Reading in a State of Emergence: The Rhetoric of Cultural Transformation and the Post-colonial-Post-apartheid Condition[1]

Sikhumbuzo Mngadi
Department of English
University of Durban-Westville

Abstract

This article interrogates the notion of cultural transformation as implied and sometimes overtly articulated in the colonial, anti-colonial and resistance discourses of the past. It is argued that the basic assumption that cultural transformation is a punctual occurrence with unambiguous values of before/after, positive/negative, progressive/counterprogressive cannot be accepted. These values emerge from and remain trapped in closed dualistic structures of thought and reading. The argument against this view is two-fold: in the context of material change, these values constitute a transformation that conceals value judgements which only benefit the values of an emergent civil society; secondly, civil society—whether old or new—springs forth from a base of different forms of sexual and psychic repression which disrupt its unisonance.

To locate a state of emergence in any condition of cultural transition confronts one immediately with serious difficulties. As all acts of locating culture periodically carry with them assumptions of its linear progression, in the way it is written, spoken, photographed, filmed, gazed at—in fact, in the ways in which it is represented structurally—to speak of a 'post' (as in post-colonial/post-apartheid) needs to be effectively removed from the language of origin and destiny, for such may be the sustaining myths in a context that has never had a single teleological framework.

My paper seeks to interrogate ways in which literature has been read in the past, and how it continues to be read in South Africa today. It takes as its cue readings of Nadine Gordimer's recent novel *None to Accompany Me*, which appeared in the Review section of *The Weekly Mail* of September 30 to October 6, 1994. These readings, due credit to their creative complexity granted, to a large extent exhibit a tone of impatience with that writing which suspends final judgement on who its characters represent in the real state of transition from minority to majority government. Or at least that writing which 'name(s) the real' (Nussbaum 1989:xxi) in a manner which to some is 'not so real'. One immediately becomes aware of reading being gradually seen in the context of 'peace and reconciliation, reconstruction and development', and its related rhetoric which attempts to unite contradictions. This type of reading of cultural signs, characteristic of most societies to whom literature offers possibilities of self-apprehension and progress—those

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belaboured, yet persistent banalities—comes as no surprise. What seems to undermine it, however, and which reminds us that socio-political reality is 'chaotic', unrepresentable and incommensurate with parochial nationalist frames, is often tucked away in conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, with their almost exclusive emphasis on morality overdetermined from a standpoint external to the signs that construct cultural engagement, are suspect. They are suspect insofar as they eclipse our understanding that 'terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively' (Bhabha 1994:2), and are certainly not products of an *a priori*. Therefore, even where such 'voices of dissent' are taken on board in the construction of a national culture, they are often pacified, whilst remaining largely uninfluential to the terms that are seen to determine cultural transformation.

I am interested in how cultural transformation is implied and sometimes overtly articulated in those discourses of the past, often termed colonial, anti-colonial and resistance. I am also interested in showing how cultural transformation cannot therefore be seen as a punctual occurrence, the values of which are unambiguous: before/ after, positive/negative, progressive/counterprogressive, and other such closed dualistic structures of thought and reading that constitute this transformation which, when translated into material change, conceal value judgements that only benefit values of an emergent civil society. Civil society, old or new, as many of its critics have variously shown (here I can mention Cherrie Moraga, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon), has as its inessential basis different forms of repression—sexual, psychic—in fact, everything that disrupts its 'unisonance'. It should be remembered that 'the boundaries of national culture are open so long as the voices of dissent remain individual and closed' (Bhabha 1994:94).

Listen to Cherrie Moraga (in Accad nd:1), in *Loving in the War Years*, speaking from within and between the interstitial space that defines 'malestream' military culture:

> But the only hunger I have ever known was the hunger for sex and the hunger for freedom and somehow, in my mind and heart, they were related and certainly not mutually exclusive. If I could not use the source of my hunger as the source of my activism, how then was I to be politically effective?

or the persona in Serote's (1972:62) *Black Bells*:

> You've trapped me whitey! Memm wanna ge aot Fuc/ pschwee e ep booboodubooboodu blllll/ Black books,/ Flesh blood word shitrr Haai/ Amen.

or Guillermo Gomez-Pena broadcasting from the US/Mexico border:

> hello America/ this is the voice of Gran Vato Charollero/ broadcasting from the hot deserts of Nogales, Arizona/ zona de libre cogercio/ 2000 megaherz en todas direciones/ you are celebrating Labour Day in Seattle/ while the Klan demonstrates/ against Mexicans in Georgia/ ironia, 100% ironia (in Bhabha 1994:7).

