

Interviews

Oral Traditions

Interview with Lewis Nkosi During his Visit to South Africa¹

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LL Lewis, what was the deciding factor that resulted in your leaving South Africa?

LN Well, in fact, it was a very strange occurrence. I was working for *Drum* and *Golden City Post* at the time—and there was a visiting American who was head of the Foundation, and Nat Nakase took me to dinner at the man's house, called *MISTER WHITE* —(LN emphasis) and it was very strange—he was the head of the Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg. And so we met this man there and there was a lot of discussion and arguments with some Afrikaner professors, and this guy was so impressed with us—he wanted to come to the townships with us—and when he got back to the United States—he knew people at Harvard, who were running the Newman Foundation and he said he had met intelligent intellectuals in Johannesburg—black guys—and he would like someone like me to apply to the Foundation; and what you did then was send specimens of your writing to the Newman Foundation and if you were accepted, then they invited you to Harvard. But the Government of the day

¹ The interview was conducted on April 10 2003 at the Rob Roy Hotel, Durban Kwa-Zulu Natal.

refused to give me a passport when I got this offer, and I became quite reconciled with the idea that I wasn't going to leave. And then, my friend Harold Wolpe—who is dead now— he was a lawyer but I was a friend of the family—and I always used to help Anne-Marie with the children when Harold was arrested or was away—so, I was quite close to the family. Harold was so angry about this refusal of the passport without even the courtesy of an explanation—so he just combed the Statute book until he found this law, that *nobody, but nobody*, had ever used before in South Africa—(LN in a ponderous mocking tone) THE. DEPARTURE. FROM. SOUTH AFRICA. ACT. And he threatened to take the South African Government to the Supreme Court if they didn't give me a piece of paper *immediately* within a week. And it would have taken the Government changing the law by introducing a Bill in Parliament—you know—just for one person who was not even an activist—except *writing* against apartheid—so in the end they decided that it was not worth it—give him the papers, but let him fuck off. And what you do is to sign this piece of paper saying you agree you are not going to come back.

LL Ever?

LN Ever—so long you can show that you have no business assets—you are not going to take any capital out of the country—[smiles] but, you know, a black boy (amused laugh) what capital has *he* got to take out of the country?

LL Lewis, in a previous interview you said that language is the key to your roots, yes?—why then do you use so little of your own language in your writing?

LN Ah yes, I didn't exactly put it that way—that it is a key to my roots—I said that a lot of what goes on in my writing, there is my language behind it, sometimes you don't even notice—I mean, it isn't a question of using Zulu—you know—linguistic terms in order to show that you are in touch with your language—you hear it in the tonalities of the English language when it's the Black people speaking—like in *Mating Birds* when its Mamlambo at Cato Manor laughing about stains on white women's undergarments and she uses certain expressions—she uses certain *kinds* of humour—and I'm sure it wouldn't be *there*, unless I had grown up in that environment—so when I come back to the country, this automatically brings back memories—just talking to these people in Zulu and that guy, [LN referring to the gate guards at the Rob

Roy entrance] when he was laughing at what I was saying—we were connecting about something that is common to us and that was through language obviously, but I don't deliberately exploit this—in the same way certain people think they have to translate from their mother tongue to English in order to show that they are in touch with their roots.

LL You made an interesting point in your recent video [*Fugitive Memories of Place*—David Basckin and Zoe Molver]—you said that you have never suffered from 'homesickness'.

LN [Thoughtful] No

LL Please to elaborate?

LN Because I think homesickness is precisely that—it's a sickness ... [laughs].

LL Really?

LN Ja [still laughing] I mean, I am not *sick*!

LL But Lewis, surely you must miss or long for your home, your country, sometimes, yes?

LN No ... no, you know, there are certain *ways* of *missing* the country, of *missing* the sea for example, missing *Durban*, which is not homesickness.

LL It is a longing then, or nostalgia—perhaps a better word?

