

Introduction

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We are in dire need of dedicated, patriotic and action-oriented young intellectuals who will contribute to building the kind of prosperous and successful society we envisage (Jacob Zuma, University of KwaZulu-Natal SRC awards ceremony, 07/05/2005).

This edition of *Alternation* consists of essays that were submitted without any pre-determined theme or topic. Something along the lines of the ubiquitous ‘culture and politics’ was the proffered remit given to numerous enquiries. It soon became clear that three lines of enquiry were emerging around questions of language, literature and cultural politics. The history of the journal and its reputation undoubtedly played a part in attracting certain contributors. Part of this history is, in addition to the standard refereeing procedure, the policy of providing detailed critiques and constructive suggestions to first time authors unfamiliar with the conventions of the academic essay. The positive result of this ethos is that new voices are brought into the academic arena on a continuous basis, and hopefully new perspectives too.

Looking over this edition, the variety of the essays—their subject matter and their mode of address—is striking. This is as it should be in a context where academic debate is marked by radically different priorities and perspectives. In this sense the apparent unevenness of the following

assemblage of essays is itself a reflection of the discordant nature of intellectual enquiry in a society scarred by a racialised past and the persisting legacy of massive inequalities. What does it mean to study and write about language, literature and cultural politics in such a fraught context? Or even to participate in the niceties of academic discourse at all? While no context ever saturates completely, the singularity of the post-apartheid context has left its imprimatur on the current edition. Such is one of the benefits of withholding any binding editorial consensus that would filter out or massage contributions in accordance with some presiding viewpoint. At best flickering points of affinity between the various contributors emerge, briefly, only to withdraw leaving the impression of an emerging horizon of interpretation.

For example, particularly notable is an implicit tradition that sees the connection between the aesthetic and the reconciliation of necessity and freedom. Exploration of the nature of the literary and the nature of politically engaged literature evidences the continuity of debates around the relevance of literature and literary studies. While the institutional aspect of this crisis is often allowed to recede into the background, the stakes in terms of the interrogation of meaning and the imperative of critical engagement with moral and political issues remain very much to the fore. At the immediate level this nexus of concerns indicates both continuity with the past and a renewed attempt to reflect on the process of reading and interpretation in a post-apartheid context. What the literary foregrounds are the ways of (mis)reading that are not restricted to the literature found on library shelves or served up on the internet. The act of reading overflows the written text, and involves dispute over meaning and hermeneutic authority. What is tied up with this activity is what is at the same time secured by it: the legitimacy of the intellectual engaging in the networks of the academic market-place.

Whether concerned with the minutiae of the canonical text or the fine grain of political analysis, the legitimacy of the academic writer is put into play. Thus each contributor to this edition engages either consciously or inadvertently with the issue of the function of intellectuals and the nature of cultural criticism. This does not mean that all authors take, or should take, a position on the usefulness or relevance of their work. Still less does it entail reading into every text a political position, not least for the simple reason

that if everything is political then nothing is political. This applies as much to an analysis of South Africa and Africa and black political thought as to a report and reflection on teaching poetry. At the minimum, each contributor included here adopts the posture of principled critic contributing to scholarly debate which is also a form of public engagement, however circumscribed its audience and limited its immediate effects.

With this in mind, the reader of the following essays cannot but be aware of the lack of any sense of intellectual community between the various writers. One can speculate that the eclectic bias of the editors and the range of interests and foci make such dissonance inevitable. Perhaps. But beyond an operative commitment to truth and a vague sense of justice indicative of liberal scholarship, this diversity is itself very much a product of history. Not only of the wider post-apartheid moment—which in its stratifications and overlapping currents requires careful delineation—but also of the shifting nature of South African academic discourse. For not only has there been a shuffling of personnel, but also a merging of institutions that has mainly impacted upon former historically black universities that have been swallowed by their generally more powerful historically white neighbours. What has been swept away and what has been uncovered is only now becoming visible. Even within the newly emerged entities a range of distinct intellectual traditions exist uneasily side by side and have not yet fused into one offspring.

We wish to acknowledge this diversity and observe that, while it may not yet amount to anything more than a bare, functional unity in diversity, it does indicate a critical mix that may yet produce great things. A modest step in this direction is to gather these various voices together, inevitably jostling each other, and allow the reader to experience not only the impediments of our present disjuncture but also, hopefully, its creative potential.

