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Sarah Ruden

THOUGHTS ON MDA, NDEBELE AND BLACK SOUTH
AFRICAN WRITING AT THE MILLENNIUM

It is a frequent complaint in South African literary circles that the West is not giving black African literature a chance, because of racial prejudice. Given the adoption of white anti-apartheid writers into the Western canon, the neglect of black writers, both anti- and post-apartheid, is supposed to be a glaringly bigoted slight. As usual, claims about racism oversimplify. There are vast cultural differences that make black African authors—even the black authors writing in English in relatively cosmopolitan South Africa—hard for Americans and Europeans to appreciate. But the danger is that “cultural differences” will become the new cop-out. Critics should really fight this one. With a demography of the arts like the one that emerged during the late Roman Empire—original talent coming from everywhere but the political center—becoming clearer and clearer, there *are* reasons to bother about African literature. The cultural differences themselves are a reason; unlike anything conveyed by “multiculturalism” (a strange name for a movement promoting the works of American minority writers in a state of the most harmless, theme-park acculturation), they are startling and interesting, worth going through some at first uncongenial books to get at. Or this is how I found it, to the extent that the playwright Zakes Mda and the fiction writer Njabulo Ndebele became subversive pleasures of mine during the three years I spent behind battlements of Western culture, teaching in the Classics Department at the University of Cape Town.

But now I am hesitating, looking back at that first paragraph and feeling dubious about the direction in which I am taking this essay. I seem to be about to show myself as a bringer of American openness to a benighted, colonized land, a discoverer and sharer of the fascinating texts of an oppressed culture. But the truth is much cruder. I came to African literature out of guilt and fear. I was uncomfortable teaching Plato and Juvenal to tiny numbers of well-to-do white students, the only students I could attract. Whenever I became engrossed in a course or in a research problem, my Quaker activities (I became a “convinced Friend,” or Quaker convert, in Boston while I was finishing my doctorate at Harvard, the year before I moved to South Africa)

would interrupt and remind me how little I was giving to the country through my job, and yet how well I got paid compared to those South Africans who could not vote until 1994. It was hard for me to believe what I was getting away with. I thought that, any day, some person of integrity would investigate and pillory me, and it was my panic that in the end made me (absurdly, of course) resign from a tenure-track post. In the meantime, I began reading Ndebele and Mda, planning in the back of my head to use my new knowledge—somehow—to defend myself when I got caught.

I did not expect to admire these authors' work, and I still have reservations. What kept me reading it, even after I left the University of Cape Town, and even after I returned to the United States, was the opportunity to experience another world—and, to some extent, to experience it more vividly through the resistances its literature evoked in me. It is these resistances—partly characterizing me as a typical Westerner, partly, I am sure, just mine—I will concentrate on in writing about Ndebele and Mda. Though this is an unusual critical mode, I value it in having come to it the hard way.

Black South African literature, like the literature of sub-Saharan Africa in general, is founded on group experience. The African ideal of social life, now frequently voiced by Mandela's government, is that "a person is a person because of other people." Africans never sought to live by any principle that conflicts with this one, so that it is stubborn of Americans not to accept the failures of liberal individualism in Africa. Africans reject or mangle institutions like independent courts, salaried jobs, the nuclear family, and achievement-oriented education, because by making the individual free but responsible these conflict with Africans' deepest values. (I know I must seem condescending or even disingenuous when I describe striking differences between Africa and the West. Years ago, I sniffed at a missionary's account of how extraordinarily prone Africans are to twisted bowels. Now that I have lived in Africa I believe him—physically, Africans are really not like us. But I don't expect my own assertions about African culture to be believed by any Americans but those who have lived overseas; the undiluted American environment is too bland to foster any notion of real difference.) A literature of individual experience does not grow from African values, so that we Westerners, peering nervously out of our own experience (decades if not centuries ago, we stopped worrying about the self-abnegating Proverbs and turned wholly to the self-expressive Psalms), find it difficult to see any sympathetic values at all in

African literature. Powerful group values are there, but to us these are anti-values.

