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The Rediscovery of South African Cultural Identity in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*

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**THE REDISCOVERY OF SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY IN
ZAKES MDA'S WAYS OF DYING**

A Thesis Presented

by

KIREN VALJEE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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English

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ABSTRACT

THE REDISCOVERY OF SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ZAKES

MDA'S WAYS OF DYING

MAY 2009

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Since the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and his subsequent election to the presidency in 1994, South Africa certainly has not achieved the hopes and dreams of its people or for the rest of the continent. But despite bleak conditions, there are many who still have hope for their country. One of those people is Zakes Mda, and his hope is reflected in his novels. Yet, his novels remain complex. They do not provide all-encompassing solutions or answers to the problems that face the nation. But they do address questions with possibilities, suggestions, and innovation. The South Africa he creates, both in the past and the present, embodies what the real South Africa is and isn't, and what it has the potential to be. Mda is not afraid to be critical of his own people, he is not afraid to face the history of his country with an equally critical lens, and even more importantly, he is not afraid to face the future of his country with that same critical gaze. This open approach to the people of his country, to its history, and current policies opens up his narrative to imagination, allowing his characters to re-envision themselves more completely and form a more complete and encompassing cultural identity that was previously denied to them.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We can choose between absorption and accommodation on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the quest for a self-created reality.

—Njabulo S. Ndebele, South African Literature and Culture

The heroes may be dead, but imagination is not; their literature constitutes an essential dimension of the educational development of the ‘new African.’

—Wole Soyinka, Art, Dialogue, and Outrage

Two years ago, a friend of my father confronted him, asking him why he never wanted to return to “his country,” South Africa. My father replied quite matter-of-factly, “South Africa was never my country. It was a prison. This is my country now. I am an American.” I simultaneously felt proud of him and sad for him. Proud of him for taking pride in his new home, despite its many faults (I had spent most of my teenage years trying to convince my parents that I was American and not any different from the white students at my school), and sad for him for no longer having a connection to the land of his birth, if he indeed ever had one. I have a feeling that if I ask him when the transformation occurred, when he stopped viewing himself as South African and started viewing himself as an American, he would not be able to answer. But he would pinpoint the date of the confrontation with his friend as the date that he finally knew it completely and without a doubt.

I imagine that many of those oppressed in South Africa didn’t really feel whole, didn’t really feel at home, couldn’t quite know who they were until that day when Nelson Mandela was sworn in as President. I imagine it as a day in which hope truly lived, even if it was just for one day, when everyone believed in South Africa and knew exactly who

they were, knew they were South Africans. I wish my father had been in South Africa that day, perhaps he would feel a little bit different today, and not so bitter about the land of his youth.

And so here I am, an American, whose parents were once South African but never really, trying to write on the “new South Africa.” What authority do I have? Who am I to know what it means to be South African today? I cannot, I do not, and I will not pretend to know. No. My purpose here is not to formulate new South African identities myself. Instead I rely on someone who may not know how to do such a thing any better than me, but someone who at least knows where and how to begin. Zakes Mda. But his subject position is not so clear either. He has not lived in South Africa for sometime. Yes, he visits every year for several months, but he spends the majority of each year here in the United States. He wrote Ways of Dying while living in Connecticut. This certainly complicates things, but perhaps most appropriately. South Africa has a complicated history, a complicated population, and complicated problems that will need complicated solutions. But ‘complicated’ is too negative a term. I prefer ‘complex.’ Complexity suggests relationships, interwoven, criss-crossing, seemingly formless, but certainly decipherable. Mda’s novels are complex, celebratory, critical, introspective, descriptive, definitive, without closure, non-redemptive, but certainly hopeful.

Wole Soyinka noted before the fall of apartheid that non-South African writers in a way envy the South African writer. The condition of the South African writer at that time had not been darkened by the failures of their own government, by a disillusionment towards their own leaders, or a realization that only a pseudo-liberation had been won, that most South Africans were still bound to economic and spiritual poverty because of

the last structures built by colonialism and apartheid. The South African writer still wrote with hope (Soyinka 16). Since the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and his subsequent election to the presidency in 1994, South Africa certainly has not achieved the hopes and dreams of its people or for the rest of the continent. Poverty has increased, violence is prolific and the HIV/AIDS epidemic has seen no relief. But despite these bleak conditions, there are many who still have hope for their country. One of those people is Zakes Mda, and his hope is reflected in his novels. Yet, his novels remain complex. They certainly do not paint a picture of an idyllic new South Africa. They do not provide all-encompassing solutions or answers to the problems that face the nation. But they do address questions with possibilities, suggestions, and innovation. The South Africa he creates, both in the past and the present, embodies what the real South Africa is and isn't, and what it has the potential to be. Mda is not afraid to be critical of his own people, he is not afraid to face the history of his country with an equally critical lens, and even more importantly, he is not afraid to face the future of his country with that same critical gaze. This open approach to the people of his country, to its history, and current policies opens up his narrative to imagination, allowing his characters, and thus his readers, to re-envision themselves more completely and form a more complete and encompassing cultural identity that was previously denied to them.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this project has been how to theoretically approach Mda's work. I knew what I wanted to write on: community, art, culture, and identity. Of course, these are topics with no shortage of attention, but I kept on returning to one contributor: Steve Biko. Maybe it was my personal historical connection (or, in fact, my lack of a personal connection) to South Africa, or that my father had met and

