



Two bad-time stories and a song of hope

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Abstract

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*Using three fairly recently published South African texts – David B. Coplan’s **In the Time of Cannibals – The Word Music of South Africa’s Basotho Migrants** (1994); A.H.M. Scholtz’s **Vatmaar – ’n Lewendagge verhaal van ’n tyd wat nie meer is nie** (1995) in its English translation, **A Place Called Vatmaar** (2000) and Mongane (Wally) Serote’s **Come and Hope with Me** (1994) – this essay looks at the role such texts can play to give public expression to the voices of formerly silenced communities. The essay contends that the deep fissures in South African society require intense efforts in order to make those isolated from one another mutually intelligible. All South Africans need to broaden their cultural vocabularies. This is where texts such as novels and those containing the oral art of neglected communities can function as ‘translations’, and have profound social importance. It can be predicted that rehistoricising writings and culturally recontextualising teaching practices will continue to be required in this country, but also texts that contain the vision of a shared South African future.*

1. Introduction

In his essay titled “What Has Literature Got To Do With It?” Chinua Achebe (1989b:163) speaks of the human need for inaugural myths:

So important have such stories [of origins] been to mankind that they are not restricted to accounts of initial creation but will be found following human societies as they recreate themselves through vicissitudes of their history, validating their social organizations, their political systems, their moral attitudes and religious beliefs, even their prejudices. Such stories serve the purpose of consolidating whatever gains a people or their leaders have made or imagine they

have made in their existential journey through the world; but they also serve to sanction change when it can no longer be denied. At such critical moments new versions of old stories or entirely fresh ones tend to be brought into being to mediate the changes and sometimes to consecrate opportunistic defections into more honourable rites of passage.

It is with Achebe's recognition of the importance of recorded (re-) imaginings of social existence in mind that the three texts discussed in this essay have been selected. The topic considered here is the need of articulating, hearing and listening for the voices – and the stories of the land – becoming audible in a 'changed' or changing South African context. For, as Achebe wrote in a slightly later essay, "*stories create people create stories*" (Achebe, 1989b:162 – italics in the original).

Apartheid in terms of its own options was necessarily a system involving a great deal of silencing of inward voices and of *Voices from Within* (Chapman & Dangor, 1982 [title]). With South Africans now precariously footed in a re-imagined territory, a veritable chorus of witnesses – in autobiographies, mediated autobiographies and testimonies – is beginning to make itself heard, one that is likely to swell in volume and to refine its art with time. But many of the 'old' stories are still around us, perhaps less publicly proclaimed, but the more deeply embedded for all that. Achebe in his essay "The Truth of Fiction" warns that "there are fictions that help and fictions that hinder" (Achebe, 1989b8:143).

At the age of five, my youngest daughter (who is now fifteen) came home from her 'Model C' pre-primary school one day and (in all the pride of newly acquired knowledge) asked me, rather condescendingly: "Mom, have you ever heard of Jan van Ribbitz?" When I said I had not, she informed me: "His face is on our dollars!" She added that "Jan van Ribbitz" had encountered "the little dots" when he first came to this country and added that "Jan van Ribbitz" had given "the little dots" (with great scorn in her voice at this point) "wonderful jewels what *they* knew nothing about". I swear to the veracity of this account. Having worked out that "the little dots" were probably her five-year-old version of the (originally uncomprehending) name "Hottentots" assigned to the indigenous Khoikhoi people by the early European settlers at the Cape, I could only gape at the adroitness with which capitalism, colonialism, hypocrisy, cultural contempt and racism were encapsulated in such a 'history' told, or perhaps shown as a cartoon film, to very young minds, so ready to grab at any prop to establish 'superiority', and so easily deafened to the dignity and needs of others. This was a "story of the land" – and as Achebe (1989a:124) has written, "[w]hen we are young and without experience we all imagine that the story of the land is easy". The erasure

of various acts of expropriation in that 'history lesson' for children is especially dismaying, but the temptation that it offers is as unmistakable as its danger and hidden ugliness.

