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SPEAKING OF THE SOUTH:
northern voices and southern realities

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Listening to South Africa and learning to toyi-toyi

ABSTRACT

When so many voices from the north of the world strike so many discordant notes when speaking of the south, how is it possible to find a voice that is strong, significant and truthful, yet not neo-colonial and arrogant? This presentation will be a reflection on the problems of writing about Africa from Europe, of living in the 1st world while engaging meaningfully with the 3rd world. It will indicate the struggle of an author of a book-in-the-making to find an appropriate voice for writing about South Africa, for articulating an experience of the expectations, achievements and disappointments generated by a liberation movement come to power. What are the appropriate parameters for being critical of a society in which you come and go but do not live? When you enter contested terrain and believe that you cannot and should not be neutral, what are reasonable terms of engagement? What can Europeans writing of Africa contribute to Europe and to Africa?

This paper will explore modes of writing about Africa from Europe, moving from traditional patterns satirised in the current issue of *Granta* devoted to *The view from Africa* to the discourse surrounding G8-Live 8 in 2005. It will

then turn to Irish ways of speaking about South Africa and pose a series of questions to confront in struggling for meaningful terms of engagement with the project of transformation in contemporary South Africa.

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In the most recent issue of *Granta*,

there is an article by the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina entitled “How to write about Africa”, subtitled “some tips: sunsets and starvation are good”. He advises:



Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress. In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book...Make sure you show how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls...Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes ... references to African writers or intellectuals...Throughout the book, adopt a *sotto* voice, in conspiracy with the reader, and a sad *I-expected-so-much* tone. Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place... Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated...Your hero is you (if reportage), or a beautiful, tragic international celebrity/aristocrat who now cares for animals (if fiction).¹

Reviewing it in *South Africa's Mail & Guardian*, Darryl Accone wrote:

Air travel has exacerbated the problem, encouraging the syndrome of drop in, deliver a burst of instant authority, and jet out. Evelyn Waugh's satire *Scoop* has much to answer for, by way of wannabes and more ambitious imitators, those species of Africa watchers, Africa hands and would-be-expert commentators on Africa.²

So how do we write about Africa without being part of the problem? Should we/I write about Africa at all?

If I were to satirise how Irish people, meaning well, speak/write about South Africa, the advice might be:

Start with Nelson Mandela and how he was a colossus, who saw what needed to be done and made it happen. Don't complicate things with socio-historical forces. Don't mention the layers of negotiators and role played by others, especially if they were whites or communists or even worse, both. Let the mass movement fade into the shadows. Don't dwell on neo-liberal economic policies that Mandela insisted were not negotiable and how he was feted by the rich, famous and powerful on the world stage. Don't raise questions about how heroes of the liberation movement have become multi-millionaires. Don't wonder why nothing will turn the masses against Winnie Mandela or Jacob Zuma. Let people know that you have seen how people live in the townships, but remark on how resilient they are and how they know that it will take

time. Don't go on about shack fires, evictions, electricity cut-offs, the bucket system and all of the protests about these issues. We know that housing is still a problem, but sure aren't Niall Mellon and the lads helping out? The AIDS statistics are alarming. Thabo Mbeki shouldn't go surfing on the internet at night. He should get a grip. Make sure to mention Bob and Bono and Live 8. Great Irish angle here: our guys telling world leaders what to do. Sure, where would Africa be without them? Still a lot to be done, of course, but wasn't it great?

What can I say? All these images. So many clichés. So many false starts. So many cul de sacs.



The discourse of G8 and Live 8 did not tell the truth about Africa. Africa is not so much poor as systemically impoverished. This is what Africans are saying about Africa. Not all Africans, but Africans particularly worth hearing. But we are hearing only Bob, Bono, Blair, Brown, even Bush. I marched in Dublin during the Make Poverty History campaign and found others with whom I have marched for many years ambivalent about what they were saying and doing. Some seemed to have lost their critical faculties altogether. During G8 / Live 8, I cringed as I listened to one performer after another, one commentator after another, speak of Africa. Oh, those poor people, but isn't this awesome and aren't we wonderful? I am still waiting for someone to explain to me what did *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* have to do it?

Then there was that tv play to go with these events: *The Girl in the Cafe*. A lonely civil servant meets a lonely girl in a cafe and takes her with him to the G8 summit and she clicks her fingers every 3 seconds to remind the powers-that-be that a child dies of poverty in that time and that convinces those 8 men in a room in a hotel to do the right thing and make poverty history.

Africa is again the dark continent. Its people are poor and helpless and voiceless. Now politicians and rock stars are bearing the white man's burden. The causes of poverty, the systemic imperatives of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, the struggles of liberation movements, all fall away in this mock heroic, mindless myopia.

Where are the African voices about Africa? Can Africans not speak? Can Africans not sing? They are speaking. They are singing. But most of the world is not listening. Those who don't want to listen to them, because they were not famous enough, justify it by saying that other people wouldn't listen, because they are not famous enough.

Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, Nigerian political scientist, spoke of these events:

It is difficult to know how to react to this sudden show of concern for a people that have been so marginalized and humiliated for such a long time. It is like being offered a handkerchief by the same person who is beating the hell out of you.³

Did you see that quoted anywhere? There were many such statements from Africans. Yet how many times did you hear Bob Geldof saying:

A great justice has been done ... On aid, 10 out of 10; on debt, 8 out of 10 ... Mission accomplished, frankly.⁴

However, many Africans protested that injustice still prevailed, that it was not their mission that was accomplished. For them it was: G8-10, Africa-nil.

So what to do? One thing that Europeans speaking about Africa can do is not to consent to this and to connect to African voices speaking of Africa.

That is one purpose of my writing. However, it is complicated. Africans do not speak with one voice. How do I make my way among African voices and speak meaningfully in my own voice? What do I have to offer? I think that the perspective of one who comes and goes can be of value. It makes it possible to see some things in sharp relief. I would never have understood the land of my birth so well if I had never left it.

Let me retrace my steps. I started, as did many of you, with the black babies. Unless we gave over our allowances, they would never be baptised and remain uneducated and unredeemed pagans. Our knowledge advanced. For me, a great leap forward was my movement to the left and my involvement with African liberation movements, particularly the African National Congress. I belonged to the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Ireland and mixed with South Africans in ANC, MK, SACP throughout Europe. Africa became more and more important to me, although for many years from afar. I devoured African novels and every source I could come by to learn of the politics, economics, cultures of Africa. I watched the big events on television: the release of Nelson Mandela, the first democratic elections, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission.

I wanted to know what happened when the international media left. How had the texture of everyday life changed? How was the transformation of the many institutions of the society going? I knew that I would go there, but I wanted to go as meaningfully as possible. So I waited until my sabbatical year 2000-1. I prepared intensively. I read the *SA Mail & Guardian* online every day, ordered books from amazon, visited SA websites, sent megabytes of e-mail flying off to SA.

By the moment I finally set foot on African soil, it was almost eerie. I knew an almost unnatural amount about some place I had never been. I knew it, but I didn't know it. The sheer existence of South Africa and my presence there had me on a high for some days. I was based at University of Cape Town and pursuing a research project on academic transformation. I attended functions on campus, in town and in

townships. I interviewed academics and politicians, but also spoke to students and ex-students (including expelled ones), journalists, cleaners, all sorts of people. I heard many life stories. I participated in many political discussions. I led an alternative life. I moved through different spaces, presupposed different terms of reference, dwelt among a different set of life stories. I was there for three months the first time and back several times since. I am heading back soon again.

It is time to take my impressions, ideas, notes, diaries, powerpoint presentations and transform them into another form of writing. I am struggling with many questions as I do so, questions of genre, truth, loyalty, morality.

I have already run into trouble. I published two extended interviews with a South African politician-intellectual that I much admire.⁵ It was at the centre of a media maelstrom. It covered many subjects and dealt with many difficulties already in the public domain, but it spoke in an honest way of how the ruling party itself was contested terrain and it played into the battle of ideas and struggle for power underway. It was very bruising.

I have learned many lessons, but I cannot back away from difficulty. The world does not need me to recycle clichés. I want to illuminate the terrain. I do not want to be arrogant, but I cannot be bland. I traverse this terrain only at intervals, but I do it with passion and conviction. I am opinionated. Also I believe that someone who comes and goes sees some things in particularly sharp relief. I have lived on two other continents: Europe and North America. I think that I see each in a certain way because of my years in the other.

I want to grapple with the difficult questions that my time In South Africa has posed for me. Some of these are:

- How transformed are the economy, the state, the media, education, health, security, everyday life?
- Is 'decolonisation of the mind' happening?
- Are alternative ways of thinking, writing, working, teaching, learning, living emerging?
- How deep in the legacy of underdevelopment?
- What truths did the TRC not air?
- How have freedom fighters become multi-millionaires or criminals or both?
- Why do masses idolise Winnie Mandela and Jacob Zuma?
- Is transformation any more than racial quotas in some institutions?
- Why are so many people still so poor?
- Is there an alternative to neo-liberalism for SA?
- Is marketisation the real transformation?
- Why are the monuments of the colonisers still standing?
- What was the significance of the funeral of Saartjie Baartman?
- How do schools, universities, museums, social movements play into this process?
- What changes have been made in the curriculum?
- Why do African universities have problems filling chairs of African studies?
- What has happened to marxism?
- What role has postmodernism played?
- Where does indigenous knowledge come into the picture?

What do soapies reveal about the values of the society?
Why was *Yizo Yizo* so controversial?
Why does private security outstrip public policing by 4:1 ?

So many questions. I hope that my struggle with them will constitute a meaningful engagement of a European with Africa.

Notes:

- 1) Binyavanga Wainaina "How to write about Africa" *Granta* 92 London, 2006
- 2) Darryl Accone Review of *Granta* 92 in *Mail & Guardian* 17 February 2006
- 3) Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem July 6, 2005
<http://www.pambazuka.org/index.php?id=28836>
- 4) Bob Geldof as quoted in most of the world's media in July 2005
- 5) Helena Sheehan interviews with Jeremy Cronin 2001 & 2002 at
webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehan/za/cronin-aah01.htm and webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehan/za/cronin02.htm

<http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehan/sheehan.htm>
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