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or the Black slavewoman under masculine and racist surveillance in Meiling Jin's (1987:126f) *Strangers in a Hostile Landscape*:

> We arrived in the Northern Hemisphere/ when summer was set in its way/ running from the flames that lit the sky/ over the plantation./ We were a straggle bunch of immigrants/ in a lily white landscape./ One day I learnt/ a secret art,/ Invisible-Ness, it was called./ I think it worked/ as even now you look/ but never see me ..../ Only my eyes will remain to watch and to haunt,/ and to turn your dreams to chaos.

What these voices express is neither resistance, refusal nor acceptance to be incorporated into the spaces that attempt to authorize their identities and to determine terms of 'political' engagement. These political stances are tóó closed to be assumed in any such state, as they ultimately and invariably reconstitute the 'one' and the 'other' polarity. Such stances paradoxically feed on the very terms set by ideologies which record their presence as fixed and primordial. Rather, the location of these ambiguous interventions between authority, desire for authority and its subversion, places under suspense the language of responsibility, what Derrida calls the 'ought to' (Derrida 1992:13). In other words, it is not a *cause* (political or personal) that these voices resource, for, as James Baldwin once observed, *causes* have a tendency to become 'notoriously bloodthirsty' (Baldwin 1955:15) as they are exclusively morally determined. What the persona in Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* articulates cuts somewhat obliquely through masculine values of confrontation and penetration in a state of war. She does so most effectively by bringing into the confined space of 'malestream' military culture that which has always been perceived as other to it, that is, sexuality, and more specifically un-masculine sexuality. She questions the very forced externality of sexuality as unconstitutive of, and other to, politics and political activism, so that in the end what has always resourced patriarchal nationalism, that is, gender as an essential category and all that it implies, becomes a truism. The expression of female sexuality (which in malestream ideology equals a 'lack of') as constitutive of political activism therefore splits the uniformity of patriarchal expression by neither refusing its traditional sway, nor resisting its presence as false but, by recognising its expression as forked, or 'fac[ing] two ways without being two-faced' (Bhabha 1994:97). In this way, patriarchal culture, which ostensibly encodes the public/private divide onto what is a much more complex intercultural space of activism, is undermined by Bakhtin's 'carnival', in this case without the element of ordered disorder Bakhtin's notion seems to imply. It is a perpetual interrogation of the ontology of the so-called private space, and not the letting in of the 'barbarians' into an externally-determined ideological frame. It is what Derrida calls *An Oblique Offering* which, while it appears to 'offer the best figure for all the moves' and is ideal in a situation where disruption rather than prescription is demanded, it is undermined by the very discernible geometrical origins it bears. Derrida (1992:13) continues to elaborate on the 'oblique' as

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> the geometrical figure, the compromise still made with the primitiveness of the plane, the line, the angle, the diagonal, and thus the right angle between the vertical and the horizontal. The oblique remains the choice of a strategy that is still crude, obliged to ward off what is most urgent, a geometric calculus for diverting as quickly as possible both the frontal approach and the straight line: presumed to be the shortest path from one point to another. Even in its rhetorical form and in the figure of figure that is called *oratio obliqua*, this displacement still appears too direct, in short economic, in complicity with the diagonal arc.

It may well be argued, therefore, that in a state of emergency (cultural, political, social), emergence is possible as 'critical consciousness' which, in Edward Said's terms is 'at bottom an unstoppable predilection for alternatives' (in Ryan 1990:1).

The same conundrum that animates traditional military culture, and to which *Loving in the War Years* 'responds', is perhaps at the root of the American army's 1994 debate on homosexuality, which raises the question of whose values determine participation in military activism. In the terms that construct traditional militarism, gay culture remains one of those 'dirty little secrets' which, in the age of human rights, has to be explained away in conspiracy theories, such as 'lack of (masculine) discipline'. Recourse to discipline, as Hayden White observes in another context, remains a problematic decision. For historians, he argues, disciplinization suppresses the 'imaginary' and the 'creative' in search of the normal, factual and natural (White 1987:67). To discipline sexual urges in 'the war years', more especially those which civil society accords the label 'abnormal', only compounds our suspicions of the validity of normative criticism. Normative criticism appeals to our 'common sense', with the hope that what has often been accorded the status of the 'normal' remains unaffected by ideological interest. But we know, as Raman Selden (1985) argues in the introduction to *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, that 'common sense' in social discourse enters our perceptions through the method of repetition. What time has sanctified, as a result of it being repeated, ultimately loses its ideological mask, thereby passing for fact and/or one of nature's imponderables.

