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Citizens, Writers and Readers (Remaking Culture in South Africa)

There has been a great interest in the future of South African literature. This interest has traditionally taken the form of the question: what will South Africans write about after the death of apartheid? The interest in the question is analogous to other similar questions asked about other aspects of national life in South Africa. The question is not easy to answer. What an individual writer might choose to write about may be impossible to predict. What fascinates individual interest is too intimately connected with personal history, where the self, family, and the neighborhood and national communities converge. Nor is it easy to predict trends in the complex interplay between form and content. Any emergent trends will take their shape according ebbs and flows in the relationship between writers, readers, and any number of issues thrown up in the public domain.

That the question about the future of South African literature may be difficult to answer does not mean it should not be asked. On the contrary, it may be regarded as a vital question which offers innumerable possibilities for speculative thinking. One line of speculation regards conditions that may enable a literature to emerge and either to flourish or run aground as a transient phenomenon. Or, what are the conditions that would enable an existing tradition to mutate and take on a different character? Or, could the emergence of a new literature simply abort, in favor of other art forms because conditions favor the latter? The variables in the equation connecting writers, readers, and citizenship in terms of how a new South African literature may emerge are many. Their number suggests that solving the equation is a daunting task. Often the complexity facing us takes us away from specifically literary concerns to broader questions of culture. Being a participant in

the South African situation has made one so aware of how interconnected things actually are, far beyond one's intellectual appreciation of the fact. It presents one with the opportunity to ask anew questions which have been asked a million times.

I would like to illustrate the problem facing literature and culture in South Africa through an analogy. It may be difficult to see a connection between real estate and literature. But it is my reflection on a recent development in South African tourism and real estate which led to the current discussion.

"This Week in South Africa: News Highlights from the South African Media" is a publication of the South African Consulate General's Office in New York. The issue of February 17 - March 1, 1999 contains a seemingly innocuous extract from the "Business Day" of February 17:

South African real estate company Pam Golding Properties will introduce a new concept at Europe's leading international trade and tourism fair, BIT 99, in Milan later this month - property tours. "The idea is for visitors to South Africa to include a day or two in their itinerary for property shopping," said MD Andrew Golding. "With the favorable exchange rate for foreigners, property in South Africa continues to be an attractive investment." The Euroinvest 99 road show would travel to places such as Zurich, Salzburg and Hamburg.

I noted immediately that as a citizen of the new South Africa, I should have been pleased by this announcement. It seemed an innovative way of selling the country. I was intrigued by the act of selling the country as a tourist destination. But then there is also the implication of selling away the country by encouraging Europeans with strong currencies to come and buy plots of land. Clearly, there must be a lot of plots lying around, waiting to be bought, particularly in the Western Cape, around Cape Town. Just under five years into the calendar of liberation, memory should remind us that such brazen marketing of the land was unthinkable before the historic elections of 1994, when it could have been construed as selling out the country. What could look like a continuing disinheritance of Africans of land would have been condemned as one of the evil manifestations of apartheid. But, in a sudden shift of attitude, attracting foreign capital

has now become legitimate business, which enjoys considerable political support.

My lingering unease about this real estate promotion, took on some firmer definition three weeks later when I happened to read some judgements of the Land Claims Court, on appeal cases involving white farmers evicting their black workers from farms often after many years of the workers' tenancy on the farms. The evictions, particularly marked after the elections, were often sudden, resulting in instant homelessness. In 1994, under the interim constitution, Parliament established a Commission of the Restitution of Land Rights and the Land Claims Court as two instruments to give effect to the provisions of the Restitution of Land Right Act 22 of 1994. Essentially, the act confers upon persons who were dispossessed of their land under racist legislation, the right to claim restitution from the State.

People who had land grievances falling under the provisions of the act are entitled to lodge them with the Commission, which would investigate them thoroughly. Where the Commission was able to settle the matter between the contending parties, the dispute was forwarded to the Land Claims Court for final adjudication. Later, Parliament passed the Land Reform (Labor Tenants) Act 3 of 1996 and the Extension of Security of Tenure Act 62 of 1997 which respectively protects labor tenants and rural occupiers of land (other than labor tenants) against arbitrary eviction.

The story of the eviction of black people from their land, and later from lands now owned by others, is the long story of European colonization of South Africa. Land dispossession was followed by strict controls on human movement and settlements in such a way that black labor is controlled, deployed, and exploited in the most effective way for the new mining, manufacturing, and agricultural economy.

Social behaviour arising out of conquest and dispossession is remarkably resilient. Today, land acquisition by Europeans continues, but by invitation. A new, legitimate government will protect valuable investments. In the absence of a critical mass of black people who can purchase available property, the white South African and European ability to buy land, accentuates the symbolism of white control and black dependance despite a political process underway to alter that relationship.