Zakes Mda (b. 1948; his full name is Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda, but nobody uses it) is the leading South African black playwright. One of his long-standing literary involvements is strikingly African: “development theatre,” or the acting out of useful messages for the illiterate. Here, group dynamics are key. In Mda’s book *When People Play People* (1993), there is as much emphasis on the collective reactions of villagers as on the content of plays like *Migrant Labour* and *Vaccination* that he and his university colleagues produced. The audiences were vitally part of the plays, as is the case whenever development projects use drama. By now, many non-governmental organizations have found it expedient to let clients do all of the actual play-acting: Africans are that devoted to performance. Even if they are not performing in the strict sense themselves at a given presentation, their attention is intense, and they create a sort of counter-performance of their own. There is a clear contrast between an African child or young woman, whose status at home is low and who does not normally have what we would call a “voice,” in an individual interview and the same person on or facing a stage. Mda’s novel *She Plays with the Darkness* (1996) forms a good illustration of the African ideology of performance: a young Lesotho girl’s refusal to dance leads to her withdrawing into a dark hut for many years and ceasing to age; she effectively stops living as a human being.

In his published, commercial plays, Mda makes many concessions to Western expectations of theater—naturally, as Western curricula have been, until very recently, the only official ones available in Africa. Mda’s main models are European and American classics. In the most academic of his plays, however, the author’s deep and particularly African solidarity with the live audience is plain. The characters speak in such general terms (complaint, resignation, hope) of such common experiences (poverty, corruption, violence, racial and class divisions) that they seem to be a cross-section of the public talking. A veteran miner in *The Hill* (1980) says:

What is not degrading in this land of gold? The medical examinations through which you’ll go, are they not degrading? When all the recruits stand naked irrespective of age and relationship, only to have the heartbeat examined, is that not degrading . . . ? Are all

these things not meant to humiliate us, to make us feel inadequate as men and fathers of our children, and to deprive us of human dignity, so that we may dig the gold of the white man with utmost submission?

There are no quirky characters here, no one with a special fault or gift, and conflicts come only from people having generally different experiences and political views. This makes the endings of the plays, from a Western point of view, especially odd. Personal revelation is what we expect a main character to undergo: like Oedipus, he or she should find out, or do, or be subject to, something that changes everything. In twentieth-century Western theater, the negation of such a change, as in *Death of a Salesman*, is as dramatic as its occurrence: the personal in any case contains most of the excitement of dramatic story-telling. In African drama like Mda's, Western influences work eerily with the demands of a culture that could not care less about the inner and individual lives of the characters. In *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses* (1988), which is set in an unnamed post-colonial African country, a prostitute and an exiled woman anti-apartheid activist become friends while waiting several days for a distribution of free rice. In the end, drawing strength from each other, they refuse the hand-out from careless and questionably motivated international donors working through a corrupt and sadistic local bureaucracy. To some degree, a Western-style coming-of-age theme is visible: the prostitute, inspired by the activist's idealism and endurance, elects to go away without the food meant to degrade her and make her dependent; the activist joyfully joins her in this assertion of dignity. But their decision is more like a political affiliation than an act of personal growth. The two women are now made available for building a new, just society, in defiance of black tyrannies, the white police state, and the whole manipulative West. Their motivation comes largely from without; while they acknowledge that they have had far more than their share of suffering (much of it inflicted by those closest to them) because they are women, they decline to make an issue of their gender identity or interests, but merely dedicate themselves to the larger struggle.

It is now time for us to change things. To liberate not only ourselves, but the men themselves, for we are all in bondage . . . !
When mothers whose sons have been ripped to pieces by bullets

are able to say “My son’s death is a victory for the people. His wasn’t just mine. He belonged to the people!” Then you know that victory is indeed certain, and liberation is just around the corner.

The similarities to Soviet thinking are of course rather overt, but communists in Africa did not have to foster collectivist sentiment: there was actually too much of it, even for them. Post-colonial socialist African states failed not because of people looking after themselves at the expense of their civic duty, but because of them devoting their energies to their extended families and tribes. Leftist African authors like Mda sometimes try to show that traditional and revolutionary loyalties can be combined. The *Joys of War* (1989) is a somewhat Brechtian meditation on war, but the ending goes far beyond Brecht in prescriptiveness. A hysterical little girl (in repeated frenzies of mourning for a doll she is convinced dies again and again) has been dragged across the country by her grandmother, in a forced search for the father who abandoned her to join a rebel underground. The girl finds him moments before he is to blow up an army base—and insists on joining him though warned of the danger. This ending and that of *And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses* resonate with the African idea of initiation. In most sub-Saharan African tribes, a person is held to grow into maturity in the moment of sacrifice to the group, a sacrifice so radical as to be symbolized by physical trauma: male circumcision or female genital mutilation, facial scarring or other painful decoration; at the least, a fast or a period of exile in the wilderness. Africans think that it is absurd to honor as mature a person who has defied the group because of private convictions or ambitions or needs.