LN It is not even a longing to come back to live or anything like that—it is something *akin* to nostalgia, or memories of the past. And what comes through to me most of the time, which really strikes the cords that produce those resonances, is when I hear township music, like on the radio in Switzerland, and suddenly I start dancing to it and I remember how people used to dance—but *that* I don't call homesickness—I just think of it as missing your country sometimes- which occasionally happens—I mean, everybody misses their roots, their childhood sights—that's why I come to visit here—looking at that valley [we are facing the Valley of a Thousand Hills which includes Embo to the right

where Lewis lived as young child] and thinking—ah, this is where I grew up—but I can't see myself thinking ... [mock passion and pointing to the scenery below] *Ah ... I'd like to go back to live in a hut in the middle of all this bush!*

LL So Lewis, in Europe, how do you maintain your African identity, if at all?

LN Oh, I don't have a *compulsion* to maintain what is called an African identity—I really don't think about it that way. I see myself as an African, of course, but basically as a South African. I'd like to cite a statement that someone like Spivak made—yes, she is an Indian, she is a philosopher, she is a literary scholar and she has lived in America most of the time—and she was talking about these multiple identities that post-colonial people choose from—and she said well you make use of them as is required by the circumstances—she said that when I arrive at London Airport and people talk to me in a certain way or challenge me on the grounds of who I am or how I look- then I feel, you know, like an *Indian*. So identities, they are very complicated things—there are times when I don't even think about whether I'm an African or not. I definitely have never thought of myself as a *European*, but, there are times when I don't think of my African identity—when I just think I am *me*, or when I think I am a *writer*, or when I think I am a *novelist* and or, you know, but then there are times when I hear people denigrating what is supposed to be African, so they are telling lies about Africa or about my country, when suddenly *that* other identity rears up, which is a defence of my heritage, if you want to call it that—so, I mean, identities are *contingent*—meaning that they rear their heads when they are needed for, you know, one reason or the other, they are like clothes that you wear—I mean, you don't wear the same clothes everyday?

LL Quite so—I have the same experience—I am from Europe but I live in South Africa and agree with your views on ways of missing one's country and interchangeable identities. But now an interesting question for me, but possible not for you—is that having considered the *titles* of your works, such as the *Rhythm of Violence, Home and Exile, The Transplanted Heart, Tasks and Masks, A Voice from Detention, The Prisoner, The Forbidden Dialogue*. I seem to sense a dark pilgrimage here. Lewis, why *these* titles in particular?

LN Well, I don't know

LL You did not consciously decide on these?

LN No, no, these are things that I, well yes, I entrust my life into your hands for that, so *you* work it out [laughing].

LL I will try—but then, on the same note—why a *black* psychiatrist—why not just *any* psychiatrist?

LN [Animated] Oh yes, one has to use the black psychiatrist—first of all—because it ties up with the theme of this guy being the first black psychiatrist—which one wants to emphasise, because it was an unusual thing in London, and black does not actually mean African—he is supposedly a Coloured South African because his father was white and so he is related to this white woman through their father. *But*, it immediately raises certain issues when a white woman is visiting a *black* psychiatrist—rather than *any* psychiatrist—you immediately know something is going to happen there—the news is being leaked [laughs] so its an easy way of evoking a situation that is going to become important automatically—any way.

LL Ah Lewis, so you *do* consider your titles!

LN [Laughing] I leave you to work those others out!

LL Your writings are firmly rooted in South Africa, Lewis, why is this? You don't seem to include anything about the other countries you have been to—your work is set in the South African context always, yes?

LN Yes, that is quite interesting—I think this is very common amongst South Africans, black exiles, anyway. Very rarely do they write about the societies in which they live, in the way that say V.S. Naipaul will situate his novels in Britain and get away with it. One way of answering that question is by retelling the joke that you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy—which basically means that if one is interested in 'mining' one's memories, what one remembers of the country is what comes to the forefront of your consciousness most of the time. And I have never felt close enough to the places I live in to think that I want to devote my life writing about those societies. English society, for example, is too complicated for me—I can write about South Africans in London, but to write about

'Buckinghamshire' [LN mimicking in exaggerated English accent] that kind of story is what British writers can so ably handle in tonalities of speech that are related to those northern people—you know—its just- I don't feel emotionally linked to that kind of thing.