Like Achebe, Edward Said has expressed his sense of the double-edged nature of the sword of fiction in a well-known passage from *Culture and Imperialism*:

Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. ... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism (Said, 1994:xiii).

The domination of the South African literary scene by a small number of texts, and the consequent (or persistent) obscuring of others, unfortunately (still) in many ways replicates the cultural profile of the apartheid past. The veritable flood of commentaries on J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 1999), its endless discussion at literary conferences, and the iconisation of this author, may be taken as embarrassing instances of this tendency.

Whether a text like *Disgrace* valorises or castigates South African racial divides and intransigence is a source of ongoing debate. With Achebe's vision of "art ... in the service of life" (Achebe, 1975:19) in mind, I propose in this essay that the writing, teaching and discussion of fictions for transformation – to take up his other point – is an urgent need in our society. Within the South African social and cultural sphere, I would argue, texts of this kind are recognisable in exhibiting such qualities as an awareness of the cluster of cultures among which we exist here, and in dignifying the formerly denigrated members and cultures of our society. To do so successfully, it must be added, writing of a merely 'politically correct', sentimental or (even more crudely) of an 'agit.-prop.' kind will not do. It is with these considerations in mind that the three local works examined in this essay have been chosen. The first of these texts is *In the Time of Cannibals* (Coplan, 1994), a book in which the adventurous American-born musicologist-sociologist-historian David B. Coplan renders *The Word Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants* (the work's subtitle) accessible to readers of English. The second is a much acclaimed and prize-winning Afrikaans work now available in an English translation as *A Place Called Vatmaar* (Scholtz, 1995 and 2000 – the word "vatmaar" being roughly translatable as "go ahead – take it"). In this novel, Andrew Scholtz traces the histories of a rural, multicultural, 'coloured' community. (The two aforementioned texts are the 'bad-time

stories' of my title.) My last text is a long poem published as a small book, Wally Serote's *Come and Hope with Me* (1994), Serote being the author of the most compelling and profound novelistic account of apartheid yet written, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (Serote, 1980), besides being one of the foremost poets writing in English in South Africa.

2. David B. Coplan: *In the Time of Cannibals*

Two rhetorical modes are at work in Coplan's text: firstly, the modest, scholarly English of the author, informative and meditative, which combines (among others) perspectives from anthropology, sociology, history and cultural studies to tell the stories of Basutoland, Lesotho and South Africa, and secondly, the flamboyant, declamatory, richly metaphorical and individualised Sesotho of the migrant workers' songs or *lifela*¹, the full meaning of which translates to "songs of the inveterate travellers" (Coplan, 1994:27) – compositions which Coplan translates into English with a strong suggestion of the inadequacy and sometimes inaccuracy of the new medium. This is literally a 'cross-border' phenomenon, another of the borders it crosses being that between traditional Sesotho culture and modernity (or capitalism) (Coplan, 1994:144; 117). The author's definition reads: "*sefela* is a poetic autobiography composed in social context, a personal odyssey of common travails and travels ..." (Coplan, 1994:88). The examples cited in the text suggest that *lifela* are self-proclamations: stories told to tent the wanderer in the new worlds s/he encounters (see also Swanepoel, 1994 as well as Guy & Thabane, 1992). (One needs to bear in mind, here, the information that labour migrancy supplies over half of Lesotho's gross domestic product.)

To illustrate the two styles of telling I contrast one of the Basotho "informants'" description of the *lifela* as the songs "of those who have seen the places and the spaces between the places" with Coplan's own reference to these songs as those of the "solitary migrant ... [who] establishes identity and status through knowledge of his country and its inhabitants while remaining critically apart, a homeboy with a homeless mind" (both quotations Coplan, 1994:120). Oddly, Coplan's description coincides with one of the notorious 'old' South African government's references to people from places like the so-called homelands and Lesotho as "foreign native[s]" (Coplan cites the expression in 1994:125).

