
BOOK REVIEW

Experiments in Freedom: Explorations of Identity in New South African Drama, New Edition, Anton Krueger (author), (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 245 pp., \$59.99.

This book is a study of post-apartheid identity formation through an analysis of South African drama. Anton Krueger, a playwright and academic, looks at about a dozen plays written in English and produced between 1994 and 2004. The book is 231 pages and is divided into seven parts and subdivided into 28 chapters of varying lengths. The book's stated intention in its introduction is to "examine a number of play texts as cultural signs" (xiii) in the interest of analyzing their potential as a site and an agent of cultural transformation.

In Part I: Exploring Identity, the author identifies his theoretical approach, which he reluctantly describes as postmodern. Krueger seeks to examine how the concept of freedom has shifted categories and by-ways of belonging by looking at characters and characterization in contemporary drama. He argues that while South Africans have achieved a unified political identity, the freedom to experiment, question, and reinvent has meant there is no totalizing conception of a South African cultural identity. Broadly defining identity within his text as "the way in which a person or a collective has been framed" (45), Krueger proposes to examine the different frames through which people view their identity in a post-apartheid context. He states that he will examine

multiple overlapping micro-narratives in four broad areas of investigation: gender, political affiliation, ethnicity and syncretism.

Part II, *Gendered Identities*, focuses on issues of masculinity and exile in plays by the three South African playwrights Athol Fugard, Anthony Akerman, and Zakes Mda. Kruger briefly deconstructs essentialist conceptions of masculinity that tie gender exclusively to sex, and states that masculinity can be better described in terms of display. While Kruger notes a variety of behaviors that his selected playwrights associate with masculine concerns, including “freedom from restraint”, all three consistently create a relationship between masculinity and the notion of the homeland, which is repeated personified as female, as the motherland. They examine it from a negative perspective, as masculinity lost through exile (Van der Bijl in *The Bells of Amersfoort*, 2002). Kruger argues that this is because white male identification in particular, challenged by the end of apartheid, is now revealing its lack of legitimacy as a durable form of identity construction.

Part III, *Anti-Apartheid Identities*, is a short section which examines the replacement of agit-prop and protest theater, plays that demand freedom, with political plays that make an appeal for transformation after freedom has been achieved. Kruger looks specifically at plays written in response to the TRC, and uses Jane Taylor’s play *Ubu and the Truth Commission* as his primary example. Taylor’s fraught portrayal of the character Pa Ubu as an apartheid enforcer who ironically claims no agency in the violence because he was only an ‘agent’ of the state asks whether these measures of reconciliation, aimed at translating the experiences of the

victim to the perpetrator, and vice versa, are effective. Krueger concludes that the TRC may be read as an attempt to “will a new country into existence, rather than restore a country which has been lost.” (109)

Part IV, Ethnic Identities and Part VI, Racial Identities, deal with similar material and take a similar approach; both delineate how identity in terms of an ethnic collective is premised on laws of exclusion, and ask in what ways South African theater may liberate itself from “the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination” (114). Part IV aims to challenge the viability of writing purely from a single ethnic or nationalist perspective through an examination of Greig Coetzee’s *Happy Natives* (2003). In Coetzee’s play, two actors play eight different characters whose attempts to freely affirm their own individual identities are in conflict with their sense of belonging to particular groups. While Krueger notes that Coetzee presents contrasts in terms of a wide variety of identity structures, including young and old, educated and uneducated, poor and rich, etc, he ultimately admits that the contrast of “black and white” identities emerges most vividly because, while each actor plays multiple roles, the black actor only plays black characters, and the white actor only plays white characters (125).

The author states that he hopes to avoid talking directly about race, which he considers an outmoded designation belonging to the science of eugenics; however, his acknowledgement in Part IV that perceptions of identity are still largely tied to skin colour, even in a free society, seems to have necessitated his inclusion of a later section on racial identities that goes beyond the scope of themes identified in his introduction. This leads the reader to conclude that

Krueger, over the course of his study, found that while questions of racial designation did not fit his desired analytical paradigm (which seeks to examine and support progressive modes of identity-building in new theater) it could not be avoided entirely in a survey of contemporary South African theater. Thus, Part VI attempts to provide examples in which a performance of “race” (if such a performance is even possible) can provide a critical space for the re-conceptualization of identity. Krueger suggests that *Inter-racial*, a play by Mpumelelo Paul Grooboom (2005) incorporates and challenges the question of ethnic and specifically racial categorization through the use of parody. Inter-Racial parodies both

Part V, *Syncretic Identities*, is denoted by the author as the most promising frame of identity formation. Krueger characterizes syncretic plays as works that do not struggle with identity, but freely construct it through a pastiche of both European and African cultural elements, eschewing the “peeping tom” mentality of mimetic realism for a more fantastical presentation not of what is but of what could be. Focusing primarily on the works of Brett Bailey and Reza de Wet, Krueger examines how both authors forge identity in terms of an amalgamation and fusion of cultural resources—Bailey through a leap into Xhosa spirituality, and de Wet through a depiction of the Afrikaner identity as a Euro-African hybrid.

To a certain extent, however, Part V sits uneasily with the rest of the study. There are several reasons for this. The first is that Krueger’s approach to the plays in previous sections revolved around the delineation of identities embodied in and performed by specific characters. Here,

characters take a backseat in Krueger's analysis, which begins to foreground elements such as narrative and presentation. He examines how, for example, Brett Bailey has innovated modes of performance, from his use of theater in the round to his sacrifice of a chicken onstage. Secondly, Krueger notes that a "syncretic" approach is characteristic of plays by white authors, while coloured, black, and Indian playwrights have generally focused on reclaiming previously disenfranchised racial identities. (204). While a syncretic approach may be the most promising of the modes adopted among white playwrights (who are, with the exception of Zakes Mda, the only playwrights Krueger focuses on in his study) the author is forced to admit that syncretism as a category of self-identification is no more or less inclusive than the other categories he has outlined.

Krueger states in his concluding section, in a chapter entitled "Accepting the paradox: learning to let go" that his original goal in the study, which was to look at the ways in which the freedom of the post-apartheid era had opened up performance in South African drama, has shifted. He acknowledges that, over the course of his investigation, he increasingly found the more imperative issue in post-apartheid drama to be the way in which authors, and their characters, continued to struggle with the types of identities delineated by the apartheid state. It appears that despite the best intentions of the author, South Africans in the plays under study have not yet innovated approaches to identity that transcend categories created by the past fifty years of racial conflict.

Anton Krueger's study of identity through the lens of post-apartheid plays is a welcome addition to the field of

cultural and performance studies. His thorough survey of themes in post-apartheid drama provides a multiplicity of approaches to the problematic concept of “freedom” in a South African context. However, certain aspects of the book are problematic. Krueger’s assertion that the play is an ideal space to challenge old categories of South African identities and re-conceptualize new ones is weakened by his admission that plays continue to be seen exclusively by a middle class (and primarily white) audience. Additionally, aspects of Krueger’s work make the book a difficult read for researchers hoping to glean a diachronic understanding of playwriting and its relationship to the political in a South African context. Because the author does not address plays made earlier than 1980, it is difficult to get a sense of how much South African drama has changed, and to what degree the post-apartheid period may be described as particularly innovative. Krueger’s book, which is more of a synchronic assessment of the viability of certain themes and approaches to theater, would prove more useful to students of contemporary drama.

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