spoken with Biko on several occasions, or maybe it was Biko's tragic death that lent weight to his words. But as I read more of Biko and then began to move on to those who influenced him (e.g. Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Leopold Senghor), I realized that it was an intimacy of location that pulled me in. Though Biko's ideas were heavily reliant on those scholars mentioned above, his writing was unmistakably geared towards South Africa and nowhere else. It was this same intimacy that pulled me to Zakes Mda's works. It's an intimacy of community in specific locales with specific histories that contribute to specific cultures and specific identities. This sort of intimacy does not allow Mda's characters to remain faceless symbols of resistance, as is the case with some novelists who came before him, such as Alex La Guma and Ezekiel Mphahlele (Ndebele 44). Biko's Black Consciousness did have some grandiose notions, but I found they were always tempered by a grounding in local community. He was a black South African, speaking not for black South Africans, but to black South Africans. Mda, I believe, is doing something similar yet taking it a step further. He is a black South African, writing about black South Africa, writing to all South Africans. This statement deserves some attention.

Zakes Mda is a black South African. There is no doubt that Mda is a black South African, according to both the color of his skin and to Biko's definition of 'black':

We have in our policy manifesto defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations. This definition illustrates to us a number of things:

1. Being black is not a matter of pigmentation—being black is a reflection of mental attitude.
2. Merely describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that

seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being.

From the above observations therefore, we can see that the term black is not necessarily all-inclusive; i.e. the fact we are all *not white* does not necessarily mean that we are all *black*. (Biko 48)

There are two important things to note here. The first is that I only wish to use 'black' as Biko has defined it above, and not as a social misnomer of a supposed set of biological characteristics, otherwise known as 'race.' But in the interest of temporarily creating a subject position for Mda and his work to operate in, I will categorize him as a black South African in full recognition of all the complications, complexities, contradictions, and constructions that accompany those categories presently and historically.¹ The second importance to note is the specificity used by Biko in his definition of blackness. He is careful to mention the nation of South Africa and its specific struggle. This Black Consciousness that Biko goes on to define carries this same specificity. He is not interested in universalizing the African experience or creating a counter-culture to the colonizing culture of Europe as some critics have supposed of Négritude in its earliest manifestations.² He is interested in unity, a unity of a specific political struggle within South Africa. And the unity of this struggle requires a unity of persons oppressed, regardless of pigmentation, tradition, and culture. It seems to me the reason is that regardless of degree of pigmentation, tradition, and culture, apartheid has uniformly oppressed. This may not appear to be so, and one might refer to the different degrees of pass laws and access, voting, citizenship, and other social and economic benefits depending on a South African's categorization as 'black,' 'coloured,' 'Asian,' or 'white.' This, however, is the power of myth: the arbitrarily created differences in order to shift the focus away from the government as oppressor to the constructed differences and

privileges that are assigned to those differences. Biko saw the need to debunk these myths of constructed difference and encourage a unity for the purpose of fighting not the puppets, but the puppeteer.

Mda's father was forced into exile during the anti-apartheid struggle and Zakes followed. His plays, poetry, and prose have drawn inspiration from the tiny pockets of community throughout South Africa and Lesotho during the struggle. In an interview he stated, "Apartheid dominated our lives; we could not write honestly without talking about it. The system was such that all you had to do was go into a township and take a slice of life to turn into a wonderful piece of theatre of the absurd" (Mongo-Mboussa 30). And so Mda was entrenched in the struggle as a writer for most, if not all, of his career. The recognition of apartheid dominating the lives of black South Africans is what, in a sense, frees Mda's writing. His writing differs from most anti-apartheid writers (whose work is often insufficiently labeled 'protest literature') in that his novels never treat apartheid as an explicit character, an object upon which to act, or a subject that is explicitly acting upon other characters. Apartheid is implicit, it is characterized in the processes of the daily lives of his characters. It is in the environment they must negotiate to accomplish the mundane tasks of life, so there is no need to speak to it or of it explicitly. His characters do not engage in the forced actions of protest or resistance. But this is not to say they are complicit either. The very ordinary actions required for his characters to survive daily, are a form of resistance.