I can quote only a few snippets from the numerous songs cited in Coplan's book:

1 The term *lifela* signifies the plural; *sefela* is the singular and the generic term.

<i>Bafutsana, re maoto matelele</i>	Poor men, we are longlegged (Coplan, 1994:124)
	and
<i>Bajaki ba jakang Makbooeng Ha le jake khomo, le jaka sjambok,</i>	Migrants who migrate to the Whites, You don't migrate to cattle, you migrate to a sjambok,
	and
<i>Ba basoeu, ba le na le setsoalle, Le tsoe le bloka selekane,</i>	You whites, you haven't any friendship, You're lacking the spirit of alliance, Bosses ...
	and
<i>Li fapana, li na le kutse</i>	They crossed one another, ours and a freight train.
<i>Kutse eena e apere matata:</i>	That freight wore karosses [skin capes, a chiefly prerogative]:
<i>Enkile likbomo, le furu'a lesere, Lipholo li tloba bo Verwoerd Tse tlang bo tona kholo</i>	It carried cattle, feeding on fodder, Oxen given by Verwoerd To the prime minister [of Lesotho] (Coplan, 1994:73).

These are examples by males – of the women's "shebeen songs", Coplan says that "theirs is an explicitly shared affliction ... grieving the loss of friendship and marital security ... the embattled reality starkly outlined against the conjugal and communal ideal" (Coplan, 1994:181) – although the examples cited by him sound on the whole as much like 'brags' and as full of political and personal defiance and raconteur's skill as the men's do. Here is one example (given in English only by Coplan) of such a woman's *sefela*:

I wish my voice would ring like a bell
To let the miners know that I live under hardships here in Lesotho.
I deeply fear the government in power!

.....

I recall when the russians [Basotho gangsters] in Johannesburg beat me
Because of the blankets [other lovers];

.....

People always get in my way,
But we still disappear into mountain hideaways (Coplan, 1994:153).

The most significant aspect of Coplan's work is the way this text fleshes out the pitifully impoverished South African histories which have been available up till recently with a strong sense of the density and complexity of the process of the formation of a history. Especially useful is the attention given, though almost incidentally, to someone who may be thought of as one of this country's most important and most neglected political ancestors, the founder of the Basotho nation, Moshoeshe I, who ruled from 1820 until his death in 1870. Coplan's book is one of those which can help us to understand that the so-called South African 'miracle' – the achievement of a 'negotiated revolution' – does have roots and antecedents in the histories of this soil. An account like the following illustrates the open, 'accepting', inclusive social space established and maintained by this remarkable ruler:

Moshoeshe's leadership, like his headquarters at Thaba Bosiu (Mountain of the Night), was a fortress under whose protection the four great clans of the Basotho – the invading Bakoena, the aboriginal Bafokeng, the vassal Bataung, and the conquered Batlokoa – could gather. Also counted among his subjects were numerous segments of Sotho-Tswana-speaking clans, including the Bakhatla, Lihaja, Basia, and others, as well as large communities of originally Nguni-speaking people such as the emigrant Thembu (Sesotho: Bathepu), Moorosi's Baphuthi of Zizi origin, and fractions of Swazi and Zulu clans known collectively as Matebele or Bakone – all of whom today speak Sesotho and regard themselves as fully Basotho (Coplan, 1994:35).

It is (furthermore) hard to think of a better example of a successful 'Truth and Reconciliation' procedure than the words of Moshoeshe to the cannibal Rakotsoane (as recorded by the missionary Casalis in his 1843 *Journal des Missions*):

We, the masters of the country, did drive you to live on human flesh, for men cannot eat stones. You ate my father, but before that I had eaten [dispossessed] yours. Oh, let it all be forgotten! (quoted in Coplan, 1994:30).

The anecdotal version of this event ascribes to Moshoeshe the words (when Rakotsoane, who had eaten Moshoeshe's grandfather, was brought to the latter by followers eager to see how the king would punish him) that he could not possibly 'disturb the grave of his ancestor': a story embodying the legendary political deftness and profound humanity of Moshoeshe.