In Serote's persona, what can easily be read as an existential condition (i.e. we all experience self-doubt in the face of adverse circumstances), is by a single stroke of linguistic maneouvre transformed into a *beyond*. It is not a return to an essential self, for it recognises that it is by partly repeating the terms of its 'trap' that it can construct itself as the 'other'. But paradoxically, it is by differentiating itself from those terms that it can define its resistance. The persona here becomes aware, at the very moment of his articulation of resistance, that in such a state of emergency, what emerges is neither within the frame in which his identity has been constructed by colonial incursions, nor is it outside that frame. In fact, it lies somewhere in the region of undecidability which defines the space of colonial intersubjective interpenetration. What can be read as nonsense in the sense/nonsense binary opposition, becomes effectively a displacement of such a dualism and a construction of a hybridized borderline language to conditions of transit (as the state of emergency is indeed always a state of emergence). Also, what can

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be read as a Caliban complex, becomes a case of Caliban neither resisting nor refusing this intersubjectivity but, instead, collapsing the boundaries that seem to separate the two in a colonial continuum of differences. Homi Bhabha's (1994:97) observation in this regard is apt. He argues that

> What threatens the authority of colonial command is the ambivalence of its address—father and oppressor or, alternatively, the ruled and reviled—which will not be resolved in a dialectical play of power. For those doubly inscribed figures face two ways without being two-faced. Western imperialist discourse continually puts under erasure the civil state, as the colonial text emerges uncertainly within its narrative of progress. Between the civil address and its colonial signification—each axis displaying a problem of recognition and repetition—shuttles the signifier of authority in search of a strategy of surveillance, subjection, and inscription. Here there can be no dialectic of the master-slave for where discourse is so disseminated can there ever be the passage from trauma to transcendence? From alienation to authority? Both colonizer and colonized are in a process of miscognition where each point of identification is always a partial and double repetition of the otherness of the self—democrat and despot, individual and servant, native and child.

The point being made here, as my analysis of Serote's persona's subjectivity demands anyway, is that the 'split' in colonial intersubjectivities keeps in suspense both the desire to impose colonial authority in colonial discourses of civility on the one hand, and its resistance in nativist rhetoric on the other. A familiar image of the native's 'primordial fixity' in colonial discourse of civility is undermined by an appropriation of its revered fetish, the book and the word, redefined endlessly and unceremoniously: 'Black books,/ Flesh blood words shitrr Haai ...'. This 'shuttles the signifier of authority in search of a strategy of surveillance'. In *Strangers in a Hostile Landscape* this surveillance is perpetually held in suspense by the void/lacuna it attempts to hold under its gaze. Surveillance becomes subject to a kind of surveillance which denies it its desire to monitor and control. The master's 'dreams' of final control and definition of the slave's identity (which construct masterhood and slavehood in a colonial situation), become undermined by the ambivalence of their final destination. Where these dreams have always found their final confirmation in the presence of its servile target, they now find not resistance (which paradoxically improves and sharpens strategies of control) but, rather, 'Invisible-Ness', which suspends while confusing colonial authority. The masculinist and racist gaze of the master is 'turn[ed] into chaos' by a subject that

> 'speaks, and is seen, from where it is *not*. The migrant woman can subvert the perverse satisfaction of the racist, masculinist gaze that disavowed her presence, by presenting it with an anxious absence, a counter-gaze that turns the discriminatory look, which denies her cultural and sexual difference, back on itself' (Bhabha 1994:47).

It is what one reads in Gomez-Pena who, broadcasting from the US/Mexico border, plays on the American export image of 'the land of the free' by introducing into the 'truth' the 'lie' that defines the imposed margins of its internal politics. The anthem as text, from which this 'truthful lie' emerges,

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to use Biodun Jeyifo's paradoxical formulation, foregrounds a singularity of purpose, 'voiced by a unanimous people assembled in the self-presence of its speech' (Bhabha 1994:93). Within this type of recordation of the American export identity, in the anthem, is an unexpressed subtext which, like the absent gaze of the black slavewoman in *Strangers in a Hostile Landscape*, 'speaks, and is seen from where it is not'. The 'border', signifying Gomez-Pena's (dis)location in relation to mainstream America, becomes a space where America's perverse self-congratulatory jingoism is re-thought. This is done in a way which exposes and undermines the inscription of American society within the frozen margins of speech and writing.