Njabulo S. Ndebele develops this idea of literature focusing on the ordinary in his essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" originally presented in 1984. Ndebele laments

the tendency of South African fiction to focus on the spectacular and assigns it the following conditions:

The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness. Nothing beyond this can be expected of it. (49)

Ndebele argues for literature rather to become more contemplative and less reliant on totalizing symbols of good and evil. He asks for fiction to embrace the ordinary as the opposite of existence; to encourage analysis and inner thought; to notice the details of life's processes. He defines the ordinary as "sobering rationality; it is the forcing of attention on necessary detail" (53). It is essential to examine the details for that is where an oppressive system such as apartheid truly breaks down its subjects; during the everyday minutiae, the mundane tasks that determine survival. This how the literature may move from protest (the simple recognition of the oppression) to a "direct object of change" (Ndebele 53).

Zakes Mda writes about black South Africa. Mda's novels focus on different communities of black South Africans. White persons have only played a peripheral role. I don't believe this due to any other reason than that Mda writes what he knows and what he can imagine. Imagination always grows from some real experience and it would be disingenuous for him to imagine the world of white South Africans. If at all represented, it is comes in the form of the sort of contact the black communities had with the white world, that is, as oppressors, economic exploiters, or ineffectual sympathizers. I am

reminded of Njabulo Ndebele's reasons for being unable to write a novel about a young Afrikaner in the South African Defence Force:

After much planning and research, I found I could not write the novel. At the root of the problem was that I simply did not know my main character. I did not know the simplest things about him. What was his mother fond of saying to him? Did he dream of his childhood sweetheart? Did he have problems revealing his feelings? Who were his neighbourhood friends, and what kind of mischief as boys did they get into? Does he have any strong thoughts about TV, about the Space Shuttle? what kind of home conditions his thinking? All I had was a treasure house of stereotypes for which I had no use. (Ndebele 151).

Mda's novels are about the relationships among the people of communities with which he is familiar. Those relationships take a certain shape because of external conflict with white South Africa, not because of any intimate relationships with it.

Zakes Mda writes for all South Africans. The obvious thing to note, of course, is that Mda really has no control over who reads his novels. But I think it is important to take into account that his works are not scathing indictments of apartheid South Africa or colonial South Africa. They certainly contain critiques of each period, but they are not hateful or full of anger. They are complex narratives that acknowledge a painful past, but celebrate the culture(s) of South Africans and their ability to keep on living in the face of such oppression and brutality as well as forge new relationships in the aftermath of apartheid. Dominant systems of oppression are able to accommodate most forms of resistance and dissidence. What they have trouble contending with is survival. Most systems eventually begin to break down because they are not designed to be as flexible and changing as time allows people and culture to be. Knowledge is passed from generation to generation, constantly accumulating and changing as the people who wield it and use it change, as the environment around them changes. Systems of oppression do not have the luxury of generational adaptation. Though as systems, they may survive

several generations, they eventually are broken as people learn how to fight them and survive. P.W. Botha attempted to enact such a generational change in apartheid with his 'Total Strategy.' It was not able to keep pace, however, with economic and social changes taking place globally and nationally. It was not a particular strike, nor a certain series of protests that brought about the dismantling of apartheid rule. In addition to the cost of maintaining such a system of oppression (e.g. trade embargoes, lack of foreign investment, and poor international relations), it was the simple recognition by the government that South Africa as a nation could not survive in those circumstances because the majority of people in the country continued to survive and could not be reckoned with or ignored.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "And therein lies the tragedy of the age: not that men are poor,—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked,—who is good? not that men are ignorant,—what is Truth? Nay, but that men know little of men" (178). I do not want to suggest that Mda is teaching the white community of South Africa about how the black community lives, or how it suffered. But his novels do focus on the relationships between individuals and communities. In this way, they share a vitality with many frames of humanist movements, but for the scope of this project I would like to focus on Négritude and Black Consciousness. These movements are not without deserved criticisms, but any reader of Mda's work would be hard-pressed not to notice traces of the movements in his novels.

Before I conclude with a statement of what I hope to accomplish in these pages, I would like to spend some time addressing some important concepts that shape my argument: culture, identity, and cultural identity. I would like to begin broadly and move

to the specific. I will do this with each term, beginning with culture. I begin with culture because it is culture, I believe, that informs identity. Finally, I will combine the terms to formulate an idea of cultural identity. It is through this idea of cultural identity that Mda's characters rediscover themselves in a post-apartheid society.

