



**Sue Kossew.** *Writing Woman, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction.* New York: Routledge, 2003. 240 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-28649-7.

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## South African & Australian Fiction Today

Sue Kossew's *Writing Woman, Writing Place* is the tenth volume published in the Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures series. Consequently, its critical framework draws openly on postcolonial criticism, combining it with detailed reference to feminist theory. Methodologically, the work is premised on a comparative approach to its examination of a wide range of literary texts by South African and Australian women writers.

The strength of Kossew's book lies especially in her detailed, rich, and thoughtful readings of the selected works. *Writing Woman, Writing Place* takes a critically rigorous approach and offers meticulous attention to the possibilities that emerge at the crossover of colonial and postcolonial identity formation, especially as this relates to place, space, time, and, crucially, gender; thus the book relies on the work of contemporary critics studying the confluence between postcolonialism and feminism, notably Gillian Whitlock, Sarah Nuttall, and Susan Sheridan. These writers in various ways contribute to Kossew's critical template, combining complex historiography and close textual analysis of a body of writing by white Australian and South African women.

Starting by asserting that it has been suggested that it is deeply unfashionable to engage with the notion of the settler subject, a view that she borrows from Whitlock (*The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* [2000]), Kossew aims to undertake precisely such a task (p. 1). This, she argues, is especially relevant in

the context of the ways in which such unsettled settlers (in J. M. Coetzee's memorable phrase) inscribe, through their literary practices, their shifting and ambivalent identities and subjectivities, illuminating as it does the complex nature of resistance, complicity and representation (p. 1). She aims thus to explore the position within settler identities of the white or post-colonising woman who can be seen to have an in-between subjectivity, often caught between masculinist discourses of nationalism and a kind of maternal role involving compassion and reconciliation (p. 1). In so doing, Kossew seeks to negotiate the above theoretical minefield by situating her study on the faultlines where tensions and collusions between sex, race and nation become visible, words that she quotes from Sheridan's influential work, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race, and Nation in Australian Women's Writing, 1880s-1930s* (1995) (p. 1).

Part 1, which focuses on Australian writing, begins with an examination of the multiple rewriting of one of Australia's best-known short stories, Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife,' and includes discussions of novels by Kate Grenville, Eva Sallis, Thea Astley, Gillian Mears, Jo Dutton, and Heather Grace. Central to much of the work of these writers is a conscious, politically motivated, writing back or responding to work by male and/or colonial authors, foregrounding, therefore, the distinctly political dimension of much work by white

Australian and South African women. That in many of these cases the revisionist work produced by settler subjects is anything but unproblematic only underlines the difficulty of being postcolonial in the settler colony. Hence, Kossew carefully qualifies the use of postcolonial criticism, reflecting a level of trepidation that remains wise in this context and perhaps even more so in the case of work by white South African authors.

Part 2 of the study examines writing by South Africans Nadine Gordimer, Mānan du Plessis, Anne Landsman, Elleke Boehmer, Anne Harries, and Gillian Slovo. As in the earlier section, the focus here is on the many and varied ways in which these writers have engaged with South Africa's brutal and complex history, and Kossew analyzes specifically how the selected novels participate in a process of rethinking the past in an effort to make the present and future different. At the heart of the work of most of these novelists is a clear desire to use storytelling as a means to rewrite both the collective narrative of the South African nation and the writers' own place within that society. As Kossew shows, fiction by white South Africans occupies a particularly fraught position, often seriously and unfairly limiting the nature of the responses they generate. That as readers and critics our focus on so many of these novels privileges a political rather than an aesthetic approach is a sad but understandable reflection on the position they occupy in South African literature. Kossew thus is rightly cautious about the risks that inflect settler subjectivities, framing her reading of the various works within what might be defined as a "self-conscious postcoloniality." As Rosemary Jolly has said of the politics of production and consumption that circumscribe South African art and culture: "Resistance, then, is not a quality inherent in a cultural product but rather an effect of the process of that product's creation and reception."<sup>[1]</sup>

