

ON WRITING *ENTANGLEMENT*

Sarah Nuttall

(University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg)

Reflecting on a seven year quest to write a history of the South African present from Johannesburg (to write the now, from here), Sarah Nuttall ventures beyond the safety of difference, the easy control of the academic voice, and the comfortable negative subject position of much intellectual critique. She finds herself engaging entanglement and elusivity through creative non-fiction.

After writing a book, and with the passing of time, one begins to see, sometimes more clearly than during its writing, its autobiographical subtexts, its wider intellectual currents, its political dimensions. Seeing these things makes the project more interesting, to me, in some ways. It's probably important to start with the fact that the essays in *Entanglement: Literary and cultural reflections on post-apartheid* were written between the years 2001-2007. It's also worth noting that in these years I published three other books: *Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*; *At Risk: Writing On and Over the Edge of South Africa*; and *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. These were years that were very compelling and powerful to me. I got a job at the newly formed WISER, which gave me the chance to do no teaching apart from graduate supervision and to write – I saw an opening, an open road, and I took it. I came to Johannesburg, having been in Cape Town for three years and in Oxford before that. I would drive and drive through the city, with Achille, who had come



"Earth Book"

Photo: courtesy Paul Marais

to WISER too. He came from somewhere else, but from this continent (via Paris and New York); we were free to roam around Johannesburg, to drive it and test out ideas about it in ways not insignificant to my work during this time.

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I wanted to write from a place, in a language that I felt I could live by, and which seemed to me truer

than the received wisdoms of post-colonial studies in particular and, sometimes, the narrowness of South African academic accounts. In Oxford, I was schooled in post-colonial theory. From there, it seemed to make sense, as a way of thinking politically, when looking at Africa, at South Africa even. From here, it has become increasingly incoherent to me as a way of explaining a place like Johannesburg. Still, when I go to England, I can see how to slip back into a post-colonial view of the 'margins'; of a kind of agency accorded to victims that seldom allows us to explore their complex, even ugly sides (a sort of half-human agency), a need to assert people from elsewhere's right to their strategies of resistance and their 'difference' and so on. Of course, one needs to become preoccupied by a politics and language of difference when one lives in a largely white space, if one is to inhabit a certain kind of ethical selfhood.

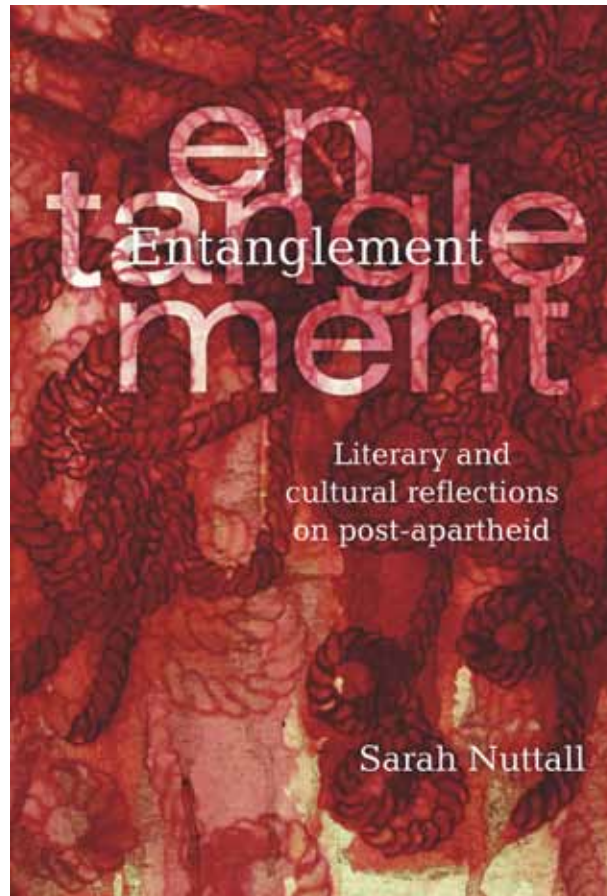
Living in Johannesburg, one is actively trying to build something – and actively trying to find a future. Not just that – the terms on which we live are different. We live across multiple registers of the social, the racial, the spatial – including ongoing racism, re-segregation, but also the contemporary forms of an historical legacy which are often left unwritten or disregarded – those of overlap, mixture, intimacy, crossing-over. So at a certain level it seems to me unfortunate and unproductive to confine ourselves to only repeating the terms of our difference. What seems to me equally worthwhile is to dig deep into our history and psyches and find forms and moments of mutuality from which we can begin to build something. It is not insignificant to me that this is what happened in the US. That out of the ruins of the Bush era, Obama went back in, deeper, to find the resources to move forward, to move out into a

newer place that was in fact latent in American society but had not been given a name – either for quite some time, or perhaps never.

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Mine is not a liberal position or politics. I write with an awareness of the limitations of that discredited ideology. At the same time, it may be worth considering in as undefensive way as possible that where nationalism has blatantly failed to offer us a language of mutuality, we might look to the resources of liberalism on that particular score. It is quite possible to do this while rejecting the more squeamish, self-satisfied and anachronistic elements of that larger ideological history.