Robert Thornton has written that an essential problem of defining culture or explicating what is meant by culture is the little 's' that attaches itself to 'cultures' (18). Textbooks have come to broadly define culture as that which makes us human. They then proceed to qualify groups of people by nation, race, and language groups and declare that each of these groups possesses a unique culture (17–18). Our own universities have departments or sections that create and study fields called 'multiculturalism,' assuming the existence of many cultures, each defined in a post-modern fashion by their differences. If culture is that which makes us human (Thornton 18), it can be understood as a unifying force. What the writers of the textbooks fail to realize or explain is in order for many unique cultures to exist, first a set of cultural constructs, such as geographic markers, language differences, and borders, need to be understood and shared similarly among the supposedly unique groups. This would indicate that the groups are not completely unique, but share something that enables them to recognize the differences among each other. Thornton intimates:

The very act of defining 'culture' is itself a declaration of what it is to be human—that is, a moral statement—and a statement of identity—in other words, a political statement. This is because the attempt to understand and to define culture is also part of culture. ...[T]o discuss culture is to be part of culture, to have an effect on it, and ultimately to change the very nature of the 'object' itself. (18)

We are then required to acknowledge that any sort of regional notion of traditions and ways of living do not determine a unique culture. This is not to say that differences do not

exist. These differences are, however, sub-constructions within culture, that which makes us human. What this implies is that difference is actually at the “centre of culture, not its edges” (Thornton 28). Culture, at its broadest conception, encompasses difference. The fact that we all recognize differences precludes that we share some part of culture with everyone as well.

So what do I mean when I use the term ‘South African culture?’ I am not referring to a necessarily different culture that is inherent to the land and people characterized as South African. Instead, I refer to those visible and equally invisible ways of living that have been constructed within the borders of South Africa, which are not only validated by those inhabitants of South Africa, but are indeed validated by those outside of South Africa by the mere recognition of South Africa as a nation.

Edward W. Said has used “culture” to mean two things in his books Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism. The first he describes as the aesthetic forms of “the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political” and whose primary aim is pleasure (Said xii). The second he describes as such:

[C]ulture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860s. Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralize, the ravages of a modern, aggressive, mercantile, and brutalizing urban existence. ...In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates “us” from “them,” almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent “returns” to culture and tradition. ...In the formerly colonized world, these “returns” have produced varieties of religious and nationalist fundamentalism. (Said xiii)

In Mda’s novel, culture seems to be working both in its aggressive form and palliative form. The tribal chief in Ways of Dying has used a narrative of a warrior history to

convince the hostel dwellers of the necessity to return to that past. In the shack settlement, the Young Tigers provide an education of the resistance for the young children. The result is an aggressive identity formation that divides and brutalizes; certainly a form of fundamentalism. Said notes that “the trouble with this idea of culture is that it entails not only venerating one’s own culture but also thinking of it as somehow divorced from, because transcending, the everyday world” (xiii). It is in response to this idea that Mda seems to advocate the palliative form of culture. In his novel, the cultural acts are performed in conjunction with normal, everyday activities, allowing the people performing them to mitigate the harshness of their existence. The problem of course here is whether Mda is suggesting a complete divorce between cultural acts of the everyday and politics of identity and/or nationalism. It seems that this would be hypocritical, for as Said points out, this sort of separation of culture from disturbing political acts is how the West operated during the heyday of colonization (xiv). But perhaps the problem in the West wasn’t necessarily the separation itself, but was how that separation occurred. Said writes that this separation took place because of the refusal of so many cultural agents to take “issue with the notion of ‘subject’ or ‘inferior’ races so prevalent among officials who practiced [slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial subjection] as a matter of course” (xiv). If so, Mda’s separation of ordinary cultural acts from the politics of the struggle isn’t a refusal to take issue with the atrocities, but to challenge them.

Historically, the problem in South Africa has not been the presence or absence of culture. As culture is that which makes us human, it certainly cannot disappear at any time. Instead, Thornton writes that it is useful think of culture as a resource. In this way, culture cannot be owned by any group or individual. But as a resource, access to it can be

restricted (Thornton 24). As such, we may theorize that South Africans who suffered under apartheid did not witness a destruction of their culture, but rather they were kept from being able to access it. This denial of access is not simply the closing of a gate, nor is it meant to imply that the oppressor alone possesses culture. Access is denied by a complex dehumanizing process enacted by a system of oppression that results in the oppressed being unable to conceptualize or articulate himself without the image of the oppressor and the power unequal power dynamic between them (Freire 28–31). The danger of this, as Freire warns, is that the oppressed then view the goal of the restoration of their humanity as becoming like the oppressor in image and action. Conceptualizing culture as a resource allows us to acknowledge that South Africans do not need to return or go back to an antiquated time or place to rediscover their cultural institutions. Consequently, the continued presence of culture does not mean that it was locked in a vacuum and is structurally the same as it was before apartheid or even before colonialism. Rather, it has very naturally changed, as the people and the land has changed. Furthermore, I don't mean to imply that apartheid existed outside of culture and acted upon it in an oppressive manner. Apartheid indeed was a part of the universal, national, local, and performative culture. It acted within all of the spheres in complex ways from the overdetermined spectacle of racism to minutiae of everyday life.