On the other hand, white farmers, this time in the face of the uncertainties following loss of political power, are still evicting poor, landless Blacks, in a manner reminiscent of what happened in the 1960s and described by Cosmas Desmond in his book, *The Discarded People*. The scale of evictions is, of course, much less. But what is significant is the reflex to resort to traditional assertions of power rather than to adopt solutions which indicate an awareness of a need to adjust conduct in the light of far reaching changes across the land. Seemingly through force of habit rather than principled intent, old forms of behaviour are reproduced in a manner that can seriously threaten the emergence of a new order. Indeed, some of the factors that reproduce the old order are embedded in the manner in which the economic system functions, and that the manner in which it continues to function, remains essential for the survival of the country. In this connection, while there is some protection in the law for black tenants, power relations dependant on land ownership, access to credit and security of tenure, largely remain unchanged.

The creativity of Pam Golding Real Estates, shows itself more in taking full advantage of opportunities suddenly opened up by a democratic state, to leverage business and maximize profit, using inherited business skills honed during apartheid times. The further challenge is the capacity of established white businesses to be conscious of the extent to which behaviour conditioned by the mechanisms of a system, can result in the reinforcement of inherited social and economic imbalances which may ultimately threaten the long term viability of those very new opportunities. That challenge is to apply those skills in a new context. In short, South African capitalism has yet to acknowledge the existence of the black consumer as a primary factor in developing a successful local economy. It is only now beginning to know it, to understand it, and to begin to meet its needs. How does South African capitalism reconcile business with the complex demands of citizenship in a new democracy, in the very manner in which it formulates its strategies for profit making?

A serious concern for the planners of human settlements, architects, and the real estate industry, should be how to deal with a landscape that tells the story of division. With the inherited landscape looming so large before the eyes of every South Africa, the danger of

our continuing to reproduce an epistemology of division, will prevent the capacity of South Africans to dream of new landscapes. It is urgent that new ways of thinking about the environment be developed. The renaissance that is talked about so much will not be possible in the long term without new visions of the land.

What will it take to bring about this refocusing in an economic system, where black participation in the real estate industry is so negligible as to be non-existent? Where high volume trading seems inextricably tied to traditional markets both internally and internationally? Where black participation at executive level in the corporate sector is still too small to effect major changes? Where the preponderance of white males in the commanding height economy will be a marked feature of the system in the short to medium term?

It seems to me we are faced with similar dilemmas in the cultural sphere. The making of cultural artefacts is at once a private and public matter. A writer who wants to write, will write. Whether or not there is a new policy on arts and culture will not normally have a decisive impact on whether or not a writer will sit down and write a new novel or poem. Certainly, a policy will assist. For example, the new National Arts Council disburses funds to support writers and other artists who need space to give concentrated attention to their creative projects. But ultimately, a story that wants to be told will be told, regardless of funding.

However, once you move from the generic writer to particular, writing individuals, you begin to hit against public issues which may necessitate policy intervention. When you look at the number of applicants for writing grants and those that finally qualify, you notice the emergence of racial, language, gender, and educational biases. Writers who are white, male, have more education, write in English, have had more exposure to cultural institutions of various kinds, are more likely to obtain a grant than those who cannot deploy such a formidable array of qualifying characteristics. If the intention is to stimulate writing among black South Africans, who come from cultures that have been suppressed or marginalised, then we find that writers are faced with similar, difficult choices as other citizens grappling with how best to support the quest for social justice in the midst of inherited inequalities.

The new Constitution provides mechanisms for addressing many inequalities. Of the six founding provisions of the Constitution, the sixth deals with languages of the republic. The relevant provision reads as follows:

- (2) Recognizing the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages,
- (3) (a) The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned but the national government and each province government must use at least two official languages.
(b) Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
- (4) The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

In meeting its constitutional obligations to the languages of South Africa, the state and its various organs have to deal with a seemingly intractable situation. According to 1995 data, of twenty-seven major South African newspapers across the land, 74% were in English, 15% Afrikaans, 7% Zulu, and 4% Xhosa. These statistics strongly suggest that the overwhelming majority of South Africans receive information in English. I have not seen a statistical analysis of the number of textbooks in English compared to those in African languages in the South African school and university systems. Chances are that the same picture emerges. At this point, I would like to consider another situation.

What is South African literature? In the beginning was literature. Literature was English. Then, grudgingly, in the colonies, new literature came to be born. In terms of what appears on the curriculum of most departments of English or Literature in South African Universities, in South Africa, South African literature refers to South African literature in English: a descendent of literature, without qualification. At first this

meant, William Plomer, Pauline Smith, Alan Paton, Guy Butler, Douglas Livingstone, Nadine Gordimer, and others. This literature did not include literature in Afrikaans. That was Afrikaans literature. Then, in the midst of the rise of the black consciousness movement in the late sixties and early seventies, a new phenomenon emerged. It was called Black South African Literature: a descendant of South African Literature. It was increasingly difficult with rising temperature against apartheid to ignore the presence of a black South African literary tradition in English, which stretched back into the 1920s to cover R.R.R. Dhlomo, Sol. T. Plaatje, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Temba, Lewis Nkosi, and the new poets of black consciousness movement such as Oswald Mtshali, and Mafika Gwala, and Wally Serote. Although this literature was qualified "black," because it was in English, it qualified to be called South African.