Coplan's book also allows one to recognise that, contrary to the persistent idea that there is only a 'Westminster model' of 'parliamentary

democracy', similar forms of governance are indigenous to the African continent. I quote only three of the Sesotho proverbs in his book, which in combination suggest such an impression of a participatory form of power: "*Morena ke morena ka batho*, 'A chief is a chief by the people'" and "*Lekhotla ha le nameloe motho*, 'The court [debating meeting] is no respecter of persons'", offset by the *realpolitik* of the perhaps cynical saying, "*Molomo o mosehlanyana ha o mameloe*, 'The mouth of a commoner is not listened to'" (Coplan, 1994:34; 38). Coplan's emphasis on indigenous early South African social practices of a democratic or proto-democratic kind (though balanced, as seen above, with the recognition of a darker underside) may be compared with the South African novelist Bessie Head's vision conveyed in her brilliant yet neglected work, *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (Head, 1984). This text is Head's 'novelised', but scrupulously researched and contextualised history of the formation of the state of Botswana (her adoptive country). I have elsewhere commented that in this text (much as Coplan does in his own) "Head uses her novelistic skills and her moral sensitivity (as well as her 'African loyalty') to *read*, reinterpret, and rearrange histories that had been differently deployed, and to other ends" (Gagiano, 2000:164).

Coplan shows that the trope of cannibalism used in his text title is ubiquitous and of multiple significance. Its origins lie in folklore – in references to a "deep-pool monster" (Coplan, 1994:236) in so many Sesotho myths – and it is an image of threatening power which evolves in history, being used to contrast the conquering Zulu King Shaka and his 'swallowing' wars (a period which drove many people to cannibalism in order to survive) with the restorative reign of Moshoeshoe. (This is a report of perception, not an endorsement of ethnic stereotyping.) Lesotho and, earlier, Basutoland having suffered greatly at the hands of the country by which the region is entirely landlocked, South Africa, Coplan refers to "that cannibal of cannibals, white South Africa" (Coplan, 1994:248). Yet the Basotho chiefs themselves, when behaving selfishly and greedily, or in cahoots with white South Africa or its mine bosses, are referred to as cannibals. So too are: the train which engulfs and removes the migrants; the mines which 'swallow' them; and the gangs and gangster fights – such as the hectic armed encounters of the notorious Basotho *marashea* or "russians" which take both the migrants' loyalties and (sometimes their) lives in the 'white' cities – indeed, *all* who are powerful, greedy and exploitative are likely to be termed cannibals (Coplan, 1994:37).

In a startling inversion or reclamation, however, those of the migrants who proudly proclaim that they have 'made it' despite all the odds, may

refer to themselves as cannibals – “*Ho setse 'na, lelimo la motho*” or “*it's me who survived, a cannibal of a man*”, quotes Coplan – and he explains: “for a travelling man and a champion poet is not to be used or digested by others” (Coplan, 1994:132, 134). One of the migrant workers is quoted as saying: “When your *sefela* is good and contains the real Sesotho you feel very nice, inside yourself; when you play with the language, you are getting pleasure by sharing your feelings” (Coplan, 1994:114). These adaptations of the trope indicate, I would suggest, the migrants' recognition that the harsh challenges of a traveller's life require a tough alertness similar to that which predators exhibit; the saying expresses something like an ‘eat or be eaten’ ethos. It bears pointing out how different the lifestyle recorded in the *lifela* is to the Eurocentric image of “little dots” dazzled by the “wonderful jewels” of the ‘white’ world. Coplan also quotes from Johannes Fabian (in Coplan, 1994:243) the statement that

... the kind of performances we find in popular culture have become for the people involved more than ever ways to preserve the wealth of artistic creativity against an environment of utter poverty. All this is not to be dismissed off-hand as escape from reality; it is realistic praxis under the concrete political and economic conditions that reign (Fabian, 1990:19).