Let me explain further how I am conceptualizing culture in several manifestations: universal, national, local, and performance (i.e. art, literature, music, etc.). Universal culture, as Thornton provides, is that which makes us human (Thornton 18), in the broadest sense of the phrase: from simply recognizing ourselves and others as sharing some general, lived experience on this earth. Persons can be denied access to this

level of culture by oppressive systems that characterize the oppressed as less than human, or in some other way inherently inferior to the oppressor. Ironically, this process also denies the oppressor the shared experience and thus dehumanizes the oppressor (Freire 29). By dehumanizing others and himself, the oppressor has denied access to universal culture, also known as humanity, that which makes us human. If universal culture is that which makes us human, and the oppressed do not conceptualize themselves as fully human, then they do not have access to universal culture. It is restored to them only once they believe and celebrate their own humanity as full and complete and not inferior.

Mda's novel does not seem so much concerned with national culture, so I will not delve too deeply. But Frantz Fanon has written on the problems of the claim to national culture within liberation movements. National culture, I believe, is a social construction of politics that is not inherent to the land or the people that live on it. It seems it has become as much a part of our identification process as race and gender. Universal culture provides the space for which a temporal-specific and locale-specific national culture could be created for purposes of external and interior control, a need and function of power (however temporary or permanent). Fanon has suggested that the political party that mobilizes the people problematizes the claim to national culture by refusing to engage the issue of legitimacy (146). In the case of the oppressor, access is denied by disenfranchisement; non-citizenship; forced removals to 'homelands,' 'bantustans,' and 'reservations.' Fanon claims that these types of claims and denials of national culture is what "obliterates" the culture of the oppressed and "petrifies" the national culture of the oppressor (170–172). For Mda, the people's claim to citizenship or national culture is not

a priority. It seems that the people must first be able to claim their humanity and ways of living.

Local culture within national borders are characterized by very specific locales (but not always) and people who perform specific tasks, or ways of living, recognized by themselves and others outside of the specific locale or group as shared by those who perform the tasks. Access to this local culture can be denied to individuals or groups by an oppressive system that forces them to look upon their ways of living as backwards. The way apartheid affected these ways was to create a hostile and deprived environments in which acts of resistance, or acts of spectacle, came to be defined as cultural acts, such as protest songs and freedom dances. Systems of oppression also characterized certain acts as peculiar, mythical, and barbarian. For instance, in South Africa, as well as other areas of the continent, traditional healers, or *muti* practitioners, were, and still are, conflated with a small population of ‘witch doctors’ who kill and mutilate humans (not derived or related to ‘*muti*’) for the purpose of creating ‘medicines’ or divination for superstitious clients (Turrell 22).

Conceiving of ‘South African culture’ in this way allows me the specificity required to write on such matters as Mda’s novels, while not being exclusive in such a way to deny the effects of observation, travel, and local and global relations as a part of culture. ‘South African’ then becomes a temporal- and locale-specific modifier of culture. It does not exist separately or uniquely with permanent and impassable borders. Rather, it is a group of conditions within culture that may temporarily define or categorize particular ways of living³. Intrinsicly there are no borders; things and people are constantly influx and interacting with each other in fairly specific, local ways that

temporarily allow us to speak of them as if they were unique or belonging to solely one group. But they are not and do not, respectively.

These different levels of culture—which are not completely separate but are within each other and rely on each other for definition—all shape a person’s identity. I use ‘identity’ here as a specific subject position that takes into account how one places oneself in the surrounding environment with the purpose of acting within it and upon it. That environment includes the land, buildings, people, and modes of thought emanating and being constructed by all of these things. Because a person is in fact placing himself in that position, it suggests that this subject position cannot ever be an essential way of being, or authentic. It is always constructed, sometimes unconsciously, but even when the person is the only subject in the room. Carol-Anne Tyler articulates this, writing, “No matter how self-consciously we deconstruct identities, no matter how self-reflexively we perform our selves, we are still ‘doing’ them” (qtd. in Caughie 9). These performances of identity may occur unconsciously, without attempts at self-reflection. I am not interested in theorizing on the current subjectivities of South Africans, be they Fanon’s masks or Bhabha’s mimicry. I am, however, interested in how South Africans might go about living in a way that contributes to a universal, national, and local culture that in turn shapes a positive subjectivity, or cultural identity, completely free of—or at least with a diminished role from—the oppressive structures of apartheid. Apartheid and its lingering effects are not preventing persons from ‘placing’ themselves in subject positions, thus not preventing identity formations, but apartheid has prevented the oppressed from being able to place themselves in subject positions characterized by humanity and dignity. Mda’s

novel perhaps shows how attending to ordinary details of living provides the space and means for identity formations characterized by humanity and dignity.