It is partly allegiance to a large group that keeps Mda’s plays short, their language and plots simple, and their ideas cut and dried, so that the stories in themselves do not take over and rampage through the audience in what Westerners have thought, since Aristotle, is a highly desirable manner. Interpersonal conflict is haphazard and unconvincing in Mda, because the characters are not persons but general types, as in a medieval morality play. They do not usually have names, but are designated as “Man” or “Young Man” or the like. Sometimes Mda seems to be keeping a broad, impersonal message on the stage at any cost to probability. In *The Road* (1982), a white farmer struts his brutality (“I say love your enemy, but shoot him all the same”) before a stranger he at first thinks is a liberal white, but then discovers to be black; even after this, he confesses the sexual nature of his hatred and includes an account of bestiality.

As an American reading Mda, I used to think of the skits American high school students write and perform, so that their parents and friends can learn in one act that drug abuse is dangerous or that popularity isn't everything. But in Africa dramatic didacticism has a far different social resonance, that of modesty and respect, not of shallowness. Mda is talking to his people (or putatively to his people; whites have probably outnumbered blacks in his commercial audiences, merely because of economics) only about their general experience, and only in general terms, but, unlike Americans, Africans would not *want* him to think and speak for himself.

But what does a Western audience make of it all? Probably not a great deal: some of Mda's plays debuted in America and Europe, but they apparently did not take hold like Athol Fugard's drama, which has been causing great excitement since the seventies—and which did not come to look narrowly topical after apartheid ended. In America, I never heard of Mda, and in Africa his politics have a certain staleness. In South Africa, whites, still the main theater-goers, tend to treat Mda as a phrase (“the black playwright Zakes Mda”) rather than a cultural resource. He seems also to have sacrificed some post-apartheid black establishment patronage by his—in this case, Western-style—political engagement, particularly by his outspokenness about the African National Congress government's tendency to award jobs literally “to the family” and the consequent emigration of unemployed though highly qualified black professionals. While there is plenty of Fugard produced every season, I did not have a chance to see a Mda play during more than three years in the country.

This I really regret. Mda is superb in ritual—almost literal ritual. In *We Will Sing for the Fatherland* (1979), two derelict veterans of a war of liberation conduct what will turn out to be their own funeral. At the end, they are grudgingly buried in paupers' graves by the bribe-taking policeman who helped cause their death by allowing them to stay overnight in a public park, where they froze. But on the day before, they mourn themselves in detail, in parallel to the mendacious ceremonies the government is preparing for foreign dignitaries, for whose sake the derelicts are supposed to be removed from the park; and later, their ghosts look on and comment as the bodies are buried.

Sub-Saharan African funerals are usually events of vast importance, lasting several days and wiping out bank accounts. Family ghosts, or “ancestors,” are the guiding and judging inhabitants of the spiritual world; fertility and continuity are their mandate. The irony in the case of the bereft veterans is skill-

fully crafted—especially in their mock-heroic presentation of themselves (still living biologically, but dead in the ways that count in Africa), which parodies funeral “praise-singing”; dead warriors are particularly entitled to praise, particularly from their relatives. In this connection, the play’s title looks brilliantly creepy. The nation-state has stolen the praise the men earned from society—but perhaps not?—by helping to create that very nation-state.

Njabulo Ndebele is the best-established South African prose fiction writer; his short stories in the collection *Fools* (1983) are required reading in many secondary schools. This is not a strange fate for the book, as Ndebele’s involvement with education has been long and devoted. His most recent book is *Death of a Son* (1996), an adult literacy training text anachronistically about the shooting of a little boy by apartheid security forces in a black township. Turning the poor and illiterate into an audience, as Mda also has done, must be in part a matter of African pragmatism. But, like Tolstoy with his peasants’ schools and his primer, Mda and Ndebele have an unfakable earnestness. Ndebele’s chiefly concerns the young, and it is in depicting their integration into society that he expresses the typical African regard for the group. His emphasis on growing up is in general not about achievement and independence but about fitting in. In “Uncle,” a fatherless boy in a black township finds advice and inspiration in his jazz musician relative. The climactic scene is a street fight in which the opinion of the township—especially of its leading figures—is in the boy’s mind at every shift, as the uncle outwits his rival. There are also monologues from the uncle about history and politics, manhood and survival. In the end, the uncle rescues his sister and nephew from a mob, although he fails to help a young thief who is being kicked and beaten. The maternal uncle, a traditionally special figure to an African child, in this depiction totters between the freedoms that success among whites have conferred on him—he can disappear for days at a time on mysterious business, and he has money to spend on a prostitute, whom his nephew encounters by dismaying accident—and the demands and abuses of a community near collapse. But there is little narrative movement in the story, probably because the uncle’s status and authority cannot change: they are built in. Westerners (like myself) sometimes find Ndebele callow, reminding them of teenage-authored fiction in which a grown-up advisor is the *deus ex machina*, or in which the protagonist achieves happiness by doing what is expected. Again, a completely different view of human development is part of the reason for the

