

The Anthology as Patchwork Quilt

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Bettina Weiss (ed). 2004. *The End of Unheard Narratives: Contemporary Perspectives on Southern African Literatures*. Heidelberg: Kalliope Paperbacks.

Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac (eds). 2005. *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*. Harare: Weaver Press.

In her essay “‘How All Life is Lived, in Patches’: Quilting Metaphors in the Fiction of Yvonne Vera”, from *The End of Unheard Narratives*, Jessica Hemmings explores the ways in which Vera engages with the concept of quilting. The use of fabric and cloth in her novels is tied to notions of home and domesticity; on a visual level, a quilt exists as a whole image constructed of small, differently coloured squares that individually may not reveal the memories they contain but, positioned together according to the quilter’s design, collectively present a new meaning.

For the purposes of this review, the quilt metaphor works equally well. Two collections of essays – *The End of Unheard Narratives* and *Versions of Zimbabwe* – have been pieced together from separate fragments and each editor has worked as a quilter, choosing the pieces of cloth best suited to create the image in his or her head, thereby making a whole. Thus, it is necessary when reading these books to look at the ideology the editor is working out of, in order to understand the image he or she is trying to create. Bettina Weiss, the editor of *The End of Unheard Narratives*, received her PhD in the field of gender and body discourse in African women’s writing of southern Africa; while Robert Muponde, one of the editors of *Versions of Zimbabwe*, is a PhD fellow at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (his thesis explores the politics of childhood in Zimbabwean literature), and Ranka Primorac, the other editor, is a specialist in

Zimbabwean literature. Although both books deal with southern Africa literature, no immediate connections are apparent, the former being concerned with gender issues and the latter with the identity of a nation. Both books, however, deal with hidden narratives and alternative versions of the officially documented truth. Both feature the work of Yvonne Vera prominently.

The concept of Othering, a mainstay of postcolonial theory, is turned back on the postcolony in *The End of Unheard Narratives*, but the Othering that occurs is no longer between the West and Africa but rather between Africa and its concealed minorities. Mainstream culture in southern Africa dominates the social landscape and Others that which it does not understand. The essays in this book are united by the aim of moving the unheard narratives of southern African literature from the periphery to the centre. They explore issues relating to the concept of ‘female’ as well as the notion of family, nation and history, and they examine how preconceptions are upheld and how they can, in some cases, be subverted. Lizzy Attree explores how HIV/AIDS, and particularly its occurrence in the city, is translated into the literary. As the pandemic spreads, so those who suffer struggle to find a voice. The effects of HIV/AIDS will need to be even more extensively interrogated in the literature of South Africa – as has begun in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, among others – and in itself is a topic for many more books of criticism. Other subjects dealt with in this collection include the socio-homosexual experiences of black men as well homoerotic readings of black women’s desire.

In *Versions of Zimbabwe*, Robert Muponde questions the identity of the country where he was born. Criticising Zimbabwe, albeit from the safety of South Africa, he states that “the opposition, civil society activists and (what remains of) the independent media are courageously challenging the official version of Zimbabwe’s past, and ... what it is to be Zimbabwean” (www.thezimbabwean.co.uk). As Zimbabwe heads ever closer to the void, this timely collection seeks to examine (and undermine) the occasionally absurd images of Zimbabwe as constructed through Mugabe’s Ministry of Information. The essays consider the close relationship between literature, history and politics. Making the point that literature and culture cannot be understood separately from the social climate in which they are produced, this book provides insight into the current political crisis in Zimbabwe. While not an original idea in itself, this approach provides new ways of looking at Zimbabwean fiction, and through it a plurality of images can be

constructed. It is only through this multiplicity, contend Muponde and Primorac in their introduction, that a true vision of Zimbabwe can be seen. Essays deal with Zimbabwean fiction and poetry, focusing on authors Dambudzo Marechera, Alexandra Fuller and Yvonne Vera, alongside lesser-known writers, and they cover writing in Shona, Ndebele and English.

Connecting the two collections is an over-riding desire to dispel the currently hegemonic view of a region and to force the paradoxical realities of life in the postcolony to the forefront of public debate. Both collections provide solid and intriguing academic essays that are welcome additions to the quilt of southern African literature that they both interrogate and inform.