I think it has been possible to glean from the pages above what I hope to accomplish. I have already detailed a few caveats, attempts to cover any misinterpretation of intent. However, I'd also like to take some responsibility for my words, ideas, and intentions. I was told this thesis was to be a contribution of knowledge to the academic community. That is quite a task. Knowledge is nothing to be taken lightly. It has consequences, mostly predicted, but often unforeseen. But a wary producer of knowledge has already attempted to take the unforeseen into account. I would like to believe that as an amateur producer of knowledge, I am stepping into the room quietly, not necessarily in an attempt to escape notice, but in an effort to not to offend those I will be working with for some time to come. Nevertheless, I do wish to make an impression so that my peers and future colleagues will grant me the respect of listening to what I have to say and grant me the privilege of their criticism.

In the following pages, I will be asking my readers to consider the role and consequence of a certain writer, Zakes Mda. I do not cast upon him any responsibility because I do not think that it is my place to name that responsibility. Any responsibilities he does take on, however, I will make note of and comment on. But more importantly, I would like the readers to imagine the specificity of Mda's text as a suggestion of how a particular group of persons have come not only to survive, but to live a life with all its glory, tragedy, and consequence. Mda's novel, Ways of Dying, is not simply a narration born of observation, it is a narration of the imagination's role in rediscovering, shaping, acting upon, and acting within culture, all with the simple purpose of placing oneself

purposefully in a positive role of cultural agent: one who is willing and able to use the cultural resources at hand to negotiate the quite ordinary task of life.

Notes

¹ I take full responsibility for this qualification. If my reader deems it necessary to fault my arguments presented in this thesis on the basis of this categorization and thus render my work invalid, I accept that possibility.

² A more in-depth discussion of Négritude will take place in Chapter 2.

³ And we are to remember, as Toloki reminds us, that “our ways of dying are our ways of living” (Mda Ways 98)

CHAPTER II

WRITTEN ORALITY AS REDISCOVERY OF THE ORDINARY

Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying is informed and shaped by the events occurring during the waning days of apartheid. Following the lead of Njabulo Ndebele, however, I do not think it is sufficient to confine the events informing the novel to the early 1990s. Ndebele writes in 1994, "the problems of South Africa are premised on the moral evil of the apartheid" (28). Because of this, a moral ideology is set forth by anti-apartheid writers that relies on symbols for "exposure" but not explication. He warns that this "moral ideology tends to ossify complex social problems into symbols which are perceived as finished forms of good or evil, instead of leading us towards important necessary insights into the social *processes* leading to those finished forms" (28). The processes of apartheid are important to take note of if we are to truly understand the ways of living and resistance Mda's characters enact in order keep some semblance of the ordinary in their lives. These social and political processes of apartheid that culminate in the events of the early 1990s, started far earlier and serve to explicate the actions of Mda's characters. It is important to note that the specificity and locality of events leading up to the time period in which Mda's novel takes place not only inform how his characters perform their day-to-day functions in extraordinary ways, but allow Mda to present a vision of a "new aesthetic education" that serves as a sort of protoplasm for a South African cultural identity. I refuse here to attach the modifier "new" to South African cultural identity. As we continue, I think it will become apparent that Mda is not suggesting that the future of South Africa and the cultural identity it will be characterized by will be new but rather a

‘rediscovery’. In fact, he admits as much in an interview published in Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael’s Senses of Culture. When asked on his take about the term

‘renaissance’ as used in ‘African Renaissance,’ Mda responds:

Renaissance involves both ‘development’ and ‘rediscovery’. I would have a problem with ‘revival’. It implies ‘going back’ to the archive to reinvent culture and reclaim a pre-colonial authenticity that is lost. All these, in my view, are conservative and reactionary notions of an African Renaissance. We cannot hope to revive the great civilizations that existed in many parts of Africa. But we can rediscover them—their literature, their philosophy. (117)

Mda’s novels, as I will highlight below, remind us that ‘traditional’ culture did not disappear during the apartheid. Nor did it lie dormant, in wait for liberation. In some rural areas, and even in some bleak urban settings, the primary setting of Ways of Dying, it flourished. But first we must understand the events that have made it difficult for South Africans to ‘rediscover’ what was hidden from them, their own humanity.

In 1978⁴, P.W. Botha took over the office of Prime Minister. After the urban and labor resistance movements of the mid-1970s, it became apparent to the administration that the current policies were not quelling the masses. Repression was not enough. In addition, the South African economy was suffering. The 1960s and 1970s had brought a surge of industry and technology to the nation. The need for a semi-skilled black labor force was replacing the use for the unskilled black labor population. The mechanization of agriculture was making farming a “big business” and smaller Afrikaner farmers were finding themselves unable to compete with the large-scale operations. This trend created class tensions within the formerly largely united white race group (undermining one of the purposes of the Verwoerdian model of apartheid). In order to address these new class

issues as well as “appease” the resistance movements still functioning, Botha introduced his “total strategy.”