After all, white people in South Africa and Australia have stories to tell, and a right to tell them, but it is wise to see their concern with the other as a rather obvious concern with the self. Kossew's reading of Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1984) comes closest to elaborating on this aspect, though she could have extended this analysis to her examination of all the selected works. The world has turned in many different ways, yet hardly for South African literature; the white story remains by far the most popular narrative coming out of Africa, and literary output by black and white South African authors proves the point. R. Neville Choonoo's comments, written way back in 1991 in a review of Albie Sachs's autobiography, still are uncannily topical: "Suffice it to say

that black South African writers in South Africa today are less likely to command attention in places like London or New York as have writers like Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Donald Woods, André Brink, John Coetzee, Christopher Hope, Rian Malan, and Albie Sachs himself."<sup>[2]</sup>

In a concluding part 3, entitled "Beyond the National," Kossew juxtaposes two novels by Gordimer and Sallis, *The Pickup* (2001) and *The City of Sealions* (2002) respectively. In an interesting reversal of the way in which the rest of the book is organized, here the South African text is examined first, something that I note because it highlights an issue at play throughout the study. Although Kossew is clear about the desire to compare writing from two different yet similar locations, ultimately the readings she undertakes exist apart from each other. The comparative element often is best elucidated within the specific body of Australian writing (as in a brilliant examination of the various responses to Lawson's text) or in the context of each South African text's place within a larger body of national writing. Yet, as a reader familiar with both literatures and both societies, I wanted to see explicated the loud and visually aggressive aspects that link Australia and (white) South Africa. In words that Kossew quotes early in the study, I wanted to read about the shared ways in which Coetzee's "unsettled settlers" negotiate their self-interested anxieties of belonging, their more or less permanent dislocation, and their inability to face up to the past (p. 1). The recent apologies to Aboriginal peoples in Australia and Canada are significant illustrations of this process, but even then they vary greatly. Canada's apology will involve monetary compensation, while in Australia the whole process is premised on an expectation that Aboriginal Australians will settle for a discursive and affective resolution to their dispossession. As for South Africa, and speaking with what might strike some as the comfortable insight of the outsider, it seems to me that most white people are dealing with the past by getting on a plane out of the country or getting on with life behind the high walls of their domains. The past (and I guess the future) is indeed a foreign country.

Significantly, then, the world in which Kossew's book was born differs considerably from the post-John Howard era in Australia and a South Africa approaching the end of Thabo Mbeki's era. Yet, one thing that *Writing Woman, Writing Place* makes especially obvious today is the persistence of whiteness in contemporary postcolonial writing. The irony is that while in her study she is up front about the way the work addresses "White women's

words, a four and half years later the bulk of fiction being published in Australia and South Africa remains in the hands of white people (p. 7). Unsettled subjectivities they may be, but they are neither short of the means to express that experience nor short of access to publication outlets to circulate it. Neither Kossew nor her book is responsible for this state of affairs, of course, and I note it here merely to highlight the ongoing seduction and staying power of the story of whiteness in the postcolonial moment. In *Writing Woman, Writing Place*, Kossew offers an important contribution to an understanding of these complex and fluid processes.

#### Notes

[1]. Rosemary Jolly, *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996), 19.

[2]. R. Neville Choonoo, "So This is What It's Like," review of *Running from Maputo*, by Albie Sachs, *Tran-*

*sition*, 51 (1991): 252-255, quotation on 255. Choonoo's words remain an important comment on the acclaim bestowed on all of the above writers while the Apartheid regime lasted (see, inter alia, Jolly, *Colonization, Violence, and Narration*; Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Laura Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism, and Transnationalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). Although it is important not to exaggerate the reaction to the award to Coetzee of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, some of it may in effect be attributed to a perception that yet again it was the white man's response to the African continent that the committee rewarded. In this sense it is interesting to note that in its citation for the award the Nobel Prize Committee commended Coetzee as a writer "who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider." (Nobel Foundation, Nobel Prize.org, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/index.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/index.html).)

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