheid, in 1966, but remained outside the liberation movement and was left out of most accounts of the anti-apartheid struggle. Tsafendas's life marks the first of many "unusable" histories at the center of this book: pasts that cannot be straightforwardly recuperated into culturally sanctioned memory (13). His history not only challenges the racial definitions that underpinned the apartheid regime but remains "recalcitrant to now-familiar narratives of struggle, liberation, truth, and reconciliation" (23).

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on narratives of betrayal, stories that insistently complicate “narrative templates premised on progression and closure” (49) and binary constructions of victim and perpetrator (an opposition that, as many critics note, limited the work of the TRC). As Twidle explains, to complicate such binaries is not to question the rightness or necessity of the anti-apartheid struggle, but to acknowledge that liberation fighters could also sometimes be perpetrators or betrayers, and that political struggles can be taken up for complex personal reasons.

With Chapters 5 and 6, Twidle turns to the biographies of two well-known figures: Ronald Suresh Roberts’s *No Cold Kitchen*, his de-authorized biography of Nadine Gordimer, and Mark Gevisser’s *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*. Here Twidle moves from “a poetics of absence and fragments – of microhistorical speculation and archival slivers” to “an aesthetic of excess and superabundance” (99). Both texts are huge volumes shaped by enormous research, but they also embody excess as they “exceed or overspill their immediate subjects and become coded discourses about other things,” particularly the roles and freedoms of the writer in the post-transitional period (100). For Twidle, the two books raise questions about what kinds of knowledge one can legitimately claim about another person’s life, particularly when writing across racial differences in a society that remains deeply divided.

Chapters 7 and 8 extend Twidle’s analysis of these questions through the lens of what American critics often call literary or narrative journalism: journalistic reportage that uses formal strategies typically associated with fiction. Here, Twidle focuses on Jonny Steinberg’s three early books, *Midlands*, *The Number*, and *Three Letter Plague*. By tracing the twin images of the writer as “confidence man”, “dealing too intimately and overpoweringly in the lives of others” (182), and as conned by the willful deceits and misdirections of his subjects, Twidle explores how histories of racism in South Africa limit the capacity of the writer to claim explanatory power over the issues they address – or even to develop relationships of trust and balance with the people they write about.

With Chapter 9, Twidle explores “the marked turn towards personal narrative within the activist moment” in contemporary South Africa (187). He analyzes the 2015 Ruth First Memorial Lectures of Panashe Chigumadzi and Sisonke Msimang (in collaboration with Lebogang Mashile) alongside memoirs by Thabo Jijana and Malaika wa Azania. Twidle suggests that validating displays of emotion that exceed conventional academic discourses serves as a way to subvert colonial practices of knowledge making. Last, an afterword, subtitled “The Extracurriculum,” describes the chapters that Twidle imagined or outlined but did not ultimately write, thus expanding the scope and inclusivity of the book and pointing towards a variety of generative directions for future scholarship.

If there is one lacuna in this book, it is the limited space allotted to women writers, particularly Black women – a point also made by Karina Szczurek in a *Sunday Times* review. Twidle is clearly well acquainted with the range of South African women’s writing, and he integrates references to women writers throughout the book, though outside of Chapter 9, they seldom form focal points. He is self-reflexive about this absence. In the afterword, describing a chapter he wanted to include on “radical Black feminist autobiography,” he discusses his unease about whether he could “meaningfully respond to or adjudicate on such registers of experience” (220). In deciding not to include the chapter, he weighs the conviction that the ethics of representation are not just about the racial background of the writer but the complexities of the narrative against the concern that in a society still riven by racial inequalities, a white male writer claiming a public platform to talk about the voices of people from different racial or gendered backgrounds can reify unequal power relations. Yet Twidle takes that risk in Chapter 9, analyzing personal

narratives by several Black female writers, which raises the question of why he is willing to do so there and not elsewhere. Ultimately, questions of who can and should speak about whom do not admit easy answers, and Twidle treats them carefully, too concerned with the complexities of the issues to reduce them to straightforward or dogmatic positions.

Experiments with Truth is a thought-provoking and nuanced book with impressive scope and depth. As Twidle navigates between “the imperatives of witness, testimony, and clarity” in non-fiction and the provocations offered by textual contradictions and unreliabilities (212), he refuses to reduce the texts under discussion to illustrative examples in a predetermined argument. Rather, he opens himself to their ability to unsettle pre-existing perceptions and interpretive frameworks. With this resistance to closure, Twidle’s monograph becomes a “risky” text, itself an embodiment of excess like the texts he analyzes. Its openness to risk, as it questions the conventional form of the academic monograph, is yet another strength of the book. All in all, *Experiments with Truth* is a must-read for scholars in South African literature and non-fiction studies.

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