

I

Introduction

ROSEMARY JOLLY AND DEREK ATTRIDGE

I

In declining our invitation to contribute an article to this volume, Breyten Breytenbach wished us well but pointed out the impossibility of our task. How can we begin to assess the issues raised by literature written in South Africa from 1970 to 1995, considering our closeness to the event?

Produced during a period of intense political struggle, the literature of the period offers an opportunity to examine a set of complex questions whose importance goes well beyond the boundaries of a single country. Does literature have a distinctive role to play in political life? What is the writer's responsibility in a situation of political crisis? How does the writer's concern with form and language relate to the demands of ethics and politics? How are ethical priorities changing in relation to political developments, and how are these changes suggested or reflected in cultural practices? How do issues of class and gender interact with those of race in an environment that is marked by rapid political shifts?

Such issues inform a further set of questions about the specificity of South African literary traditions. How do these traditions draw on or set themselves against literary developments in the rest of Africa, and in Europe and the Americas? How useful are the terms 'modernism', 'post-modernism', 'postcolonialism', in the description of South African literatures? How does writing by those who were classified as belonging to different racial groups under the apartheid system, by those who speak different languages, by those of different genders and sexualities, differently inflect the peculiar pressures and opportunities with which they were confronted during the past two and a half decades? What specific pressures and opportunities are they are confronted with now?

In the face of the breadth and complexity of these questions, Breytenbach's sense of our project as overly ambitious might appear justified. Yet we pose these questions in the hope not of reaching agreed conclusions but of sharpening the debate and extending it to a wider circle of participants. We regard the cultural history of South Africa in the transition from apartheid to democracy as richly exemplary of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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intricate relations among aesthetics, ethics, and politics, and this volume as an opportunity to explore these relations in the light of a new freedom. The freedom to which we refer is not simply the constitutional end of apartheid, but that freedom which cannot be obtained purely in the realm of politics. South Africans during the period which forms the focus of this collection have been and are increasingly at liberty to identify and to reject not only the determinisms of apartheid, but also the determinisms of those systems which, in addition to racism, were implicated in and supported the ideological machinery of apartheid: patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, class and language bias, ethnic nationalism, and so on. The recognition of this (predominantly potential) liberty as a resource in examining the relation between ethical and aesthetic questions forms the context of our exploration.

Yet relinquishing determinism, in the sense of relinquishing ideologies which designate fixed values by assigning negative and positive attributes in accordance with stereotyped notions of essential verities, rather than a sense of the particular possibilities of a given context, is a difficult process. Apartheid, the system of legalized racism, demanded strategic opposition. In this context, such events as the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa in the seventies, centred on the figure of Steve Biko, and the creation of the United Democratic Front in the eighties, which drew together a large number of disparate anti-apartheid groups, were accompanied by complementary strategies in the realm of culture. The African National Congress's approach to culture as a weapon in the struggle, and more specifically, the call for literature to represent the victimization of the oppressed in realist form, are instances of such strategies.

Yet an adherence to the ideology of the institutionalized culture of resistance appropriate to the anti-apartheid struggle, but limited by the framework of that time, may prove reactionary rather than liberatory in a post-apartheid context. Thus we find Njabulo Ndebele, as early as 1984, arguing against what he saw as the conservative effects of a realist literature focused on the violence of the apartheid regime as a spectacular object ('Rediscovery of the Ordinary'); and in 1989 Albie Sachs, in a much-discussed paper written for an ANC seminar (reprinted here for the first time in an international publication), denounced the formulation of culture as a weapon of the struggle, arguing for the value of art in terms of its creative ambiguity and contradiction in the struggle against, and not in concert with, the determinism of the gun.

