

Introduction: The Politics of Interpretation/ Theory

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[W]e never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions (Jameson 1981:9).

Introduction

This special edition of *Alternation* was initially conceived as one on 'Literature and Politics' and invitations for contributions were sent out with this focus in mind. As the contributions poured in it was clear that a restrictive (narrow) focus on the topic in question would not yield the desired results and that a relative degree of flexibility would beneficially broaden the scope of focus. Of course this flexibility did not mean an 'anything goes' kind of leeway to any contribution that did not refer, even if obliquely, to either the political realm or literature.

In my view the flexibility has resulted in a final product that gravitates towards a special focus on the politics of culture or cultural politics with a central thrust on the southern tip of the African

continent. This has been done without necessarily compromising on the literary bias of the focus, as the majority of the contributions will attest, or totally abandoning the essence of the initial project which, as can be inferred, is represented in a few papers.

The contributions have come from different institutions within the country and, not only from established academics but also, and, most significantly, from postgraduate students who are busy carving out a niche for themselves in the field of publication. Trying to empower postgraduate students is a trend that *Alternation* has gradually adopted in a couple of past issues so this is a continuation in that direction, especially with regard to the critical engagement of the tradition of Critical scholarship.

Therefore, Instead of providing some form of signposting for the readers by alluding to the gist of each of the contributions here, we felt that the table of contents will suffice to whet the appetite of the readers satisfy their curiosity, rather than pre-empting their responses with our own (mis)-readings of the essays. Even so, I provide brief summaries of the *aims* and basic *arguments* the authors state and highlight in their contributions. This serves to provide some form of introduction to the thought and critical fields of the different authors.



Emmanuel M. Mgqwashu focuses his contribution on the 'politics of pedagogy in the Humanities' as well as what the current challenges comprise of with regard to Language Teaching. Arguing that the (South Africa) university needs to be much more closely related to the country's citizens, he points to the challenge for developing appropriate pedagogic practices. With his notion of the 'politics of pedagogy', he explains pedagogic practices in various disciplines in the Humanities faculty. Against this background, he then engages the question of teaching practice that 'tends to conceal methods, theories and strategies involved in arriving at certain discipline specific conclusions within academic discourses'. This is

followed by an explication of how such pedagogy makes students irrelevant to the needs and demands of our society.

In his engagement of the 'Literature and Politics' complex, Sikhumbuzo Mngadi shows that the space inhabited by the copula raises a number of important composite issues—especially as it relates to the formalist approach(es) to literature. He shows how J.M. Coetzee's writing has continued to provide a needed object for critics and critique in the South African situation, i.e. on both sides of the politics/ poetics divide. Focusing on Coetzee's 'Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State'—first published in the *New York Times Book Review* of 1986—his contribution untangles related issues from both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Rather than seeing a 'peaceful' link signalled by the copula, he elaborates on how this constitutes an 'arena of great critical activity', as well as the continued importance of Coetzee's essay.

Pumla Dineo Gqola's contribution questions the significance of 'representations of Blackwomen in struggle iconography' beyond the focuses on Black Consciousness activists and artists. This is done through her problematising of existing 'masculinist biases in some parts of the liberation movement'. She then examines some of the engagements with 'the histories of this typecasting of the category "Blackwomen" in contemporary South African narratives concerned with the memorialising of the anti-apartheid struggle'. Even though some old stereotypes emerge in some of the narratives analysed, there are also 'some creative endeavours' that 'demonstrate an assortment of angles from and devices through which to deconstruct this legacy of typecasting'. Important in her argument is that the existing 'heterogeneity of all human clusters', including that of 'blackwomen', need to be taken seriously beyond typecasting and stereotyping. This will remove the 'imposed homogeneity which makes control and subjugation [of blackwomen] eas[y]'.

Johan van Wyk's translation of 'Die Rigting van die Afrikaanse Letterkunde' ([1939]; 1959), provides some insight into the thought of N.P. Van Wyk Louw at the time. Van Wyk Louw argued that it is quite problematic to chart the direction of an intellectual trend 'of your own time'. On the one hand, one is blinded by one's own 'full range of [human] emotions' and how one posits a future clouded by our own 'will and desire'. On the other hand, such crystal ball gazing is common to the futurist

scenarios of ideologues—he mentions that of the ‘communist, a liberal or a nationalist’. These opening remarks are followed by problematisations of the local-international-national nexuses. In these he also refers to new trends in the literature of the time that, in his opinion, did not break with the old but merely ‘completed’ it. He also brings in the problematics related to the constitution of the/ a ‘nation’ or ‘nation building in our current parlance. Sensitively, he focuses throughout on the problematic of the closeness of literature to personal ‘experience’, or what scholars have labelled as his ‘existentialism’. Van Wyk Louw concludes his essay with perspectives on 1) the articulation of a ‘colonial’ and ‘local’ literature; 2) the ‘responsibility of thinking’; 3) the production of gender- and 4) ‘working life’- sensitive literature; 5) literature that represents the ‘Bantu’ as ‘human’; and 6) ‘the expression of the human’s immediate relationship with the cosmos’. Finally, he reflects on the challenges related to the form - word nexus and the ‘middle class sentiments’ captured in the ‘literature of school books’.