appreciation gap, which there has been no easy way to mend. Ndebele is all but ignored abroad.

But Ndebele's little boy characters escape from narratives of indoctrination and create some flawless evocations of childhood. In "Uncle," the unnamed nephew walks home after school with his friends, the value of each of whom is carefully nuanced in his mind according to private criteria. The boys are playing a hypnotic game of kicking objects, but the game suddenly tips them into the terrifying if familiar world of thuggish older boys—their own neighbors and brothers. In "The Test," Thoba, caught with other boys in a complicated, unvoiced dare, runs through the neighborhood without a shirt in the pouring rain, exhilarated at first but finally humiliated by the matriarchs at the bus stop. The unnamed protagonist in "The Prophetess" spills the "blessed" water he is fetching for his ailing mother; after some soul-searching he fills the bottle at a nearby tap, and is satisfied when the deception works. *Fools* is full of children's secrets, small dodges that bring a temporary privilege into the hardship and upheaval of the townships. It is almost as if, in his memories of childhood, customarily the time before initiation when a person is half outside society and not quite human (full humanity being conferred by incorporation into the tribe), Ndebele re-lives the freedom of inward revelation, and in this sense the stories *can* go somewhere. This is particularly true of "The Music of the Violin," in which Vukani savors his apartheid-promoting homework, the neat puzzle of leading questions that he is good at answering and that give him an excuse to hide in his room from his bullying, social-climbing parents and their guests; but he finally gives up the appearance of conformity because of the sheer pressure placed on him. While the adults are political stick figures, markers of "the co-option of the black middle class" and "what allowed apartheid to go on for so long," Vukani is real and intriguing. In a book of essays, *South African Literature and Culture: The Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991), Ndebele describes the intimate writing possible somewhere beyond the imperatives of the fight against political oppression. He has achieved this intimacy in large segments of his own work.

It is chiefly the boys of *Fools* who inspire affection for Ndebele among whites, an affection that has great practical importance. Despite more power for blacks in cultural spheres, it is still mostly whites who are making the decisions—most crucially about required school texts. These decisions have a weight almost unimaginable in the West, where the average pupil owns a number of books and can visit a library to indulge his curiosity and dilute the

school authorities' tastes. In South Africa and beyond, in spite of more opportunity for blacks than before, everything comes back to the judgment of the West, and this situation is not likely to change until black Africa has independent political and economic power.

Mda and Ndebele have contributed to the first-generation commercial literature of black Africa, making inescapably large concessions to Western genre, media and sentiment. This may not be such a calamity: it is through Western influence that Mda explores political ambivalence and Ndebele explores inner life. But I do not wish to speak here except in the most cautious and divided way. What do I want from African literature? What is it right to want? The long-term, big question is whether anybody will do *it*, invent one of those far-reaching forms that are the means for a marginal culture to achieve status and influence: forms like jazz, in music. The deficit in literature is partly due to the problem of language, but only partly.

The post-apartheid generation of authors might be expected to get a clearer view of what in Africa has universal appeal. In some ways, these authors are more cosmopolitan. Their predecessors, Mda and Ndebele among them, had an international education through exile, but constantly directed their attention back home to the "struggle," so that they were less objective and even had a tendency to emphasize defiantly what they knew outsiders would not like, such as assertion over story-telling. Their insistence on their difference would have been more useful—to themselves and to the next generation—had they not overlooked those features of African literary culture which are better on aesthetic grounds than what the West has now, even according to the West's own standards. Current American and European literature can be tiresome in its neglect of common sense, common tastes, and common use. Most of a century ago, Virginia Woolf defended the rights of the common reader (meaning an old-fashioned seeker after pleasure and enlightenment in books) both explicitly and—this is more important—through her style. Now, during the post-modern era, she must be spinning in her grave. Ordinary Africans—never separated from their own most vital literary traditions—in their communication create a sharp contrast to us. At a conference of rural medical practitioners, a group of nurses gets up on the platform and dances to a chant composed on the spot: "Girl, if you go with many men, / Be wise, use a condom." African joy in words has not found a means of wide commercial propagation in today's circumstances, however, and remains trapped in ob-

