CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | Performing post-apartheid feeling: A review of Wayward Feeling: audio-visual culture and aesthetic activism in post-rainbow South Africa by Helene Strauss, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2022 |
| Authors | Thomas, Kylie |
| Publication date | 2024-06-18 |
| Original Citation | Thomas, K. (2024) 'Performing post-apartheid feeling: A review of Wayward Feeling: audio-visual culture and aesthetic activism in post-rainbow South Africa: by Helene Strauss, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2022', Critical Arts, 38(4–5), pp. 259–260pp. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2024.2364664 |
| Type of publication | Article (peer-reviewed) |
| Link to publisher's version | 10.1080/02560046.2024.2364664 |
| Rights | © 2024, Kylie Thomas. Published by Taylor & Francis. All rights reserved. This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book review published by Taylor & Francis in on 18 June 2024, available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2024.2364664 |
| Download date | 2026-11-15 16:18:54 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16228 |



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

# Performing Post-apartheid Feeling: A Review of *Wayward Feeling: Audio-Visual Culture and Aesthetic Activism in Post-Rainbow South Africa* by Helene Strauss

This is an author's manuscript. The published text can be accessed here:

Thomas, K. (2024). Performing post-apartheid feeling: A review of *Wayward Feeling: audio-visual culture and aesthetic activism in post-rainbow South Africa*: by Helene Strauss, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2022. *Critical Arts*, 1–2. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2024.2364664

In *Wayward Feeling: Audio-Visual Culture and Aesthetic Activism in Post-Rainbow South Africa*, cultural theorist and literary scholar Helene Strauss focuses on how "political emotions that surge unpredictably across the social", result not only in melancholic paralysis, but animate resistance and multiple forms of aesthetic activism (5). Through tracing what she terms "wayward feelings" – complex, unwieldy, affective responses to the post-apartheid present – and how they are made manifest and mediated through the work of artists, activists, writers, and filmmakers, Strauss provides a seismographic reading of the present.

The book argues for paying close attention to how "aesthetics calls forth an enlivening of the senses that makes us responsive to the social and material worlds we inhabit" (11). Across five chapters, Strauss deftly brings the analyses of feminist, queer and decolonial thinkers into conversation with the work of key contemporary South African artists, including Zanele Muholi, Berni Searle, and Gabrielle Goliath, and considers the work of writers and filmmakers, including Miriam Tlali, Sarah Chu, Evelyn Maruping and Rehad Desai. *Wayward Feeling* is not an easy read, and this is less because it is a text dense with scholarly references, than because it charts a path through many of the most traumatic aspects of post-apartheid life. The book centres on the "spectacles of disappointment" (33) that punctuate the roughly fifteen-year-period Strauss considers, and the ongoing structural, state-sanctioned, and interpersonal forms of violence that have defined this time. In concurrence with numerous other feminist scholars, Strauss identifies the 2006 rape trial of Jacob Zuma, who served as Deputy President from 1999-2005, and who, after his acquittal, was elected as President in 2009, as a "watershed moment" that signaled the end of the "rainbow anaesthesia" that infused the body politic at the time of the transition to democracy (33).[1] While Strauss does not focus on the effects of state-sanctioned AIDS-denialism and the catastrophic policies regarding treatment for people living with HIV implemented during Thabo Mbeki's presidency, it is perhaps worth noting how this too delivered a profound blow to post-apartheid optimism.

The book focuses on the performative politics that characterizes South African public life, and explores the points where protest and performance meet. In some cases, this aligns with the intentions of the practitioners, such as Zanele Muholi, who has deliberately taken

[1] For other critical readings of the trial, see Mmatshilo, 2007; Gqola, 2015; and Thlabi, 2017.

up the title, “visual activist”, and who has transformed art gallery spaces into sites of protest. Other instances, such as the case of Chumani Maxwele’s act of throwing excrement from a bucket toilet onto the statue of colonist Cecil John Rhodes to protest the stark inequality and structural violence that defines life in the city of Cape Town, occupy a more awkward position in relation to “aesthetic production” (123). In “Feeling the Fall”, a chapter that focuses on the large-scale student-led protests that took place across the country in 2015-16, Strauss reads Maxwele’s actions alongside the performance staged by Sethembile Msezane on the day that the statue of Rhodes was removed from the University of Cape Town campus. For her, both acts can be understood as “performance” (136) and as “aesthetic activism” (137) in which art and protest are intertwined. The question of Msezane’s position as an artist, who is not only engaged in protest, but in making work that will later be exhibited and sold, and how this both connects to and is distinct from the myriad quotidian forms of protest *qua* protest is left unasked, but Strauss’ analysis brings it to the surface. Her text prompts reflection on how staking a successful claim on political visibility in the hypermediated clamor of today depends, at least in part, on the staging, recording and circulation of forms of “aesthetic mediation and transmission” (113).

While *Wayward Feeling* makes a cogent argument for the significance of the affective force of audio-visual activist-aesthetic forms and their potential for shaping and channeling public feeling, Strauss is careful not to overstate their “transformative political capacities” (108). At the same time, she draws our attention to how a film like Rehad Desai’s *Miners Shot Down*, which documents the events of the Marikana Massacre in 2012, can be understood to have “fuelled the growth of a counterpublic sphere within which outrage about post-rainbow structural injustice came to find activist expression” (110).

Strauss is also concerned with forms of commemorative activism, and in the last chapter, “Feminist Resonance”, she turns to the painful, blood-soaked terrain that is the crisis of sexual violence and femicide in South Africa. In this chapter she returns to the “watershed” moment of the Jacob Zuma rape trial through an account of the silent protest staged by four activists ten years after the trial. In 2016, as the President delivered a public address to mark the end of the municipal elections, Simamkele Dlakavu, Naledi Chirwa, Amanda Mavuso and Tinyiko Shikwambane, held up posters to “Remember Khwezi”, enacting a powerful condemnation of Zuma. Strauss connects their intervention to the work of artist Gabrielle Goliath, who has created a series of installations and performances that seek to convey the effects of sexual violence and that commemorate those who have been raped and murdered. Strauss observes how Goliath’s interventions bring audiences into close proximity to the traumatic experiences they portray, simultaneously marking and dissolving the boundaries between those who bear witness and those who have been raped and killed. In this way, Strauss notes, “These works thus make significant emotional and ethical demands on their audiences, placing them in a relational space with the survivors, the deceased, and a community of mourners” (160-1). Strauss’ careful readings of Goliath’s

work serve as a form of mournful repetition. Through her detailed contextualization of the works she discusses, Strauss asks us not to move quickly on to the next episode, but to pause and reflect. In many ways this insistence on deceleration, one that runs counter to the high-speed amnesia of the post-apartheid everyday, is a painful task, but *Wayward Feeling* is intent on holding our focus. The book takes its place alongside the audio-visual artists and activists Strauss so admires for demanding "forms of resonant listening" and is itself an exemplary "project of feminist dedication and care" (171).

**References:**

Gqola, Pumla Dineo. *Rape: A South African Nightmare*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015.

Motsei, Mmatshilo. *The Kanga and the Kangaroo Court: The Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007.

Thlabi, Redi. *Khwezi: the remarkable story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo*. Jonathan Ball, 2017

Kylie Thomas
Radical Humanities Laboratory & History of Art, University College Cork, Ireland
& NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, the Netherlands