Botha’s administration took the position of supporting business and launched a rhetoric of support for a new free market economy. In order to supply business with a new labor force, as well as attempt to appease resistance forces, the government allowed blacks to join trade unions. Education for blacks was reformed, now requiring primary school enrollment and the provision of technical schools in order to provide the labor force with skills necessary for work in the new industrialized free market economy. Finally, in 1986 the pass laws were abolished. The new semi-skilled black labor force could now move more freely between home and the industrial centers where they worked. Around this time, many “petty apartheid” ordinances were repealed as well, including many segregation restrictions in public places. Restaurants, theaters, and other public amenities “were no longer compulsorily segregated and many opened their doors to all—that is, all who could afford them” (Worden 137).

In terms of oppression of the black majority, the ‘Total Strategy’ of the Botha government entailed the recognition that overt racism could no longer be used by the government to control the so-called ‘non-whites.’ Apartheid was reformulated to take advantage of the economic superiority of the ruling party and its supporters as a way of oppressing the poor black masses. Their access to certain areas of society were no longer regulated by the color bar, but by their lack of resources. This of course could only have worked after the hundreds of years of oppression based on color (141). South Africa had now adopted an extreme form of a capitalist free market economy.

The reforms, however, were not enough and the country plunged further into debt and violence. Botha's 'total strategy' had failed to relieve international sanctions and pressure for change. The Rand continued to fall significantly, putting a tremendous strain on the economy. The government's reforms had also failed to appease the resistance movements. They were still acutely aware of their oppression, even in its new form. In addition, Botha and his advisors had not anticipated the large influx of blacks into urban centers. This brought with it new challenges for the government, including the rise of shack settlements. This trend led to forced removals and frequent harassment by police forces in an effort to prevent a ghettoization of the cities.

In response to Botha's 'total strategy' and the redefinition of apartheid rather than its dismantling, two new resistance groups formed. The National Forum (NF) formed under the spirit of socialism and officially positioned itself against the new racist capitalism⁵ calling for the "establishment of 'a democratic, anti-racist worker republic in Azania'" (Worden 141). The United Democratic Front (UDF) formed under a much broader tradition, calling for the "rejection of apartheid state, boycott of the tricameral system and acceptance of the Freedom Charter principles" (Worden 141). The UDF also aligned itself with the exiled remnants of the African National Congress (ANC). The UDF was very successful in organizing local opposition to Community Councils in townships. Protest took the form of rent and service fee boycotts, as well as school boycotts and work stayaways. Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, head of the supposedly independent KwaZulu Bantustan (in what is now KwaZulu-Natal Province) formed the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in 1975 at the behest of the ANC. The relations soured, however, and in 1980 Buthelezi severed ties with ANC.

Tensions increased in the mid 1980s, including a horrific reminder of the Sharpeville massacre in which police opened fire on a funeral procession in the eastern Cape on Sharpeville Day in 1985. In response to the resistance movements, a state of emergency was declared in 1985 and then again in 1987 and held in place until 1990. During these years, the popular resistance drastically changed the landscape. Community Councils dissolved, and groups calling for “people’s power” took their place (Worden 143). Male youths began to form more organized protection groups who patrolled the townships and shack settlements in an effort to provide security against violent police raids and infiltration units. The rift between the IFP and UDF-ANC became more pronounced. The worst manifestation of the political rift occurred in black townships where party organizers from both sides often encouraged and oversaw violent retributions against members of the opposing parties. Necklacing, the tactic of draping a tire around a person’s neck and then setting it alight, became a widespread means of punishment for those blacks who were believed to be apartheid collaborators or informants for the opposing party. It was an extremely tumultuous time, racked with violence and, later, protracted negotiations between the ANC and the ruling National Party (NP). Violence ruled the daily lives in the black townships with the monthly death toll in the hundreds. Most of the deaths occurred as a result of supposedly black-on-black violence in relation to the political disputes between the UDF-ANC and IFP. It was suspected at the time and has since been confirmed that many of the attacks on black townships and shack settlements particularly in Kwazulu-Natal, were supported by the P.W. Botha and F.W. de Klerk apartheid government (Worden 145). Frustration and anxiety marked the lives of those living in the townships and squatter settlements, and yet they were expected to

carry on with their daily lives, to eke out a living, to feed families, and find some way of avoiding the depressing elements of their existence.

Ways of Dying takes place during these closing days of apartheid. By this time, Nelson Mandela had been released from prison and the ANC itself unbanned. The novel was originally published in 1991 and Mda writes of bejeweled party leaders, most likely to be the Mandela's. This would put the present action of the book taking place after February 2, 1990 and before the publication in 1991. It was still a time, as highlighted above, of violence and unrest, especially in the black townships and squatter camps. The novel's narrative centers around one such squatter settlement, yet maneuvers among several locations in both space and time. The two central characters, Toloki and Noria, grew up in the same village and are unexpectedly reunited at the funeral of Noria's son some years later in the city. Toloki is at the funeral as a professional mourner. Until this day he has successfully avoided his past by not attending any funerals involving the homeboys and homegirls from his village. But he is enraptured by Noria's beauty and finds himself longing to speak with her. Noria, too, is grateful for her chance encounter with Toloki as she sees it as an opportunity to turn away from her own recent loss. Once reunited, they begin to teach each other how to live despite being surrounded by death. They are able to revisit their past with each other, and reconstruct their pain into a shared collective memory that sometimes even allows them to laugh. Despite the pain and suffering of their community, the novel ends with an optimistic tone, suggesting that, to borrow Ndebele's words, the 'rediscovery of the ordinary' by using the imagination to negotiate 'modernity' and 'tradition' will allow South Africans to use the cultural resources around them to fuel their existence. It will allow them to forge ways of living