If this collection of essays bears the marks of a particular post-apartheid moment, it is equally a product of the peculiar dynamics and tensions of the postcolony. This is registered most clearly in a sense of disquiet and unease, a noticeable circumspection about what can be claimed, a cautious rather than an overtly polemical academic pose and a variety of articles in which the work of the intellectual comes under troubled scrutiny. A further measure of this unease is suggested perhaps by the comparatively

small number of articles devoted to literary-cultural critique. Another is the turn to the past, whether it be to the resources of traditional African epistemologies, the contributions of African intellectuals such as Anton Lembede and John Langalibelele Dube or the work of white literary critics in the 1940s. Evincing a similar sense of disquiet are those studies which revisit more contemporary academic exchanges, in particular those which touch on the ethics and effects of intellectual enquiry itself. Interestingly, of all those exploring avenues beyond intimations of the dead ends of post-apartheid society, only one contributor has exploited the experience of other postcolonial countries such as Kenya and Tanzania.

As this collection also illustrates, a further source of disquiet in the post-apartheid context are the questions of language and pedagogy, in particular the dominance of English over other indigenous languages. That these questions continue to exercise South African scholars in the present is testament not only to how little real movement there has been on this issue, but also to the impasse between academic reflection and government policy-making. At a recent meeting between the ANC and South African academics, ANC President Jacob Zuma called for a more direct engagement between government policy-makers and the intelligentsia, suggesting perhaps a greater commitment on the part of government to take seriously the work of South African academics. Coming after a period in which academics have largely been relegated to the backwaters of political influence, this may suggest one way in which to renew a sense of intellectual and political purpose and to claim an audience beyond the confines of academia.

In the first essay in this collection, Brian Fulela revisits Jacques Derrida's meditation on apartheid, its critique by Rob Nixon and Anne McClintock, Derrida's response to that criticism, and more recent interpretations of that dispute. At issue is an understanding of the nature of apartheid and the role of intellectuals. Digging beneath the scars of polemic, Fulela analyses the various refusals to read enacted by the disputants that point to the lasting stakes of this exchange. These include not only the nature of apartheid, but also the question of historical context and the likely political effect of intellectual production. South Africa—demonized, sealed in its exceptionalism, or elevated as symptomatological exemplar—is seen to be at the centre of motivated interpretations that bring to the fore the

question of the ethics of discussion. How this is related to postcolonial theory and the political consequences of deconstruction forms the conclusion.

Corinne Sandwith continues the exploration of the role of the intellectual, the work of cultural critique and the genealogy of South African literary criticism through a contextualized re-reading of the 1940s periodical, *The South African Opinion*. Noteworthy as one of the first South African literary-political journals to engage seriously with South African writing, *The South African Opinion* has significance not only as an early instance of South African canon-formation but also as a key moment in on-going efforts to define a national culture in contexts of dissonance and inequality. To return to the magazine is to unearth some of the shaping values of present-day literary criticism in South Africa; it is also to observe the gradual narrowing of a polyglot political community and its replacement by a liberal consensus. Finally, a re-reading of the journal invites renewed consideration of the social position of the critic, the postures and contexts of critical reflection and the enabling conditions of intellectual production.

Claudia Mamet examines the fictional representation of Durban's Grey Street complex in Imraan Coovadia's novel, *The Wedding* as part of a broader concern with the cultural construction of South African urban Indian space and an on-going interest in the connections between writers, place and identity. Drawing on a productive tension between Foucault's theorization of the rigid urban panopticon and De Certeau's emphasis on the liberating and destabilizing possibilities of city walking, Mamet reads Indian urban space in Coovadia's novel as an inclusive diasporic space, a repository of memory, a cultural 'contact zone' and a crucial means of subverting the 'totalisations' of apartheid rule. In conclusion, Mamet extends her concern with the literary figurations of apartheid urban space to consider the on-going processes of urban re-shaping (and re-naming) in the post-apartheid present.

Thabo Tsehloane's central thrust in his essay is reading the oppositional in South African Black intellectual responses to British imperialism and colonial discourse in general. Tsehloane identifies two strategies of counter-discourse adopted in different historical eras in these responses, the first being the assimilationist option as represented by John Langalibalele Dube based on the notion of faith in universal brotherhood and Anton Mzwakhe Lembede's broader African nationalist option, even as he

interrogates their essentialism. Despite his critique of the modalities of these two phases of anti-colonial discourse, Tsehloane remains curiously optimistic regarding a world in which genuine cosmopolitanism, unsullied by any will to power and desire to dominate, is both possible and feasible.