Mabogo P. More’s ‘Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher’, locates and positions Steve Biko within the existentialist philosophical frame. Even though one cannot limit Biko’s contribution to the Black Consciousness Movement and the liberation struggle to ‘existentialism’, More provides some significant insights to relevant links to this philosophical tradition. He first explicates the trend of Africana Existentialist Philosophy, significant philosophical influences on Biko, the latter’s stance on ‘racism’ from within the BC ‘philosophy, and then addresses themes related to the questions of ‘identity’, ‘liberation’, and ‘bad faith’. His aim with his essay is to ‘break with the prevailing tendency of interpreting Biko’s thinking singularly as political to the almost total exclusion of the philosophical’. He suggests that ‘as a radical Africana existentialist philosopher, Biko was simultaneously, like most radical Africana existentialists ... a critical race and liberation theorist.

In ‘Gramsci on Intellectuals and Culture ...’, Pravina Pillay argues for a two-fold significance of Antonio Gramsci’s significance for Africa and post-apartheid South Africa. This first is that he provided an ‘elaborated theory that places intellectuals on the cusp of social transformation in societies’. The second is that he made a very important contribution through his notion of ‘hegemony’ which refers to ‘ideological control and more crucially, consent’. She further shows that these ideas

strongly resonate with President Thabo Mbeki's speeches on the topic of the African Renaissance that question the function of intellectuals in society, claim that the masses of South Africans have mandated the ANC to govern, and, thirdly, challenge the masses of the people of our country not to be complacent but be active participants in the governance of the land.

Thengani Ngwenya's study of Sindiwe Magona's two volume autobiography shows how, through 'inherently subversive modes of self-definition', she challenges hegemonic views about gender, race and ethnicity. In order to introduce this focus he provides an argument that centrally revolves around Antonio Gramsci notion of hegemony, dating from the 1930s. This notion is also linked to the question of self-representation. So, starting from such a notion of hegemony, his essay examines the ways in which Magona's self-portrayal in her autobiography 'consciously challenges assumptions underpinning her community's cultural values and the political ideology of racial segregation'. It also shows how there has been some evolution in Magona's 'feminist consciousness'. Her autobiography, then, becomes the vehicle for her to 'elaborate her own version of African feminism which is simultaneously critical and supportive of certain aspects of the African world-view'. In his view she succeeds with this approach, because she successfully challenges hegemonic cultural and political practices related to 'common sense' in this cultural paradigm.

V.M. Sisi Maqagi's 'She's There ...' studies the 'presencing' strategies in Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and 'Mrs Plum'. Her choice of some of the women that Mphahlele represents provides insights into how these women develop a 'dynamism and determination in articulating their presence within communities in transition'. In this regard, it is important to not that—and quoting Derrida—that the subject 'category' can not be comprehended apart from the notion of 'presence'. So, in his portrayal of women as 'active participants in the transformation of their emerging societies' Mphahlele privileges their subjecthood and their presence, she argues.

In her focus on *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe, Minesh Dass points to the possibility of appreciating the generalised significance of the novel. Such generalisation, she argues, is possible through the registering of 'the loss of traditional notions of what constitutes a community, while engaging a new, humane community characterised by

both hybridity and similarity'. She also points to the 'many self-reflexive remarks' present in the novel and that they have the 'unusual effect of implicating the reader in the story being told'. The essay then explains these 'supposed "paradoxes"' in terms of the complex use of the word 'our' in the title and the second-person narration of the novel. Her explanation—especially as it relates to the 'our' and 'you' pronouns—draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's linguistic and literary theories. By utilising some of his concepts, she then argues that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* 'is a novel that anticipates, from its readers, a responsible response'.

The essay by Olivia Vermaak focuses on Dambudzo Marechera's *The Black Insider*. Her study represents her contribution to the rethinking of Marechera 'in the light of his representation of language'. In his representation of language 'terms such as "humanity" have been appropriated for ends that make "the notion of the human more appealing than humanity"'. Such a view implies, she argues, that 'the battles over these terms and the values that they define are, perforce, battles over language'. As such, she feels that Marechera's writing should not be labelled—'categorised'—but, as is evident from *The Black Insider*, that it constitutes 'a complex and eloquent testimony to the redundancy of boundaries'. In addition, even as one concedes that such categories are continuously formed and boundaries drawn, the fact of the matter remains that even as they are constituted, it may figure a pre-emptive act before the full significance of his writings has been assessed and appreciated—especially if they are drawn from existing categories that do not fit the complexity of the author's writing.