Finding the resources for mapping some form of mutuality is something I've wanted to approach boldly and cautiously at the same time. I have wanted to be, and have been in my work, attentive to experiences of ongoing violence and confrontation in this country. Of course, too, I see and want to work at the limits of a notion of entanglement – no theory is encompassing: it is a means of alerting ourselves to forgotten routes, neglected, or not taken, in the way we think about ourselves both now and then. 'Entanglement', I say in the introduction, 'is a condition of being twisted together or entwined; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or a set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness'.



Cover of *Entanglement: Literary and cultural reflections on post-apartheid*.

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'Entanglement ... is a condition of being twisted together or entwined; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited.'

An important precursor to the book is Mark Sanders' *Complicities*. That too was a book concerned with the 'after apartheid', with a reading strategy that is

not 'merely oppositional', which projects itself beyond apartheid, beyond apartness as such. Sanders' book, though, focuses almost entirely on the apartheid period, and texts written in that time (although he does have a short final section on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). I try to write from 'the now', and from here. Secondly, because I'm interested in tracking things up close – in the history of the present – I find myself being alert to anachronism (one of the reasons I find youth cultures interesting) – to modes of enquiry that have fallen behind the way things are actually happening

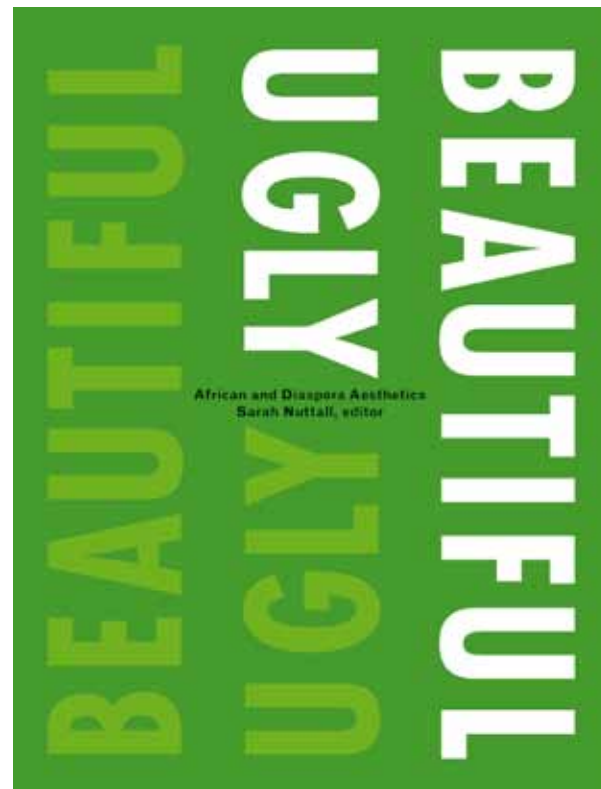
So the book was written in the years that I mentioned above. In it I say I am looking for that which remains latent in our usual accounts, a critical underneath or sub-terrain. The two volumes of creative non-fiction that I edited with Liz McGregor, *At Risk* and its sequel *Load Shedding*, become further sub-terrains in relation to *Entanglement*. These are places to drop the academic voice and submerge oneself in the personal. In my story for *At Risk* I talk about having and losing a child, and of getting married, through these years. I completely abandon one voice, and go for another. I love to be able to begin to speak in these very different registers, to discover very different sorts of voices that one can use to say something in the world. In these pieces, I can go into darker places than I feel I want to do in my academic work. I've tried to explain why. For me, there is a sometimes overwhelming negativity (endlessly bearing witness to the differences of class, race and gender) to academic work in the humanities, as if any other subject position, or point of analysis, is woefully naïve. Of course there are important exceptions. So I distrust that persistent voice in academic work (which is a different point from wanting



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to write and think about despair, say, or the radical contradictoriness, or velocity, of this place, veering between innovation and inertia, loss, violence and xenophobia as well as experimentation and desegregation). It's not entirely that deliberate though – writing stories, even non-fiction stories – takes you into places you might not have expected; makes you speak in voices that were not the ones you might have planned.

My story in *Load Shedding* is about a psychic descent into a set of hard places, a sense of something



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having passed (an era, a personal timescape, a generation, being young), quite clear and exact at times and at other times fuzzy. But it's also about being me in this city. Going up and down; feeling kind and then angry; feeling that other people are kind and then angry; confused and then clear; looking now, when I never did before, for 'ways of staying', to use Kevin Bloom's phrase. It's not a final verdict, it's about that year, 2008, and its radical uncertainties.

How does this story entangle with *Entanglement* and *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*? In some ways its title tries to say some of that. I love

you, I hate you – I am part of you but you are very cruel to me, I love you so much that if you were lost, I wouldn't be able to...? I make an alternative world, in this place but not in this place; I make an idea of myself inside of a larger story that is mine but also not mine. These are the languages of the personal but also of place; of an immense wrestling with a love of place; of wanting to name it as it is, to find a language for it that is not that of the foreign correspondent, the ex-South African, the walled-in white South African, the blinkered black South African; something that's mine or at least makes sense to me, and that my children can live by, a language, a manner of being, a place.