Meanwhile, SeSotho, Zulu, and Xhosa literatures had been steadily developing since these languages began to be written. A publishing industry, largely Afrikaner owned, thrived from publishing novels, poetry, and drama written in African languages for the school textbook market of prescribed books. The standard curriculum described these works variously as Bantu Literature, Literature in indigenous languages, or African Language Literatures. Afrikaans literature, on the other hand, was making a determined effort to be regarded as literature, without qualification. This, obviously, was a reflection of the political and cultural battles for dominance between the English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans.

The new democracy inherits a cultural terrain dominated by the English language, and the claims of the Afrikaner language not ever to be forgotten. The political claims of the what are described in the constitution as "indigenous languages" have increased. Yet, the Constitution makes provision for the establishment a "Pan South African Language Board" which must:

- (4) promote and create conditions for the development and use of -
 - (1) all official languages;
 - (2) the Khoi, Nama and San languages, and
 - (3) sign language; and
- (5) promote and ensure respect for -

- (1) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and
- (2) Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

The noble intention of the Constitution is to make everyone happy by including everyone and their language. All this may be impractical, but it makes possible one vital thing: it enables rights to be asserted in perpetuity. It provides for infinite hope and continuous effort.

This last observation is important for one to make, for it enables us to assess the extent of probability at any particular moment in history. Right now, the confidence of previously powerful political and cultural groups has been shaken, in proportion to its increase among the previously oppressed and marginalised. The dominant cultural and political position of English is not a matter to be taken for granted. Even English, given the high probability that it will continue to enjoy a large measure of dominance, has to make its case. This is in the understanding that its continued dominance actually threatens the democratic project.

The dominance of English, of inherited capitalist business practices, of a divided landscape, of any array of institutions in education, publishing, legal practice, building, financial services, and many others, are all a factor of pragmatic consensus around temporary convenience, not a fundamental principle. This is a position in which security of tenure is denied, lest consensus dangerously coagulates into complacency with damning consequences of democracy and the vision of a society organized around releasing the creativity of newly liberated people. Whatever the case might be, the situation we are facing is clearly multilayered. No one factor may be decisive.

Writers and readers. Writers writing for readers to read. The ultimate test of what is written is how it is received by readers. But even there, a number of things intervene. The readers are far from being a uniform community. They fragment into literate and newly literate adults, with diverse interests; diverse language and racial groups; students studying literature in schools; literary scholars; book reviewers; editors assisting in a new publication. Some form groupings which have exercised considerable influence on how writing is to be received.

There is a complex convergence of many factors which, acting together, may define an emergent culture. We have individual talents, the publishing environment, arts and culture policies, an historic situation which may be predisposed to other kinds of art forms, music, film (tv), theater and radio drama, than to literature. We have the state of public discussion, book reviewing, literary scholarship, the arts curriculum in schools and universities. We have to consider the social capacity of communities to think about and do certain things, and not others. It may all suggest that, in the first instance, we are likely to learn less about literature than about what happens when a country remakes itself.

Indeed, with so diverse a population, with its many languages, and all the other dynamics referred to, is a South African culture possible? Or will such a thing be an aggregation of many diverse elements? The overarching national project that inspires us, often prevents us from looking at the details of making the dream possible. Whatever the case might be, a center might emerge attracting the greatest concentration of talent and energy, becoming an organizing principle.

I find myself thinking in this direction. Inherited definitions of South African literature are all inadequate. They do not take into account connections that cut across the discreet boundaries of definition. A post apartheid South Africa may produce a literature in any language which is recognizable, and deal with imaginative concerns which seek to understand what constitutes a new human environment. Some of the signs of the new human environment are beginning to merge. Many of them were released by the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Some were already playing themselves even before the TRC, and after. We think of the dramatic divorce of Winnie and Nelson; the recent sentencing of Rev. Alan Boesak for theft; the ANC's taking the TRC to court over the latter's report. They suggest an understanding that freedom may also mean accepting responsibility for ugliness that may be discovered to be lodging deep within the victims of the past. They suggest tensions and conflicts, agonies and ecstasies that are the ingredients of tragedy.

They suggest that the inherited tendency, among both Blacks and Whites, to look for traditional heroes and villains on the South African

stage, blocks the emergence. A new view of human tragedy within which conflicting systems of morality and ethics can battle it out. The scenario suggests that emergent literary forms are not likely to take hold too soon. But on the other hand they may.

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