Introduction

South Africa is in the process of attempting to come to terms with the past in order to build a new future for itself. This is a task that requires balancing the need to view the present as a time of reckoning for those complicit in apartheid's crimes and the need for reconciliation in order to build for the future. This balancing act is being staged most visibly in the form of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The Commission offers a forum for victims to bear witness against the apartheid state and its agents, and offers amnesty to those who confess their implication in state-perpetrated crimes, except in cases of extreme sadism or those that manifest personal vengeance. This is obviously tricky business: as André Brink points out (below, page 24), there may well be no way of avoiding mistakes of judgement in such a context. In addition, the offer of amnesty is, as one would expect, controversial. Nevertheless, the Commission highlights the need to narrativize the past in such a way that the future becomes – unlike the past – bearable. In this light one can view former Prime Minister P. W. Botha's ten-page refusal to admit to any wrongdoing (his response to being subpoenaed by the Commission, having been implicated by other witnesses) as a not-so-extraordinary testimony to the continued existence of those who believe, or claim to believe, that apartheid in and of itself did not constitute a crime, in the face of testimony to the contrary from their cohorts. The secret, despite and partly due to denials such as Botha's, is out.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission bears the double responsibility of exposure and acceptance. This twin responsibility is at the heart of current debates over the evaluation of literatures produced in South Africa during the demise of apartheid. The need to tell the underside of apartheid history, and to outline its implications for the present and future, is matched by a desire in many instances to find a form of narration capable of acknowledging difference without fearing it and without fetishizing it. The postcolonial world generally faces this task; but the specifics of the South African situation are worth outlining in some detail, as they can form a singular resource for others working on related issues in a postcolonial context.

International responses to South African cultural products, as Jeanne Colleran points out in this volume, have tended to ignore the complexity of work produced by South Africans. This is partly due to the fact that the international consumer of South African culture has been encouraged to view South Africa as an ideological battleground that represents the Manichean conflict *par excellence*. Despite our current

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critical appreciation of postmodern indeterminacy, we are hesitant or unwilling to recognize in cultural products from both sides of the colonial divide breaches in oppositional logic that could constitute the beginnings of genuine cross-cultural exchange. To insist that South Africa during apartheid should be the emblem of racial struggles internationally, or to use the inauguration of the 'New South Africa' as a symbol of the triumph of multiculturalism over racism and other forms of discrimination, is both simplistic and fallacious. Indeed, brief mention of some of the difficulties attending the initiation of the 'New South Africa', many of which are outlined in more detail in this collection, should be more than enough to give any critic who would see post-apartheid South Africa as an ideal image of postcolonial liberation pause.

The term itself represents the impossibility of trying to narrate the future as though it were severed, in some sort of originary beheading, from the past. As Rob Nixon has emphasized, the phrase 'the New South Africa' was minted by F. W. de Klerk in his speech on 2 February 1990, which proclaimed the end of apartheid, announced Mandela's release from prison, and promised the repeal of apartheid laws; but its conception should not be misrecognized as immaculate: 'The New South Africa would become de Klerk's best-known coinage and an indisputable asset in the astute marketing of his regime as converts to decency and penitence, in a campaign that has seen an instinct for political survival passed off as a species of righteousness' ("An Everybody Claim Dem Democratic", 23). Such specious righteousness is evident in National Party condemnations of Inkatha-initiated acts of violence: the 'New South Africa' as event should not disguise the longstanding National Party support of Inkatha's violent expressions of Zulu nationalism (24). Following the announcement in May 1996 of its withdrawal from the Government of National Unity as a prelude to the local elections, the National Party once again demonstrated its 'instinct for political survival' by billing itself as the creator of multiparty democracy in South Africa. 'First we brought you democracy', one of their election advertisements reads, 'Now we bring you multiparty democracy.'

Inevitably, such resurrections produce parodic effects. In statements like the following, the National Party's local election blurb sounds like Desmond Tutu's 'Rainbow Nation': 'The National Party will continue to consolidate its position as a party based on Christian democratic values, uniting South Africans from all communities and all walks of life. Our commitment to reconciliation will form the cornerstone of our new

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

role.’ The sense of the ludicrous that this mimicry produces for those aware of the political history of hypocrisy in South Africa was illustrated nicely – if unintentionally – by a Standard Three (Grade Five) student interviewed by a colleague of ours who is working on the new history curriculum for South African schools. When asked in a questionnaire, ‘What would you teach American pupils about South African history?’, the boy responded: ‘I would tell them that we have a Rambo Nation.’ This facet of the new South Africa is an encouraging one: the entity that has come into being is far too contradictory to be held up as a symbol of triumph that renders critical vigilance, including self-awareness, redundant. The New South Africa – the Rainbow Nation – is always on the verge of becoming the Rambo Nation.

