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[Book Review] Unfolding narratives of Ubuntu in Southern Africa (edited by Julian Müller, John Eliastam and Sheila Trahar)

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How to cite:

Buckler, Alison and Mkwananzi, Faith (2020). [Book Review] Unfolding narratives of Ubuntu in Southern Africa (edited by Julian Müller, John Eliastam and Sheila Trahar). *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 50(1) pp. 150–152.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/03057925.2019.1585659>

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Book review for Compare

Title of book, *Unfolding narratives of Ubuntu in Southern Africa*

Authors, Julian Müller, John Eliastam and Sheila Trahar (Editors)

Date, 2019

Place of publication, Publisher, UK, Routledge

Price, £115 (hard copy), £31.98 (Kindle edition)

Number of pages pp. 132

ISBN: 1138483095

‘Unfolding narratives’ is a provocative, moving and memorable attempt to express the dynamic and competing ways in which the concept of Ubuntu is understood, politicised and lived by in Southern Africa. An outcome of a three-year study exploring the relationship between Ubuntu and development, the book is distinct in its use of fiction as a literary device to communicate the complexity of the findings.

It tells the story of the proposed demolition of a cemetery in a fictional South African town called Ubuntuville. The cemetery is a large tract of land between the town and the township. To the authorities, it symbolises the blueprint of apartheid. To the people whose lives are based around and within the cemetery, it is much more complex. A white engineer, Joel, has been sent by the mayor to inform the community that construction workers will be arriving the next day. The community convinces Joel to delay the demolition and spend a year with them to learn the importance of the cemetery in their lives, how it connects ‘the dead and the living, as well as enabling the living to connect with each other’ (p.103).

Each chapter explains the cemetery’s - and therefore Ubuntu’s - significance from the perspective of a different community member. Identities are protected through the storified approach, but the authors stress that the stories are based on research findings. These findings cut across themes of nationality, race, ethnicity, xenophobia, social class, gender, language, religion and spirituality, age, migration, nepotism, nature, violence, love, education, disability, politics, economics and poverty to highlight the ubiquitousness of Ubuntu. Joel attempts to find common ground as he navigates individual interpretations.

So, somewhat challengingly, given our word limit, this review reflects briefly on the contribution ‘Unfolding narratives’ makes to a wider understanding of Ubuntu, and also on the potential of the fictional space for the field of international and comparative education.

A strength, more apparent on the second reading, is how the careful crafting of chapters illustrates the interaction between characters’ lives: while the stories can be read independently, the book is greater than the sum of its parts. This narrative demonstration of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through persons) highlights how individuals tap into a contextual cosmivision which is relational and community-facing. Chapter 7 (A multicultural community) in particular emphasises that there are no outsiders in practising humanness, rather that co-existence in reciprocal compassion underpins the ongoing process of self-realisation. Chapter 5 (*Na bo nga bantu...* they too are human) is gripping as it recounts one man’s journey towards compassion, challenging the reader to understand his need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Chapter 6 (The outsider) demonstrates how this interpretation can be tested and twisted - with tragic consequences - when resources and opportunities are threatened.

Ubuntu, therefore, is presented primarily as a theory of resistance to, or strategy for coping with poverty and oppression; there is less of a focus on how it manifests in times of peace and accord. Indeed, chapter 11 (Lost) suggests the nostalgic view of Ubuntu has less relevance today, but its embodiment in contemporary politics is essential, particularly the consultation and inclusion processes of those not in power in deciding what matters, and for whom. This highlighted the absence of the wealthier population on the other side of the cemetery. Would their stories stand in solidarity with the cause? Are they considered to be powerful, or not?

The case for using fiction is set out in the introductory chapters. The editors are sensitive to the potential apprehension of readers (and honest about their own ‘scary’ (p.12) journey towards the decision to write in this way) but propose several advantages: from anonymity and enhanced access to sensitive topics, to communicating the ‘entanglement of experience and theory’ (p.12), to making research more accessible to those not in academia, to creating ‘possibilities for a more authentic and interesting relationship between the researcher and co-researchers when they are brought together in a fictional world’ (p.19).

As such, we assume that the careful crafting makes a further metaphoric point about knowledge co-construction, although more information about the methodology – the process of how the stories were constructed and with whom - would make the book more helpful for those interested in incorporating fictional elements in their own work. Who, for example, are the co-researchers and how much input did they have into the authoring? Without knowing this, it is somewhat unclear how you are supposed to ‘read’ and ‘use’ the texts. We know it ‘does not claim to be an objective piece of scholarly work’ (p.20), and yet we are reading it within an academic space, and for an academic journal. On the other hand, this lack of clarity sparked many discussions about how we ‘read’ and ‘use’ any text as academics, how our training supports the sometimes uncritical ‘recognition’ of truth within them. Without the scaffolding of familiar academic markers in a familiar academic genre, the reader is forced to be intellectually on-guard - particularly as the ‘stories’ clash up against more objective realities such as the Pistorius trial or the crimes committed by police during apartheid.

The ending leaves the reader to contemplate the ultimate fate of the cemetery. This re-raises the question of the editors scaffolding the narratives for the reader. Of course, ‘traditional’ fiction books are rarely mediated, but this book begins with such a reflective and carefully rigorous hand-holding into the genre. We wonder if some (academic) readers might feel a little bereft not to be welcomed back into the world of mediation at the end of the book. Then again, the inconclusive ending can be read as another multi-layered metaphor for the global project of ‘doing’ and researching ‘development’, and the book will likely be a thought-provoking read for anyone in this field (whether they buy into, or are resistant to, the idea of fiction as a way of reporting research). Ultimately the book made us think in new and challenging ways about how we do research, how we read research, and the stories we tell others - and ourselves - about the research we do.

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