Taking the analysis of African intellectual traditions in a different direction, Mokong Simon Mapadimeng intervenes in a controversial debate about whether African cultural value-systems are antithetical to socio-economic development. The article takes the form of a critical review of the existing literature and offers a summary of the key positions in the field. Against a view of African epistemologies as inherently conservative, overly reliant on religious explanations and resistant to questioning and change, Mapadimeng highlights an important counter-tradition. Drawing on the arguments of Amato, Sogolo, Wiredu, Hannerz and Hallen he foregrounds some of the conceptual limitations in the former debate, particularly the reliance on a rigidly 'dichotomising' approach, the failure to acknowledge the dynamism, fluidity and complexity of African knowledge-systems and the simplistic conflation of the West with 'modernity' and Africa with 'tradition'.

Shane Moran uncovers connections between metropolitan academic debates concerned with postcoloniality and local institutional politics. The linking thread is the various readings of South Africa and the animus of academic identity politics. In an argument that shuttles between the personal and the political, Moran uncovers questionable presuppositions regarding the nature of the anti-colonial struggle. Moving from heated debates between Benita Parry and Gayatri Spivak, to its aftermath in the polemic between Robert Young and Laura Chrisman, the stakes of identity politics are shown to involve an elision of the forces confronting the desire to exorcise colonialism. The South African debate around the idea of internal colonialism points the way out of this impasse, and the post-apartheid stalemate of institutional politics parades recognizable features of a complex yet to be transcended.

In the first of a series of articles on South African pedagogy, Karen Haire and D.S. Matjila use Sol T. Plaatje's original and translated version of Setswana stories to argue for the inclusion of bilingual stories and proverbs from an African culture in multilingual South African classrooms. Drawing on the educational principle of moving from the known to the unknown, they

suggest that proverbs, songs and stories in the vernacular, rather than an exclusive focus on Western pedagogy and aesthetics, can be culturally relevant and restore a sense of the viability of institutionalized South African multilingualism.

Continuing this theme, Thabisile Buthelezi explains how indigenous languages could be empoweringly developed further in the scientific domain. Buthelezi relies on Conceptual Blending theory, especially as advocated by the theorists Fauconnier and Turner, to show how this interface of concepts could help make isiZulu scientifically user-friendly. Using a number of examples from isiZulu Buthelezi delineates various dimensions of Conceptual Blending theory to demonstrate how such a discourse could help broaden the scope of scientific terminology of other indigenous South African languages.

Returning to the literary text, Richard Lee provides an interesting dimension to all hitherto published readings of Alex la Guma's *The Stone Country* by focusing on what he perceives as the most neglected figure in prison narratives, viz. the guard. Reading la Guma's text as a deceptively ironic prison novel, its subversive power lies in its inversion of 'binary codes'. Even as it employs those same codes to create the novel itself, Lee argues that la Guma's work is underpinned by the interface between prisoner and guard, inside and outside, orality and discourse, which he identifies as 'locations', and which his text investigates.

Craig Mackenzie pursues his interest in what he terms 'oral-style stories' by examining the modalities through which Mphahlele's 'Mrs Plum' renders visible the contradictions of white liberalism in apartheid South Africa. In his reading of Mphahlele's most popular short story Mackenzie focuses on the narrative voice to show how the oral element in this story is brought to the fore in the author's use of first person narrator as well as 'the cadences and styles of oral speech'. It is this narrative style, Mackenzie argues, that provides insight into the protagonist's consciousness and, thereby, makes the story more effective.

Dianne Shober explores Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in terms of Ellison's own experience and his articulation of broader forms of discrimination and rebellion. Arguing that Ellison's text has lessons for the present, Shober ties the psychological elements of the novel to issues around black identity.

J.A. Kearney's article explores a number of strategies for poetry teaching in South African schools from junior to more advanced levels. Kearney's disquiet regarding the present state of poetry teaching is prompted by his recent experiences as Faculty of Education lecturer in the discipline of English and his many observations of student teaching sessions in South African schools. Amongst the many problems in poetry teaching in South Africa, Kearney lists the sterile application of rigid formulas, the tendency to treat aspects of the poem in isolation from the whole, the fallacy of searching for the 'deeper meaning' and an overly teacher-centred approach which denies learners the pleasure of making discoveries for themselves. In contrast, he advocates a 'wholehearted' contact with the poem in its own right, a lively and enjoyable search for meaning, and a guided process of interpretation based on careful consideration of several key areas of concern.