It is with an awareness of what Elleke Boehmer refers to in her contribution as this ‘cusp time’, and the importance of teasing out its heady implications, that these chapters, interviews, and position papers have been written. We have included many writers who themselves have made significant contributions to the recent cultural history of South Africa, and who are currently negotiating in their own literary writing the issues discussed here. We have also taken care to ensure a balance between contributors working in South Africa, and contributors in both North America and the United Kingdom. The period we have chosen spans both apartheid’s most aggressive phase and its final collapse, a time of intensified oppression and resistance beginning with the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement and ending with the early trials of the young democracy. We focus on writing in English, both for the sake of the coherence of the volume and because it is with this body of literature that South African culture engages most fully with an international audience. However, any attempt to exclude writing in the many other languages spoken in South Africa – the country now boasts eleven official languages – would be highly artificial, and a number of the contributors (who themselves belong to a variety of language groups) extend their discussion beyond works in English. All the major genres are treated, and a number of the contributors respond to the work, creative or critical, of other contributors, reflecting the vigorous debates about South African culture now in progress.

II

Given this context, it is not surprising that many of the debates consider the role of ethics in critical judgement. ‘Ethics’ is a slippery word, used by

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different writers for different purposes, but for the present we can take it to refer to the continuing attempt to do justice to others, or, more precisely, 'the other' – the encountered person, group, or culture which does not conform to the set of beliefs, assumptions, and habits that make up the encountering self. Ethics in this sense both precedes and exceeds morality, 'the principles of conduct of both actual moralities (for example, the moral code of Victorian England, or of twentieth-century corporate business) and of ideal morality (the best justified or true moral system)' (Pojman, *Discovering Right and Wrong*, 2). It calls for careful research, for the always imperfect attempt to understand the other without turning the other into a version of the self. Only on this basis is it possible to learn from the other, and thus to engage in a genuine interchange between cultures. Through such institutions as the Constitutional Court, South Africa is self-consciously engaged in an attempt to achieve an agreed moral code that will be adequate to its unique history and complex present; one of the responsibilities of the artist, however, is constantly to test the generalizations of moral systems by confronting them with specific realizations of otherness that demand creative ethical responses.

The temptation to make 'ethical' judgements immediately, that is, before the required research has been carried out, can be overwhelming – all the more so as there is a sense in which *every* judgement is premature, necessarily made before the totality of the evidence can be weighed (a limitation of which literature has often provided powerful instances). Nevertheless, witnessing the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one notices with interest that the victims testifying are as anxious to know more about the details of their victimization as they are to request reparation from the state; in some cases, when asked what they wanted from the Commission, those testifying requested only information, and not reparation. While retributive justice satisfies a certain sense of symmetry, the witnesses' curiosity about their victimizers' motives and further details of the crimes committed exceeds any closure retributive justice on its own can offer. There is a tension between the desire for reparation – not in terms of the physical comfort it promises but the closure it appears to promise – and the desire for knowledge, which denies any such closure. An analogous contradictory desire characterizes current modes of postcolonial criticism. On the one hand, there is the impulse to name and blame the perpetrators of colonial violence – even if it is the rhetorical violence of the cultural artifact that is at stake, and even if ambivalence is attributed to

Introduction

the colonizing discourse; on the other hand, there is a desire to develop, through an understanding of the other that does not reduce the other to the same, ethical modes of cross-cultural interchange.