Hervé Mitoumba Tindy's essay focuses on the political dimension of Marecher's *Black Sunlight*. The essay first frames the novel's subject-matter and the role of the writer in this framing. It then progresses to the novel's re-imagining of the colonial encounter and its multiple implications, focusing on the relationship between history and aesthetics. It further deals with the novel's implicit and explicit view that, 'whereas traditional forms of power are violent and spectacular, negotiated and/ or rehabilitative forms of social regulation are no less violent'. Theoretically, the argument is that *Black Sunlight* 'adapts the Althusserian model of the operation of power by recasting it as a basis for reading the ruses of realism'. Thus, 'the appearance of the modern bureaucratic systems in the course of the novel—the church,

the school, the prison and the psychiatric asylum—and the manner in which these systems are shown to be woven into the fabric of the lives of the novel's subjects, constitute the political thrust of *Black Sunlight*', Tindy argues.

N.N. Mathonsi's 'Social Concerns in C.T. Msimang's *IZULU ELADUMA ESANDLWANA*', starts off by pointing to the fact that social concern and commitment (in literature) presuppose 'preparedness and ability to tackle social problems, conflicts, and needs besetting the society'. This hermeneutic predisposition—arising from cultural, political, religious, and educational challenges (amongst others) that Africans have historically experienced—brought authors 'to reflect on them and their causes, and to offer solutions'. Pointing to the fact that if authors identify and address 'one or two' social ills—not too many—they should then create 'a metaphoric image, consisting of fictional characters and events, which reflect the social ills the author is highlighting'. These then function as a conduit for both 'the manifestations of the ills' and the suggestion of 'workable solutions'. Against the background of this view, Mathonsi then contextualises Msimang's play and argues that it functions analogically, i.e. in terms of conditions and experiences at Sandlwana and the experiences of blacks in 1970s South Africa—'[t]he past is considered as exemplary to the present in order to throw light on present day developments'. In terms of the present—as is the case with the fictional representation of the past—the challenge is then for African people to take up their responsibility with regard to current cultural, religious, social and economic challenges, and not merely rely on a 'moral high ground'.

Given that 'successive white minority regimes attempted to define individuals according to reified notions of race and ethnicity, and demarcate "race" groups deemed to have essential origins from other similarly constructed groups', Goolam Vahed's contribution is a researched narrativisation of the life of the Malay cricketer and school teacher, Imam Sulayman Kirsten, popularly known as 'Solly'. It functions as a sample for the study of 'identity construction in twentieth-century South Africa' in our diverse country where 'strong sanctions were imposed on those transcending narrowly inscribed race boundaries' during the heady days of apartheid. Vahed started his study with Solly 'recounting his life in a non-directive manner'. This was followed by 'specific queries during the writing process

to fill gaps and clarify issues'. Even so, he says, 'Solly, well-educated and self-assured, was instrumental in determining the flow of research'. His introductory paragraph also provides some pointers to the problematising questions the biography addresses, e.g. the formation and sustaining of racial stereotypes; the importance of culture, religion, class and other factors in shaping identities; the question whether racial stereotypes pre-dated apartheid; the 'discursive power' of 'race discourse'; the significance of racial and ethnic identities in the day-to-day interpretation of social behaviour; and the impact of this complex on our new 'democratic non-racial order'. So, with the biographic narrative focusing on formative aspects of Solly's past and present life and relying heavily on popular memory, it provides critical reflections on these themes and issues.

Shane Moran's 'Archive Fever', draws attention to the linkage between two texts, i.e. as to their engagement of the 'challenge of interrogating South African archival and academic discourse'. The first is *Refiguring the Archive* edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, June Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and Razia Saleh. The second is Carli Coetzee's essay 'Creating an Audience'. The first opened the space for 'seeing in archival transformation an opportunity to correct the selectivity of official memoriality within the context of the new South African political dispensation'. The second focuses on 'one element of the existing archive to argue for the ameliorative and uniting effects of the work that archivists and academics can do'. He argues that these texts show a certain 'avoidance of [some] determinate complicities, or at least a choice between them, [and that these] distinguish[] post-apartheid critical theory'.

In his 'History from the Outside ...' Jabulani Mkhize points to the dearth of studies from South Africa on Alex la Guma—due to the fact that most of his works have been banned until recently. He then critically addresses two recent studies on Alex la Guma—both again published outside South Africa. The first is Nahem Yousaf's *Alex La Guma: Politics and Resistance* (2001) and the second, Fritz Pointer's *A Passion to Liberate* (2001). Even as both 'attempt to break new ground in terms of their focus on previously overlooked aspects of La Guma's work', he raises some critical perspectives.

Addressing and engaging the discursive complex of the current challenges faced by the university in South Africa, Sikhumbuzo Mngadi

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critically reviews Jacques Derrida's 'response to some of the philosophical traditions that have pondered the "principle of reason" and its vicissitudes since Immanuel Kant's response to the question *Was ist Aufklärung?*' It concludes by considering two unpublished poetry collections to assess the implications of Derrida's 'response' for some of the ways in which the 'principle of reason' has continued to inform writing about the problematic of thought and phenomenon.

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