LL Lewis, I feel that there is a lot of bitterness underlying your writing—in *Mating Birds*, for example, on one single page, you mention the words 'rage' and 'anger' six times. I also find the landscape in *Mating Birds* to be very angry—even the picture on the cover somehow conveys a sense of anger. Perhaps you won't agree, but that is how I read it. Does your writing bring some sense of healing for this latent anger and hurt? Because Lewis, there must be some sense of anger, some residue of hurt left in you as an exile? About the way you were treated, about the way your people were treated, about all the collective injustice you experienced and witnessed as a Black South African—you yourself tellingly used that wonderfully eloquent expression 'fuck off' earlier, which neatly underscores a particular emotive viewpoint?

LN [Pensive] I didn't write it to expunge or to heal a wound—I tried to situate myself into the situation of someone treated in a certain way, expelled from school, and needing recognition which is denied him and so this is, if I may say so, a re-presentation rather than a kind of psychotherapy which, once you have written about it, you got it out of your system—really, I didn't feel that way, and most people who have read *Mating Birds* end up saying you know the strange thing about *Mating Birds* is how it is without bitterness, it is full of humour, and the way you write about Veronica for example—there is more love there than hatred, which is true, I think—that I am probably more in love with her than hating her and you can tell in the way she is treated when she is making those preposterous statements in court—that Sibiya is looking at her, and instead of thinking—how *disgusting*, how *could* you, he's thinking—my goodness, she's just like a novelist—she's inventing stories!

LL Lewis, you admit that when you eventually get close to Veronica, she does not live up to the ideal—and that the ideal 'landscape' only exists in the imagination?

LN Ja, this is a philosophical statement. You try to word certain assumptions with—you know, how do you say it?—about positivist proof of things?—that when you look at the world you assume the world is supposed to

be like *that*—and then when you actually confront the world at close range, you realise that, no, it is more normal than you supposed it was, and the same thing when you look at a white woman for the first time and you think oh, she's going to be some *fantastic* sexual experience—maybe it will be—but you wake up in the morning lying side by side she's just a woman, so you stop thinking about it as in its idealised form—when things are distant always they become idealised in a sense—so what I'm trying to say is, some of the things you put in a novel are really a way of expectation, a way of philosophical discussion of certain issues, not because of something actually is supposed to have happened that way in the situation—it's a way of making a statement. But I make a statement, for example, based on the Hegelian notion of recognition in which the other needs the gaze of the other, in order to achieve full identity—that is a very Hegelian statement—so it isn't as if when this Sibiya looks at the girl on the beach and for the first time she looks straight in his eyes and then they 'see' each other for the first time—it isn't as if this is a phenomenal thing that was happening just that day—it was in a sense my way of applying the Hegelian notion of the gaze and recognition and the answering gaze and so on. So, the novelist brings all the readings and philosophical assumptions into creating situations. That is why the author is called the *author*—they have the *authority* to write what they like—and you know, authors tell most terrible lies!!

LL ... but at the same time you are creating an identity for Sibiya and Veronica—it again comes back to the question of *identity*.

LN Ja, that's true, that's true

LL ... and in order to maintain that identity, they also have to operate within the limits of their

LN Situation? Yes, I am surprised, astonished, that one of the criticisms offered by somebody—and I think it was a woman critic—that Lewis Nkosi doesn't allow Veronica to develop her own perspective, her own identity, so everything is seen from this Sibiya's perspective—that seems to me such a *reductionist* and crude way of thinking about that situation—first of all, because this was in the apartheid era, where this Sibiya will not know *what* Veronica is thinking. So what would be the point of allowing her to assume a centre of consciousness since she is being gazed at by this black boy, you know,—he is attracted to her—and the only time of course she speaks, is in court when she's

lying, but there is also a moment when she is talking to this man who visits her and suddenly you see what kind of person she is—that she is really a good woman when she says ‘why don’t you let the native go why do you bother’—because she’s trying to quieten down, calm down this man who is getting sexually jealous.

LL I think that writers both create and recreate places and spaces- do you think this is valid in terms of you writing, Lewis ?