In his own paragraph on the subject, Coplan writes that “in this sense *sefela* is both a personal and collective autobiography, an aesthetic reflection on experiences at once deeply individual and widely shared” (Coplan, 1994:222). The creative way in which people can manage or ‘absorb’ huge disruptions and transitions is well captured in Coplan's explanation why “deadly seriousness and pathos is more than balanced in *sefela* by the wry humor of comic predicament”. The point is most vividly expressed, however, in a wonderful Sesotho proverb he cites: “*Lefu – leholo ke litseho*, ‘Laughter is greater than death’” (Coplan, 1994:135, 241).

As in his earlier and beautifully written account of – mainly – the vibrant Sophiatown fifties and the black urban music culture and theatre of the time (*In Township Tonight!* – Coplan, 1985), Coplan has, with *In the Time of Cannibals*, provided South Africans with a text that, although not itself a work of literature, enlarges one's sense of the verbal art and skill of a southern African people. His recordings, translations and contextualisations of these orations allow us to read, share and reach out imaginatively to these latter-day heroes and heroines in their dangerous social encounters. Coplan's text broadens our awareness of what the study of southern African *literatures* – if thought of more inclusively – might be found to contain.

3. A.H.M. Scholtz: *Vatmaar*

As a text which itself embodies the cluster of cultures image to which I referred in my Introduction, Andrew Scholtz's *A Place Called Vatmaar* (2000) is a natural choice for the illustration of this notion. It is to be celebrated that this work has now been translated into English (as well as a number of other languages), though much in the Afrikaans original (Scholtz, 1995) may have seemed 'untranslatable' because of the fascinatingly varied, demotic Afrikaans (or *varieties* of Afrikaans) in which it is written. Yet its translation into English by the poet and novelist Chris van Wyk has produced a remarkably vivid account, that has made the text accessible to those to whom Afrikaans literary culture still seems a predominantly if not exclusively 'white' affair. Anyone who *does* understand the language will gain from this book a powerful impression of the richness, variety and rootedness of Afrikaans; of the width of its cultural circumference and the diversity and flexibility of its speech forms. In his preface, the author refers to the text as "a story of the 'coloured' people of South Africa" (Scholtz, 2000:unpaginated). That this book was published by an affiliate of the powerful Afrikaner-owned publishing giant Nasionale Pers, and that this discussion takes place in the context of a time when Afrikaans is by many of its speakers being aggressively championed as an oppressed and threatened language-culture (although enormous economic, educational and political power remains in the hands of 'white' speakers of the language), is an especial irony.

Gayatri Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988:271-313) and its customarily negative answer are implicitly challenged in this wonderful text. The author writes – in the style of novelistic or anecdotal 'history' – a story which both documents and celebrates the achievement of a community (and of the communal spirit), despite immense odds. I would hence suggest that in this text the consecration of changes, as mentioned in the introductory quotation, also features – in the depiction of the heroic, innovative and culturally consolidating acts of the community members; simultaneously traditionalists and modernisers. The inhabitants of Vatmaar are, namely, weighed down particularly by the disadvantages of illiteracy, political oppression and poverty, notwithstanding their profoundly *indigenous* identities (a condition insisted on in the brief author's preface (headed "Dear Reader" – unpaginated). Thus, the aged father figure of the community 'sees' how Vatmaar is "put on paper" by officialdom in a document he cannot read, but whose power he recognises (Scholtz, 2000:21).

In the "Tribute" on which the work concludes, the people of Vatmaar are referred to as "backward, inside-out people" (Scholtz, 2000:374). That

the members of this community (representing many cultures and classes, imagined as located in the vicinity of Kimberley) are mostly classified as 'coloured' in the apartheid state's convenient and blurring 'catch-all' category is made evident by the author's delicate and vivid delineations of personality, speech and folkways, *various* yet (on the whole) mutually accommodating. Scholtz respects the differences he exhibits and, interestingly, links them through the inhabitants' different forms of self-expression in the Afrikaans language they all claim as their own. The community is not romanticised, however, and the robust narrative gives clear indication of the malice and snobbery or foolishness occasionally manifested in it, as well as (at other times) its generosity and warmth.