Emmanuel Mqgwashu explores postcolonial language policies in Southern Africa in order to assess the viability of delivering on indigenous language education in South Africa. By way of a comparison of Kenyan, Tanzanian and Namibian language policies and experiences South African language-in-education-policies are confronted with their postcolonial contextual restraints. Moving between considerations of principle and practicality, Mqgwashu argues that there is no compelling evidence in any postcolonial African country to suggest that indigenous languages can compete with non-indigenous languages where the primary desires are fuelled by capitalism.

Rajendra Chetty and Dominique Mwepu take up the language issue from a similarly contentious angle, arguing that the case against the predominance of English in education is flawed. Taking issue with the pronouncements of Ngugi and others, Chetty and Mwepu assert that indigenous African languages can co-exist with the maximum exploitation of English. This is not simply reducible to the supposedly misguided perception that English is the gateway to upward mobility. Rather, language teaching needs to be underpinned by radical and critical educational studies to ensure that it serves emancipatory interests. In a multi-lingual context when any language, foreign or indigenous, is chosen as the official or unofficial national *lingua franca* there are casualties in the form of less promoted languages. Whether English is to be a liberator or a gatekeeper is to be

decided in the class-room and lecture hall where other languages are drawn upon as resources of knowledge and critical thinking is promoted.

Camille Tabosa-Vaz pursues a feminist, postcolonial reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. In an unexpected move, the conventional postcolonial tropes of homelessness and marginality are mapped onto the nineteenth-century novel for the insights they might reveal about the economic, legal and social insecurities of nineteenth-century women. In this way, the argument explores possible correspondences between the exclusions of gender and those of race. Tabosa-Vaz then explores the ways in which a reading of homelessness in Brontë's novels can be brought to bear on contemporary constructions of home, marginality and the subaltern in apartheid South Africa. This she does via a comparative reading of Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, a novel which is centrally preoccupied with the marginal subject, the instabilities of the domestic space and the loss of homes.

In a detailed reading of the debate around Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', Pravina Pillay traces a concern with textuality and signification, and the question of literariness. Beginning with a critical evaluation of Jacques Lacan's reading of Poe's story, Pillay draws out the criticism of that reading offered by Jacques Derrida. At issue in this exchange are the notion of textuality and the role of the theorist. Rather than a cloistered debate about the merits of Lacanian theory or the sign, what is at issue here is the role of the theorist *per se* and the nature of truth. Pillay follows the defense of Lacan mounted by Slavoj Žižek and considers the mutual accusations of misreading.

Sikhumbuzo Mngadi locates Lewis Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego* within current cultural debates including Nkosi's own interventions. Central to Mngadi's reading of Nkosi's novel is how it negotiates the tension between the politics of masculinity and nationalism. Acknowledging the abundance of irony in this work, which has become the hallmark of Nkosi's writing, Mngadi interrogates the logic of the text which seems to gravitate towards a potentially conservative discourse because of its lack of a viable social analysis. Underpinning Mngadi's critique of Nkosi's novel is a pertinent question: what does Nkosi bring into the post-apartheid novel form? His conclusion, at least with regard to this novel, is that *Mandela's Ego* falls into the same trap of petty realism that Nkosi would rather consign to the

claustrophobic colonial cauldron.

Hailing the publication of critical perspectives on Lewis Nkosi as a milestone for researchers with a keen interest in Nkosi's *oeuvre*, Jabulani Mkhize's review article delineates the dominant logic of most of the critical essays included in the collection. Mkhize concurs to a large extent with the arguments of the bulk of the essays but takes issue with some of the gaps and silences that he finds glaring in some of the essays.

At the time of writing, students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal are protesting. Outside the offices, chanting and singing seek to unify recurring grievances including financial exclusions and accommodation shortages, to name a few. On this the second day of disruptions to the academic programme, the university management has notified academics by email that they are awaiting a formal list of grievances from the student representatives. Nervous students crowd the corridors concerned that they will be victimized if they proceed to lectures and seminars. The institution in which learning and research takes place is assuredly a contested space permeable to the struggles and imbalances that mark the broader social context. In this instance the ivory tower reverberates here as much as in other contexts, the difference being that here there is a metonymy of struggle that is read as indicating more than the dissatisfaction of a relatively privileged minority. At one and the same time, the university is the exceptional microcosm and the barometer of discourses and actions that can pass beyond the security gates. The following essays can be read in part as reflecting aspects of the post-apartheid challenge; working within the precincts of established scholarship with a sense of the broader context, its fated particularity and the need to articulate its cosmopolitan generality. A moment in which the conflict of the faculties vies with the tension between the demands of scholarship and the demands of the state.

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