scurity. I am sorry to take up the cliché about the gift of “rhythm,” but it is a cliché substantiated by the strong custom of group singing and dancing. (Swaying, flouncing choirs seem to be the only unkillable institution in all of South African society; “massed” choir events draw audiences of thousands.) Rhythm is linked to performance. In putting aside performance, Western literature has cut off a main food supply. If there is no performance, sound is unimportant. Poetry and rhetoric fall apart; literature, if you can call it that, can be presented any old way—as Ndebele and Mda, unchallenged by present Western standards, present it in their frequently awkward, unattractive phrasing. As their ancestors (or ours either) never would have done, they concentrate on what they say, not on how they say it. They have missed the big party.

It is necessary to be at the same time closer to and farther away from an indigenous culture than these authors are in order to make it communicate. But the older generation of black politicians, if not of writers (Mda and Ndebele are innocent), seems to be keeping younger black authors from occupying that fertile place, by turning polarizations into loyalty tests. There is pressure on young writers to use their home languages—pressure empty of respect for the fact that a professional writer composing in Sotho, for example, not only cannot fulfill his ambitions but will not even eat bread. Most Sotho speakers, even most of those who can read, cannot afford to buy a book. This is only one blockage—among so many that I could not even find a successful young black writer whose work I could quote as an example of rising talent. (There is a great deal of talent around, but it is all underdeveloped, little-known, frustrated talent.) In general, blockages take the form of discouragement from reconciliation with white culture. The elders studied Shakespeare at mission schools (which apartheid later stamped out) and foreign universities, but now are insisting that, for blacks, the study of Shakespeare is oppression.

Sharing and reconciliation are common desires that come up against the common objection that their fulfillment is not possible when one side is much more powerful; it is a corollary of this objection that the imbalance necessarily weights cultural relations, which are ideally about free communication, down to the level of political relations dependent on power. But if this is true, there is never any way out. The artists in the less powerful group can react only after a revolution, through authoritarian impositions, which do nothing to the general situation but turn it around. The developing new South African cultural establishment is not yet powerful enough to effect this program, but its attempts to have been as repellent as such attempts generally are, and as

powerfully against the interests of those who have the gift of expression and want to develop it, and of those waiting to hear them. I hope that in the long term interaction gets a chance, with the West on its side having learned to be more fair.

I'm stupid, aren't I? Africans laugh heartily at the idea of the West ever being fair, even when the West is trying. But how am I supposed to conclude this essay?

Well, how would a good Quaker do it? If Quakers were critics, they would probably show the literary version of an attitude Africans would recognize from their tribal cultures: that the aim of judgment should not be reward or punishment, but peace, the reintegration and growth of the community. The goal of criticism would be, according to Quakers—and Africans—not to be right, not to put an author in his place according to his deserts, but to help the community of readers and writers to thrive. In practice, this would mean not a rejection of discrimination, but rather the opposite, the development of a more acute clarity. As a tool in an important process, judgment tends to get more care and respect than as an end in itself; to this, Quaker Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business bear witness: in disputes, Quakers concentrate on the practical value of the disputed object to individuals—a topic open to precise investigation and thus attractive to consensus—and not on such vague and divisive topics as the ethics and intelligence of opponents. In talking about literature, Quakers concentrate on whether a particular work “speaks to their [individual] conditions,” and why or why not, questions that avoid the validating or rejecting pose of the mainline reader and critic, yet affirm the right to seek personal meaning and to communicate an experience of that seeking. Africans will probably never express their strong impulses toward community-building through the attention to the individual evident in “Quaker process”; but it would be narrow-minded of me to believe that Africans will not work out other ways to build communities, including literary communities, in the modern world.

I come back with confidence to Quaker phrasing: African literature, in many ways, speaks to my condition. This is the model for criticism I arrived at after teaching Classics in South Africa—but also after publishing a number of sarcastic, condescending reviews, which separated me from my own experience as well as from other people. Pray for me now.

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