Vatmaar can be thought of – in the South African historical context where notions of settlers and settlements from Europe have tended to be valorised – as illustrating a *counter*-image of settlement. The community is shown to originate in the transgression of taboos.

Firstly, there is the profound but necessarily unspoken sympathy of the 'coloured' men who are incorporated as menials into the British army – an empathy felt when they execute orders to burn down the farmhouses of white Afrikaners in the later part of the Anglo-Boer War (when British forces practised a 'scorched earth' policy towards the civilian Afrikaner or Boer population).

Secondly, the unusual plan is conceived to 'save' some of the goods from such a farm and to hide these items away with an eye to future prosperity – the act (probably punishable as 'looting') to which the settlement's eventual name, Vatmaar, alludes.

The *third transgression* of a taboo is the British officer's love for and marriage to a Motswana woman, with whom he chooses to live in the new settlement, away from other 'whites' as well as from (the wife's) Batswana people.

The *fourth transgression* of conventional (South African) class and community formation lies in the continuing association and co-operation of those formerly divided by race and by rank in the British army, when George Lewis the British officer becomes "Oupa [= grandfather] Lewies" of Vatmaar.

George Lewis is the founder and leader of the Vatmaar community, along with his previous subordinates (literally, subalterns). One of these is the 'coloured' man Charles Terreblanche – an ironic choice of surname in the South African context, in its notorious association with

the leader of the far-right, militant Afrikaner-Weerstandsbeweging (or AWB, meaning 'Afrikaner Resistance Movement'). *This* Terreblanche's socially central role in the community earns *him* the name "Oom [= uncle] Chai". The third of the Vatmaar leaders is the humblest, yet culturally most important figure of the three – whose single name, "Vuurmaak" (translatable as 'kindling a fire'), indicates his Griqua identity. He becomes the honoured "Ta [= father] Vuurmaak" to whom the young of Vatmaar are sent to hear the tales incorporating the history and lore of the early Griqua world (Scholtz, 2000:106-119).

I mention only three more of the enormous and fascinating cast of characters: "Oom Flip", the Mosotho man who leaves his Lesotho home as a young boy and becomes something like a slave to Afrikaners, but is later liberated with the help of the love of his life, Bet (a young, similarly enslaved Griqua woman), and Tant Vonnie Müller, a poor but queenly woman of German Baster origin. (Scholtz's reference to Vonnie and her daughters as "German Basters" [2000:134] signifies that the women were members of a Namibian mixed-race population group.)

Political, cultural and economic tactics

Though the Vatmaar stories are told without malice, they constantly reveal the political, cultural and economic exclusionary tactics employed against 'coloured' (and black) South Africans by whites. To the people of Vatmaar, Afrikaans is the language of their parents, created by slaves and by poor Flemish soldiers (Scholtz, 2000:122). Yet even the Englishman George Lewis says: "I cannot get on with a Dutchman [= Afrikaner]. They have no flag, and now they rally behind their taal" (53), and Oom Chai *notices* how the Afrikaner "dominee" or Church minister condescendingly makes Afrikaans the "home language" of Vatmaar's people, while reserving the term "mother tongue" for the white speakers of the language (53). Ta Vuurmaak recalls the prophecy of the Griqua seer Heitsi Eibib, who said of the white colonists: "And they will take what is ours by the blood of our bodies" (107). Nevertheless, Ta Vuurmaak notices, the signs of Griqua ancestry or "blood" are everywhere visible in 'other', especially 'white' communities; "our forefathers", he says, "lost everything, except their blood" (i.e. genes) (Scholtz, 2000:115). Similarly, repeated references to "Afrikaans, the language of Vatmaar" (Scholtz, 2000: 46, 353) are acts of reclamation and restitution, confirming the role of this text as a modest yet vital challenge to white Afrikaans literary and cultural hegemony.