South Africa has passed through a period that has for obvious reasons produced a large body of what one might call judgemental texts, both critical and creative; texts that assume an ethical sufficiency to exist in the condemnation of apartheid and its agents. For this reason, the current South African situation forms a productive arena for the exploration of the uses and limitations of, as well as alternatives to, judgemental writing. For one can grant a historical strategic importance to judgemental writing in the struggle against apartheid without denying the fact that it has produced a paucity of options for creative responses to post-apartheid freedoms and their attendant challenges. Indeed, it is remarkable that so many cultural workers from such different backgrounds and producing such differing approaches to South African creative work claim this as the predominant challenge of the current situation, although their delineation of this challenge – as the debate between Benita Parry and David Attwell in this volume illustrates – is as varied as one would expect.

The history behind this challenge relates to the use to which cultural artifacts were put by political organizations during the anti-apartheid struggle. It is ironic that an awareness of the use the apartheid regime made of the management of culture, through its encouragement of certain modes of nationalist discourse and its censorship of others, has given even those South Africans sympathetic to the cause of the ANC and its affiliated organizations a wariness of the use of cultural management to gain specific political outcomes. It was as early as the 1920s that Peter Abrahams, staunch Communist and anti-apartheid writer, refused to accept the Party's demands that he submit his work to be vetted; and as recently as 1993 that André Brink expressed his misgivings over the bureaucratic 'management of culture' by the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture.

As Benita Parry has noted elsewhere, the ANC and other anti-apartheid organizations' tendency to produce doctrinal directives with respect to cultural 'development' can result in a profoundly non-democratic approach to creative activity (the ANC becomes 'donor of knowledge and freedom to the oppressed'), and a separation of the aesthetic and political or ethical ('Culture Clash', 128). This enables, as Parry writes, 'the reification of a stark choice between solipsistic aestheticism and engaged art' (129). The danger of refusing to come out of the shell

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constructed by such orthodoxies is pinpointed by the ever prescient Ndebele, whose comment is as applicable to much postcolonial criticism as it is to his intended subject, the relation between sociopolitical issues and artistic production: 'The problem has been that questions about art and society have been easily settled after a general consensus about commitment. This has led to the prescription of solutions even before all the problems have been discovered and analyzed' ('Beyond "Protest"', 212): hence the proliferation of premature judgement, of a failure to do justice to the other as other.

Malvern van Wyk Smith's provocative question, 'Why is there so little analysis of the cross-cultural achievements of colonial texts?', can be answered by taking into account Ndebele's identification of 'a general consensus about commitment' as pre-emptive. Clearly postcolonial writing desires to contest the power of the colonizer, and assert the authority of the oppressed subject. It is also clear that some degree of ambivalence has been introduced in critical judgements of colonial narratives; but the potential development of this ambivalence as the basis for cross-cultural exchange has not been realized. The reason for this is the form judgemental writing takes in postcolonial criticism: a general consensus, to use Ndebele's term again, that renders antipathy to the colonizer essentialist. To adhere to such fundamentalism is to ignore those elements of early colonial texts that manifest 'a conscious effort to let the other speak, even – and especially – when the writer's own beliefs were most directly challenged' (van Wyk Smith, 'The Metadiscourses of Postcolonialism', 286). This position also disallows, in a sense, the existence of a post-apartheid South Africa: if we cannot identify the historical gateways to cross-cultural exchange, how can we ever hope to create our own?

Elleke Boehmer points out in her contribution that the narratives of the eighties, written during a period of extreme violence perpetrated by the apartheid regime, relate time as end-stopped, rather than representing indeterminacy as possibility: 'Narrative uncertainty, its suggestiveness and tease, were constrained within the deathly binaries of a long history of oppression and opposition' (below, page 45). Here the unbearable reality of the apartheid world, she suggests, resists the novelistic imagination. There are some periods, it would seem, in which the task of imagining difference – temporally speaking and with regard to the other – is less possible than at other times. In this context, André Brink's description in this volume of fiction as that which is at the margin of what has been and what can be newly conceived, 'as that which inserts

Introduction

itself into the reader's consciousness as an invitation to a moral choice' (below, page 22), underscores the role of the fictive world as a means of exploring the possibilities of ethical cross-cultural intercourse.