LN I’m sure this is true—I mean, Durban, Cato Manor is *there* in *Mating Birds* and certainly a share of Zululand is in *Mating Birds*—because there is a description of the sea seen from Eshowe—from the *highlands* of Eshowe. Firstly we could see the sea from the school and we could see the ships, because we were high enough to see the ships beyond the horizon but if we were down there by the coast you wouldn’t have been able to see those ships and how the sea looks at different times of the day—in the morning, it is flecked with sunlight and in the evening all of those are *strands* of memory about place and about whether it automatically gets into your writing.

LL Your description of the courts—I had to reconstruct a place familiar to me, because it is not in reality as you describe it in your book ?

LN Ja, look, I didn’t even bother to get the courts—I mean

LL You artistically recreated place?

LN I realistically reproduced. In fact Lindy [Lindy Stiebel, Department of English University of Durban Westville KZN] pointed this out after reading *Mating Birds*—because we were driving from Berea on the top of Musgrave Road past the gardens, the Botanic Gardens and I said I wanted to see the city from the heights of this place in Durban—looking down on the centre of Durban from on high—and this is a very *good* perspective to describe the city from- so I just automatically I used this travelling from the cells to the magistrates courts or whatever you know, from seeing the city from that perspective. [LN reflective] but I wasn’t even conscious of that I was trying to reproduce. My aunt got married to the Khumalo’s and they lived on this plateau near the Drakensberg mountains, and there is this scene where these guys are drinking beer at night, and were sitting under the trees and singing rural songs

[LN singing a simple tune in varying intonation and tapping on the table with a far away look in his eyes]:

Ake ngiy'e Kwa Zulu ngashiy'u Baba
Ake ngiy'e Kwa Zulu ngashiy'u Baba
Ake ngiy'e Kwa Zulu ngashiy'u Baba

[LL: English translation: I must go to Kwa Zulu because I left my father—This is a very rural song which means that he is somewhere else where he is happy, but at the same time he *needs* to go back because of his family.]

LN So I put all these things in my novels, you see, and I'm aware of where it comes from.

LL Lewis, the tune alone expresses a longing for home—it is so sad! [a while of reflective silence—LN gazing at the hills and we comment on round huts vs square spaces and no spaces.]

LL I don't know if you will agree Lewis, but I feel that your writing is sometimes perhaps an exploration of both belonging and alienation ...?

LN Mmm, its too *bold*, because I don't know what it actually means—alienation—what would alienation mean in my

LL It's all there in your song, Lewis. I think that it would probably include the fact that you had to leave the known for the unknown—a new place, and this then juxtaposed against your sense of belonging in *this landscape*, these two concepts or themes.

LN Ja, I am really not aware—to me it just seems natural—I mean, I am of the country, but also already outside of the country, so I'm able to see the country from a distance that is not permitted to people who had never left the country.

LL Yes—you said at some point that when you leave your own country to live elsewhere, you discovered things that you didn't know or have suppressed. What are these 'things', Lewis?

LN Well, maybe you discover for example that you don't need white people as *white* people, something that people going out of the country probably suppress, or even loving those others and its, you know, its so complicated I cant even describe—you have to pick out a whole lot of things. That repressed is in my terminologies of Freudian terminologies doesn't mean consciously trying to conceal things—things that are simply not obvious to you, and then you discover them by having been *removed* from those things—for example: I discovered certain things about *speech* that had not been very obvious to me—how Zulu people speak very slowly in the traditional mode—you don't just go in and blunder into explanation about this and speak too fast—there is something about eloquence that is disturbing to village elders if you speak too fast. So you have people saying [drags out the words at length] 'mmm ... y e s, y e b o, and I discovered that this was annoying me as it took so much time and I wanted to get it over with—so you have Sibiya in jail trying to explain what happened between him and the girl and these people are listening to him and thinking, oh my goodness, he is no longer one of us; he speaks too fast, and also, making a judgement, an ecstatic judgement that is based precisely on the rapidity of his speech and thinking oh ja, he must not be telling the truth if he speaks so fast—it means that he actually *did* rape the girl or whatever, but they will not *say* it—so yes, those are some of the things you discover when you are removed from your own environment—[retrospectively] I probably could have discovered it just living in the urban areas.

LL [Lunch arrives] Lewis—lets have lunch—bon appetite and thank you for spending your day with me.