4. Mongane (Wally) Serote: *Come and Hope with Me*

The third and final work discussed in this essay is M.W. Serote's beautiful, hymn-like poem *Come and Hope With Me* (Serote, 1994); a rhetorically remarkable piece in its combination of 'inward' or meditative and declamatory or 'public' qualities. The poem might be described as an ode, not on the theme of 'nation-building', but lyrically envisioning the ideal South African community: "... this is a country for all of us / even the killers and the torturers / ... / even for those we killed and those who cry forever / ... / we do not want any civil war" ... [the 'new' country,] "the child / ... must not die in our hands" (Serote, 1994:18). In its vivid yet delicate statements it is another exemplification of a 'cluster of cultures' image – a theme borne throughout on the slow cadences of its rhythm. The hope expressed in the poem is not facile or an erasure of anguish, referring as it does to "that April day / ... / when they shattered our hope / and like a crashing cup in a quiet house / the news reached us ... [that] in Dawn Park / Chris Hani / like a broken cup lay / ... / and time said nothing" (Serote, 1994:20, 21). The latter quotation shows Serote's beautiful, poignant use of the image of a small domestic tragedy to evoke the horror and shock felt at the assassination of one of the most revered black South African political and military leaders (Chris Hani) at a crucial point during the negotiations for the South African political transition.

In a passage near the beginning of this ode-like poem, Serote invokes the varied beauty of the South African landscape (4-5), but immediately the speaker moves on to the recognition that "our land needs peace / its soil is heavy and sags with blood" (6). Lamentation and indignation combine when he notes that South Africans need to emerge from "the squatterlife where traitors are bought and made" (7); "we must / live here, where we were born / ... / let us return ..." (Serote, 1994:8). The speaker addresses a whole spectrum of South Africans: "amaZulu / amaXhosa / Jew / baSotho / maNdebele come answer me / maVenda maSwati / civil war against whom by whom for whom / baTswana, maShangana / Boers, maPedi / the English / the teacher the worker" (11), and as he lovingly intones the variety of South Africa's people (compare also Serote, 1994:9), he demonstrates in his typography that harmony that is more than 'peaceful coexistence'. That this ideal is not easily achievable, is noted, for "it is inside care where a fight is taut" (Serote, 1994:15) – an expression that deftly transfers the notion of inter-cultural adjustment from a concept of conquest to the realm of mutual responsibilities. It provides a new and necessary 'family anecdote' to bring this essay full circle, though I add some final considerations below.

5. Choosing one's theorists

The role of literary theory and commentary in South Africa is an ongoing debate. How do we choose the literary theorists and theories most appropriate to our particular and present context? Is there something of a colonial cringe in the prominence constantly given to a few (mostly European and American) 'big names' in our discussions of local texts? Is there sufficient recognition of the theory and social analysis embedded in supposedly 'non-theoretical' writing such as novels and essays by creative writers? Why is so little critical attention given to South African poetry (with the exception of poetry in Afrikaans)? Why are African writers' essays (with the exception, always, of Coetzee) so rarely brought into our debates? Robert Young does not even list Achebe in the index of his *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction* – in contrast with Bart Moore-Gilbert's acknowledgement of this author's seminal influence on the discourse in his *Post-Colonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (1997). Moore-Gilbert's analysis is, moreover, a rare instance of the inclusion of a novelist among the cultural commentators cited in a text concerned with theory. Is there not a type of isolating elitism in the apparent preference for more abstruse frames of reference and vocabularies in published literary commentary? Are we sufficiently aware of the need to devise and select theories appropriate to our own context, and willing to adapt international perspectives to local realities and exigencies?

