

Inhabiting the “New” South Africa: Ethical Encounters at the Race-Gender Interface in Four Post-Apartheid Novels by Zoë Wicomb, Sindiwe Magona, Nadine Gordimer and Farida Karodia  
Sonja Altnöder  
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Sonja Altnöder’s ambitious goal in *Inhabiting the “New” South Africa* is to provide a theoretically-grounded analysis of four very diverse post-apartheid texts—Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000), Sindiwe Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (1998), Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (2001) and Farida Karodia’s *Boundaries* (2003)—focusing on their textual (re)presentations of ethical encounters in racial and gendered contact zones of this newly democratic society. Underlying her study is the concept of “transdifference”—drawn from the work of Breinig and Lösch, as well as Feldmann and Habermann—which “does not discard notions of difference in favour of a notion of cultural synthesis, but instead regards difference as an indispensable, albeit inherently problematic, element in the cultural (re)production of South Africa’s post-apartheid time-space and its intrinsic processes of identity formation” (7-8). Utilizing transdifference as both a heuristic and evaluative category, Altnöder analyzes performances of cultural and gendered identity in the texts, and then proceeds to evaluate the “scope of transformation in the ‘new’ South Africa” (21) based on her readings of these four fictional works.

Altnöder’s introductory chapters include a thoughtful consideration of the implications of the idealistic epithets “Rainbow Nation” and “African Renaissance,” linked to a discussion of the persistence of racialized categories (especially in terms of South Africa’s “coloured” population) in a country actively “entangled in a process of negotiation which destabilises and transcends the increasingly overlapping boundary lines of racialised difference” (13). The performative nature of race and gender is stressed and linked to the “conceptual” and “transdifferent time-space” of the “new” South Africa (22). Unfortunately, Altnöder’s introduction to post-apartheid writing in Chapter Three remains far more limited than her overview of identity politics. After acknowledging that the literature of this new nation, with its diverse pre-existing history/ies (as well as literary history/ies), “constitutes a fraught and contested field,” she touches only briefly on heterogeneity, and refers in passing to the potentially divisive question of authenticity, or who “speaks” for post-apartheid South Africa (33). Similarly, Altnöder’s discussion of linguistic dominance and language use remains broad. She introduces the topic through Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s well-known pronouncements on colonial language,

followed by a few general statements from black South African writers on their social use of language(s), but includes no developed analysis of linguistic diversity or the implications of language choice in a nation with eleven official languages. And, problematically, the “lack of a reading culture” among black South Africans is referenced only through the words of Nadine Gordimer (34).

However, Altnöder’s textual analysis of the four selected novels demonstrates the validity of her potentially heavy-handed focus on, as her subtitle indicates, “ethical encounters at the race-gender interface.” Her discussion of *David’s Story* adds to previous studies of Wicomb’s novel in its insightful discussion of gender and gendered roles, as well as its focus on overlapping performances of “colouredness” and femininity. Magona’s *Mother to Mother*, problematically introduced as her “first, and so far only, work of fiction” (36) (*Push-Push! And Other Stories* was published in 1996, a year before *Mother to Mother*, and *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*, another collection of short stories, appeared in 2003), lends itself to a less nuanced analysis, however, and Altnöder identifies weaknesses in the novel’s intense use of pathos and its failed representation of a “dialogic relationship between the two mothers” (108). In contrast, Gordimer’s *The Pickup* is praised for its ambiguity, for the “intricate self-positioning of the narrator” and its “manifold—albeit subtle—overlappings of the level of narrative and story” (112). Lastly, Karodia’s *Boundaries*, as its title indicates, provides Altnöder with an intrinsically symbolic representation of change, “a symptomatic, fast-forward version of—and a critical commentary on—South Africa’s political, social and cultural transformation from apartheid to majority rule” (170). And, therein, lies a limitation of this study: Altnöder’s choice of texts which cover “different structural and experiential positioning within the paradigm RACE” (35) repeatedly draws attention to the subtlety of Wicomb’s and Gordimer’s novels, at the expense of Magona’s and Karodia’s less nuanced works. Moreover, the four texts are simplistically presented as representative of the “new” South Africa, depicting both the firmness of apartheid racial boundaries and the ability of these boundaries “to be at least temporarily discarded in favour of non-racialism” (209). In her final comparison, Altnöder identifies a fairly tidy chronological development in the texts “from the predominant influence of racial hierarchies towards the symptomatic persistence of racial boundary lines in an otherwise transdifferent time-space” (209)—yet this seems somewhat at odds with her aim to provide “a kaleidoscopic impression of often-contradictory ways of inhabiting the Rainbow Nation” (6).

Altnöder’s study, written from—in her words—the “subjective” and “partly-involved perspective” of an outsider who lived for a year in South Africa (5), is characterized by an appealing optimism and, in spite of its limitations, provides a sensitive reading of her chosen texts. *Inhabiting the “New” South Africa* contributes to the growing body of critical work on post-apartheid writing, and demonstrates the validity of an ethically-based

and ethically-focused analysis of texts which explore intersections of race and gender.