But what of the glaring discord within the ranks of the colonized? What cultural imperatives construct a force so clearly visible as the Inkatha Cultural Movement a.k.a. Freedom Party? What cultural signs, to be more precise, continue to sustain its staggering hold on a significant section of the South African population, even if not by comparison to its arch-rivals, the African National Congress? These are serious questions which, unfortunately, in South Africa anyway, are not given the analytic attention they clearly deserve. These questions are also reminiscent of 'moderate' Black America's concern with Farrakhan's Nation of Islam with its 'anti-Jews and anti-white' stance, which attracted a vast number of especially poor black American people. It is inevitable that this is blamed on social conditioning and abuse of power, which in effect removes the focus of debate away from the signs that manipulate our responses to social realities, placing them within some spurious moral certitudes.

Bill Faure's television drama series, *Shaka Zulu*, provoked much academic critical attention, of markedly post-marxist and post-structuralist/semiotic varieties, and highlighted the continuing centrality of the Shaka legend in South African social and political life. 'Coincidentally', the production of this series, towards the end of 1986, came at a time when the nationalist government of South Africa was introducing reforms within its apartheid edifice, by attempting to co-opt moderate ethnic-orientated political parties into its slightly modified political structure. Accompanying this was a great amount of emphasis placed on the importance of recognising cultural and historical diversity, narrowly defined to fit the apartheid socio-political vision. The proliferation of narratives of nationhood and ethnicity was justified under the rubric of democracy and freedom of expression, also defined in a manner that legitimated the government's vision of a thoroughly and rigidly fragmented South Africa. Under these circumstances, the government's arch rival, the African National Congress (ANC), could effectively be pitted against a strong oppositional force created within the ranks of the oppressed. This could in part be articulated on the terrain of historical discourses, since it is in them that myths of origins and nationhood are constructed and perpetuated as essential and transcendental. Indeed, Homi Bhabha's argument that 'nations are narrations' sharply defines the ways in which identities are constructed, particularly in moments of transition. In such moments, where one social and political order is replaced by another, a

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sense of insecurity gives way to solidarity based on some consensus, the most immediate being common history and ancestry.

Thus, the manipulation of the sign as the basic element in the process of identity construction, by the government apparatuses, helped 'produce' a highly militant Zulu faction which saw its 'nationhood' being threatened by the ANC, which itself produced a different notion of nationhood. These discourses of origin and destiny (the Shaka legend being central), were used to legitimate the government's divide and rule strategy, but they ironically put into question the very concept of 'nation', showing it to be an unstable construct, a concept that cannot be seen independently of the ideology that sustains it and gives it specific meaning. Therefore, it could be argued, taking into account Antonio Gramsci's argument that it is not only in the state that power is located, that there are other epicentres of power, producing and disseminating historical discourses equally significant for analysis.

In any case, recent events in South Africa have demonstrated the extent to which most of what had been explained away in conspiracy theories, that is, the strong presence of ethnic alliances, has assumed an existence independent of the state's direct influence. Afrikaner-ness, Boere-ness, Zulu-ness, and other ethnic essentialist identities (all of which suspend indefinitely the fulfilment of a desire for a single national or continental identity), are shown to be constructed on discourses not created by, although to a significant extent resourced and manipulated by, the state apparatuses. This can be said of those identities, African and/or black, constructed in opposition to the state's manipulation of ethnic sentiments, in an attempt to forge unity among those who have often simplistically been referred to as the 'oppressed'. Both nationalists and africanists, on the one hand and, on the other, ethnicists, can be seen as 'complicit antagonists in a closed binary logic' (Wade 1994:15) where none can claim sole access to authentic historical information, nor political and moral legitimacy over the other. This is because the terms of antagonism between them to a very large extent rest, paradoxically, within those discourses about Africa of explorers and anthropologists of past centuries imposed on diverse and sometimes converging cultural, social, historical and political alliances dating back to a period before British colonial occupation. In fact, the rhetoric of pan-africanism, which essentially sees Africa as a single unit, permeates even the strictest of ethnic groupings who see themselves as constituting a separate entity within what pan-africanism regards as a unit. To the 'Zulus', for example, Shaka would not only be regarded as the sole property of the Zulu ethnic group but, over and above this parochial proprietorial right, Shaka would be a legitimating agent for the centrality of the 'Zulus' in the history of the continent, a centrality which, when ignored, makes the history of the continent incomplete. Perhaps it should be added that Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, has often regarded himself as Shaka's incarnate, thus manipulating what to others is a symbol of African unity to resource his personal objectives, and those of his followers. Despite his constant references, in his speeches, to 'our brothers in the ANC and the