In *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction*, Young (2001:428) proposes replacing the term "postcolonial" with the adjective "tricontinental". Whatever the success of this suggestion by the author of *White Mythologies* (Young, 1990) is likely to be, it does seem to indicate a touch of discomfiture with the acclaimed adequacy and relevance of postcolonial theory to describe the position of marginalised and under-represented cultures. Stuart Hall makes the mild observation that "the decentring of the subject is not the destruction of the subject" (Hall, 1996:13). Much more trenchant is the critique of E. San Juan, Jr., specifically targeting Spivak and Bhabha in his contention that "in general post-colonial discourse mystifies the political/ideological effects of Western postmodernist hegemony and prevents change ... by espousing a metaphysics of textualism" (San Juan, Jr., 1999:22). Spivak (1996:291-292), in an interview, expounded her notion of the structural inarticulateness of the "subaltern" more fully, as follows:

[E]ven when one uttered, one was constructed by a certain kind of psychobiography that neutralizes one's utterance ... So, 'the subaltern cannot speak' means that even when the subaltern makes

an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act.

Contesting this type of position, E. San Juan (1999:152-153) raises the urgent question “How can we mobilize the capacity to speak and enunciate our unrepresentable positions of non-belonging” (described by him as “a devastating political act”)? Yet his own position see-saws dizzyingly here, between a recognition of “*unrepresentable* positions” and a “*capacity* to speak and enunciate” (emphases added).

This is where the issue Spivak raises, of “be[ing] *heard*” (Spivak, 1996: 292 – emphasis added) reasserts itself, and where the South African cultural sphere could be seen as containing unique opportunities for the practice and understanding of *postcolonialism* of a special kind. Our opportunity, as readers and teachers, to give recognition to, or simply to *hear* formerly elided voices is a responsibility of a special kind. In his new work, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001), Bill Ashcroft – without overlooking the complicating ironies of the situation – suggests that the “key ... to the whole question of transformation, lies in the fact that the written text is a social situation ... exist[ing] in the *participation* of ... writers and readers” (Ashcroft, 2001:59 – emphasis added).

I would link Ashcroft’s observation to the description, below, of the attitude that leaders in traditional societies are required to display in social deliberations (as outlined by the African philosopher Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba); they

must know how *to listen* attentively and tirelessly; *to pick up* the essence of each word spoken; *to observe* every look, every gesture, every silence; *to grasp* their respective significance ... and to elaborate ... arguments to counter ... unjust positions and/or to re-affirm or reinforce correct positions (Wamba-dia-Wamba; quoted in Bell, 2002:116).

If one were obliged to label the position I am attempting to build up here it might be called an exhortation (including a self-exhortation) to practise interculturalism in this country in a more consistently committed fashion. Attention paid to the literary and oral verbal art of our local cultures is a particularly enriching way of practising ‘postcolonialism’ in South Africa, because such texts “project ... the anguish of the actual in a way that the theoretical discussions of the same issues cannot achieve” (Gagiano, 2000:37).

On the issue of moving among ‘different’ cultures, Trinh T. Minh-ha provides the liberating perspective that “difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflicts” (Minh-ha, 1997:416). Her

insistence that “interdependency cannot be reduced to a mere question of mutual enslavement, [because it] also consists of creating a ground that belongs to no one, not even to the creator” (Minh-ha, 1997:418) accords with my notion that writers, readers and teachers have much to do to achieve such an ‘un-owned’ common ground on which cultural interchange can take place. What Minh-ha (1997:418) advocates is “look[ing] in from the outside while also looking out from the inside”, where “intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider”. In such a position, she avers, one “moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ ... and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness [that is ascribed to one]” (Minh-ha, 1997:418 – emphasis added).

To conclude, I cite J. Souter’s description of ‘identity politics’ and its limits – because, in her emphasis on the unstable, exciting, *fraught* area this is, her words recall Chinua Achebe’s notion of the function of inaugural and ever-adjusting ‘stories’ as we map our way into new territories:

In this sense, identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations, they unsettle the I; they are the sedimentation of the ‘we’ in the constitution of any I, the structuring present of alterity in the very formulation of the I. Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way (Souter, quoted in Hall & Du Gay, 1996:16).

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Key concepts:

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fictions of transformation
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Kernbegrippe:

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kultuurkompleks

