

BOOK REVIEW

Steven Robins, *Letters of Stone: From Nazi Germany to South Africa*
(Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2016), 314 pp. Paperback, \$16.15.
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A science that does not rely on fieldwork to make claims about humans is dangerous. The racism that emerged in the 1930s in various locations of the self-proclaimed civilized world found its ideological justification in the anthropology of eugenicists such as Otmar von Verschuer and Eugen Fischer, Josef Mengele's supervisor. Fischer's study from 1913 in Namibia, "The Rehoboth Bastards and the Problem of Miscegenation among Humans," strongly influenced Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Key in this ideology was the systematic identification of categories of people on the basis of heritable characteristics that seemed objective, such as 'negro', 'bastard', or 'Bantu'. Anthropology as we know it today could only take off with the complete shift advocated by Franz Boas against Nazi racial science through a 'bottom-up' approach in research methodology, which included participatory observation to obtain contextual knowledge. Ethnographic fieldwork permits a dynamic understanding of 'culture' as a both dependent and independent variable.

In a truly remarkable book, Steven Robins manages to interweave the birth of our discipline with these historical events that changed the world and have marked the history of ideas ever since. The story reaches a climax, one in a series of serendipities, when Robins stumbles upon a discarded box in his Department of Anthropology at Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape province containing three tools that Fischer himself had used to make objective measures: a skull of mixed ancestry, a hair color chart, and an eye color table. In the ensuing events as the discovery of the skull goes public in the South African media, the reader learns about the department's past struggle to break with apartheid's entrenched assumptions. Ethnologists and physical anthropologists supported Bantustan policies of ethnic discrimination through a static understanding of culture, asserting innate ethnic differences between whites and blacks and between African 'tribes' (274). The department's courageous attempt



to face its past and denounce it, in defiance of the authorities' reflex to cover it up, reflects in a belated yet amplified way the history of anthropology itself.

The big themes of Western history and those of the humanities converge in this book to become experientially salient for the reader thanks to the main vantage point of Robins—his family history. Through the letters of his forebears living in Germany during the 1930s, he retraces and contextualizes the journey his father made from pre-war Berlin to Port Elizabeth in South Africa. We sense the inexpressible powerlessness this man felt at improving the fate of his family back home. We follow his son's quest in archives and eventually on his way to Auschwitz to know whether his family members died in the concentration camps. The letters of Robins's relatives seeking to emigrate, and failing to do so, evoke one by one the anxiety gradually setting in among Jewish Germans left behind. The indirect suggestions of the hardened atmosphere, alternating with glints of hope, grab the reader by the throat, for we know what will happen. The grip refuses to let go as we listen to the speculations in the correspondence on society's transformation. I caught myself recognizing between the lines the existential experience that must have formed the anthropological sensitivity of Jewish Africanist pioneers such as Max Gluckman. The writers are compelled to reflect on the macro-structure based on their micro-situation. Robins poignantly makes the connection with the nagging question in our day and age about the direction the world is heading as governments close their borders to refugees (183). These are not mere reflections. They have all the directness and complexity of affect. That is the power of letters, if not just historically situated but also contextualized autobiographically as Robins has done. What began as a personal journey to break his family's silence has resulted, after three decades of research, in a coherent memoir of 24 chapters that evince the perspective of the subjects during one of the most painful episodes of humanity.

Robins's grip tightens with the materiality of several objects made tangible in text. The letters are sometimes printed, their nervous handwriting plain to see. Starkly contrasting are the Nazi forms, cold bureaucratic lists bearing the mark of reason. The value of the confiscated secondhand bed, the mirror, the chair—everything taken from Jewish households is objectively measured. We get to see pictures of family members in their epochal setting, as well as iconic images such as that of a child raising his hands under the pointed gun of a German soldier. An important theoretical tool is the author's reference to the *Stolpersteine* in the streets and sidewalks of Berlin, cobblestones with brass plates whose engraved names commemorate victims of Nazi violence. It is a city's subcutaneous form of protest whose first implementations the author witnessed and photographed. Robins is the inadvertent time traveler with whom the anthropologist identifies. Initially indifferent about his Jewish roots as a backpacker crossing the seas, he settled in a kibbutz working together with women whose camp tattoos did not yet strike a chord before finally returning to South Africa, ready to conceive of

apartheid through the lens of distrust his father's history prepared him for—a distrust of authority and racial ideology.

Most compelling is the materiality of a black-and-white photograph of three women. Forgotten on a table in the dining room, the picture mesmerizes due to the penetrating gaze of the girl on the left, Edith, a 'diver' for refusing to wear the yellow star and a bright mind desperate to leave Nazi Germany. She is the *Stolperstein*, the stumbling block, to anyone wishing to browse this book merely to accumulate information about the Holocaust. The attraction of *Letters of Stone* is its capacity to generate insight while raising awareness about the subjectivity of events. The pictures of family members and black citizens from those days, posing or dancing, are not supposed to illustrate an epoch or setting. Although inevitably concretizing a certain history of genocide and structural violence, they are foremost snapshots about individuals with their own biography. Some of the photographs have featured before in works claiming to offer objective information about humans in the past. In *Letters of Stone* the photographed individuals look us in the eye to remind us of how misplaced these pictures would have been in a book that was not biographical like Robins's.

Exposing the macro-structures of a society in all their complexity through personal itineraries is a daunting task. This book demonstrates for ethnographers the merit of exploring radically new ways of writing history, specifically through experiments bringing together affect and materiality in social analysis. Although not explicitly anthropological and therefore at risk of remaining under our radar, I consider this work to be a milestone bound to inspire young scholars taking the steep and winding road that post-colonial anthropology has embarked on.

Koen Stroeken
Ghent University