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PAC', which in the past afforded him credibility as being 'de-ethnicised', it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify points of political and historical convergence between these ideological factions. To Buthelezi and his supporters, Shaka has become the sole property of the ethnic group with which he bears blood relation, the Zulus. The recent rift in the royal family as to how the Shaka legend could be made relevant to the changed South African political circumstances, where Buthelezi rejected the Zulu king's suggestion that Nelson Mandela, president of South Africa and the ANC, be invited to the celebrations, is proof of how access to political power informs historical and cultural interpretations and the definition of their margins, while removing, at the same time, the terms of contest from the language of 'blood' relations to that of power.

The September 1994 Shaka commemorations, notwithstanding the king's protestations about the illegitimacy of the occasion if not 'blessed' by his presence as heir to the Zulu throne—which was widely publicized—and his conspicuous absence at the commemorations, went ahead without him anyway. Its 'success', gauged by the presence of a number of chiefs from the king's own Nongoma stronghold, raised a number of questions as to the king's real (rather than his assumed) position as 'blood' leader of his kingdom. Prior to this, the '*Sonke* Festival' (A Festival for All of Us), organised by the Natal branch of the ANC in 1993 as an occasion for celebrating the role of past Zulu kings in the struggle against colonial occupation in South Africa, and particularly in Natal, was aimed at rescuing for the party what it had already identified as central to Buthelezi's stranglehold on his followers, that is, the interpretation of cultural signs that constitute Zulu history, with much emphasis placed on his family's role in it. Also, what the ANC hoped to deconstruct in organising this 'Festival' and entitling it *Sonke* (all of Us), is what it saw as Buthelezi's autocratic language of predestination, a language which constructs him a predestined leader of KwaZulu, and the 'Zulu nation' as his predestined followers. It is highly unlikely, however, given the degree of ethical disagreement and rivalry between the ANC and IFP (which in my opinion, is profoundly more complex than conspiracy theorists have been prepared to concede), that the titular 'Us' was all-inclusive.

Now, I am against any reading of cultural signs that assumes authority without acknowledging that it might be just one of the many readings within which the Shaka legend and its implied significance in political positioning can be located. The question 'whose Shaka is Shaka?' remains an historical conundrum that critical theory and its relative privilege within the academic space needs to appreciate. Whether or not his identity is read entirely as a way of cultural and political validation of one group over another, criticism needs to engage with strains that animate such homogenising readings, without itself clearly becoming an authoritative alternative. It is this tension I find in Themba Msimang's reading of Faure's *Shaka Zulu* (Msimang 1991:237). Msimang's reading offers us familiar unmodified reception and Althusserian critical assumptions, where the discerning subject is assumed to

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be either preformed before the act of analysis, or, as in the Althusserian model, is totally in control of the material to be symptomatically discerned. It makes for interesting reading when located within these reading formations, for it applies them unambiguously. However, a mere pinpointing of distortions and stereotypes is an expression of moral privilege often characteristic of privileged social classes. Mofolo's *Chaka*, which Msimang curiously classifies under those 'distorted' versions of Shaka's personal history, is, together with James Saunders King's and Faure's Shakas, one of the many personal histories of Shaka inscribed in various artistic and theoretical discourses (written and/or orally transmitted). Its strength, to me anyway, lies in the fact that while it offers a 'Christianised' version of this past, it is a version that disturbs both the Christian mission of 'civilising the savage' (because it endorses some of the 'savage's' cultural values), and a complacent Africanised epic version (because in its interpretation of this past, it endorses and displaces Christian-colonialist discourses of good and evil). What emerges from the text, however, is that Shaka, as a cultural icon,

> is still fundamentally a human conundrum, someone whose impact on Southern Africa remains profound but whose personal history is now virtually irretrievable, having slipped permanently into the domain of legendry (Lindfors nd).

Thus, it is not impossible to reject a self-proclaimed corrective without leaving an impression that there is an alternative truth.

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