This exploration, however, is not one in which there is a single, defined prize to be found. The other is not a trophy to be won in an orientalist game of hide and seek, the dynamics of which depend upon resurrecting the other as a source of authentic knowledge whose authority rests on the ethnic origins of specific 'others', that is to say, real subjects. On this score, the history of South African culture is illuminating for its numerous instances of those who have rejected ethnic identification as a means of negotiating their future because of the bigoted formulation it takes within a racist imagination. (Rita Barnard's contribution to this volume examines some examples of the production of racial difference as myth, as well as some significant counter-mythic endeavours.) Recent South African history is replete with examples of how racial politics render ethnic identification nonsensical. In the fifties, the *Drum* writers and readers rejected the initial editorial direction of the periodical, which was to assume that to be black was to be constantly in search of one's ethnic 'roots', to be on a sort of eternal pilgrimage in the wilderness for one's (lost) self. In the eighties, ludicrous examples of the abuse to which politics puts ethnic identification continued to abound: is King Goodwill Zwelethini, manufactured as King of the Zulus both by whites and Zulus in the interests of ethnic nationalism, the authentic other with which to replace the colonizer?

One could argue that, counter to this politics of authenticity, post-colonialism poses syncretic practice. Yet just as van Wyk Smith argues that the ambivalence of postcolonialism is limited by reliance on a fundamentally Manichean structure, so genuine syncretism is limited by the politics of multiculturalism. While we may read, for example, Wilson Harris's parables of the creativity of cross-cultural fertilization attentively, we rarely produce criticism that recognizes in texts – whatever cognitive limitations they may exhibit – the possibility of interchange between cultures. Part of the problem lies in our fixation on difference, and this is where the suspicion multicultural rhetoric holds for many South Africans – in this volume, Dennis Walder's scepticism of South Africa's 'world cup "nationalism"' say, or Graham Pechey's refusal to believe in secular state politics as an ethical solution, even if they are Mandela's politics – comes in handy as a critique of the essentialism of many postcolonial formulations of hybridity.

ROSEMARY JOLLY AND DEREK ATTRIDGE

Zoë Wicomb's critique of Bhabha's formulation, in her contribution to this volume, is crucial here. She points out that the recent history of coloured politics in South Africa plays havoc with Bhabha's association of a subversive hybridity expressed specifically in terms of biological metaphor. The fact that with the post-apartheid vote coloureds have chosen to align themselves with the tawdry 'multiculturalism' of de Klerk's Nationalists, she argues, speaks to the persistence of shame in the formulation of coloured identity. In this context, the function of the recognition of difference in the subject classified as hybrid is self-abnegation. The South African experience suggests that the fetishization of difference, which takes its form here in terms of the stigmatization of race, produces negative effects. Neither shame, nor its light double, white guilt, are particularly useful resources for a post-apartheid future.

The fetishization of difference – the reading of difference as having an essential and fundamentally incomprehensible content – would appear, then, to be merely another form of Ndebele's moral consensus, in which the recognition of difference becomes a virtue in and of itself; and the institutional ramifications of this practice need to be recognized. Ndebele, in writing of the crisis of culture in South Africa – the great divide that Lewis Nkosi documents and mourns in his contribution to this collection – uses language that tellingly echoes Chinua Achebe's famous comments on racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

Standing between [black and white] is a chasm of engineered ignorance, misunderstanding, division, illusion and hostility. It highlights the national tragedy of people who have lived long together, but could do no better than acknowledge only their differences. They have done so with such passion as would suggest that perhaps they sensed something in common between them, which neither of them was prepared to acknowledge.

(‘Liberation and the Crisis of Culture’, 22)

Ndebele's analysis is revealing once it is applied to the field of post-colonial studies as a set of institutional practices. We may not wish to go as far as Anthony Appiah – ‘Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a *comprador* intelligentsia; a relatively small Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery’ (348) – but we need to consider that scholars tutored in the paramount importance of difference can fail, at some crucial, ethical level, to respect the subjects of their study.