even when surrounded by death. Toloki and Noria serve as examples of the possession and use of imagination in such a manner.

Rita Barnard has called Mda's novel "post-anti-apartheid" (280). It's employment of a complex narrative rich in detail and the fantastic "decisively breaches the generic constraints that the culture of resistance, with its demand for realist immediacy, had for years placed on the black writer" (Barnard 280). And Irene Visser suggests that Mda's novel is an answer to the call by several theorists in the 1980s (Jane Watts, Albie Sachs, and Njabulo Ndebele) for a new fiction not bogged down and rendered faceless by the struggle (39). Barnard goes on to explicate setting of Ways of Dying as an intimation of Bakhtin's theories on the location and space of the carnival and grotesque. I, too, wish to take note of the local in Mda's novel, but instead as the space in which there is an attention to detail that reveals the ways in which Mda's characters take part in the resistance movement in very ordinary ways. Barnard points out that the "quintessential aspect of the carnivalesque vision...is a peculiar and productive ambivalence," and that Ways of Dying is in this respect "wholly congruous with the Bakhtinian vision" (284). I would like to borrow Barnard's idea and term of ambivalence when speaking of these ordinary ways of resistance. Toloki seems rather ambivalent to the resistance movement, yet quits his job when his friend is burned to death by his white boss; rebuilds his shack when it is bulldozed by the government; and refuses to pay the protection fee to the settlement council. He is resisting the oppressive structures and symptoms of apartheid and is yet politically ambivalent. At the end of the novel, Toloki vows to help Noria not because he understands how she has been wronged and by whom she has been wronged, but simply because she has been wronged. Bhut'shaddy, the spaza shop owner, files a

complaint and suit with the city not because he is a resistance fighter, but because he believes he deserves and can win monetary compensation for his injuries and business damages incurred during his 'hell ride.' Both refuse to buy into the spectacle of political resistance, and instead resist merely in order to live in the way they desire to live. This is perhaps the resistance of the ordinary. It is resistance as a way of living.

Mda begins this process of rediscovering the ordinary in Ways of Dying by constructing his novel with a narrative reflecting the oral tradition. This is an important first step for Mda. As Liz Gunner writes in 2004:

Orality was the means by which Africa made its existence, its history long before the colonial and imperial presence of the west manifested itself. In this sense, orality needs to be seen not simply as 'the absence of literacy' but as something self-constitutive, *sui generis*. (67)

And so we have the generative material, or voice, of Mda's story. This narration is, in fact, a collection of voices representing the village where Toloki and Noria grew up:

It is not different, really, here in the city. Just like back in the village, we live our lives together as one. We know everything about everybody. We even know things that happen when we are not there; things that happen behind people's closed doors deep in the middle of the night. We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story, 'They say it once happened...', we are the 'they'. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria. (Mda Ways 12)

The communal voice tells the reader immediately its purpose and even mocks the reader for questioning its knowledge. The voice reminds the reader of its existence, how it works, and why it works. If the communal voice was forgotten, or more likely hidden, in the modernity of the urban setting, Mda provides his reader the opportunity to rediscover it. This important first step also reminds the reader that, as Gunner states, "it is neither

possible nor accurate to take one model that valorizes the written word as the blueprint for how the human race has developed” (67). Mda urges his reader in the playful, mocking tone that all is well, and what others may deem as ‘lost tradition’ is in fact ordinary.

It is important not to assume, however, that Mda is suggesting a ‘return’ to the past or traditions of a time before colonialism. He avoids this by having the communal voice tell the reader of its ability to adapt to the conditions of modernity. It explicitly states to the reader that things are not so different in the city. Gunner believes in the importance of demonstrating “the ways in which orality has been extended into various configurations of modernity” in order to debunk “the argument for a purist orality that is beyond the grasp of the modern” (69). This is a difficult task to negotiate, because one can fall into the trap of treating orality superficially, in a way that treats it as “a nostalgic resource” in an attempt to convince the reader that he is one of us, to convince the reader of his ‘Africaness.’ Isidore Okpewho outlines three primary ways in which “modern African writers have made their contribution toward this vindication” of orality as nostalgia: translation, adaptation, and exploitation (84). What is interesting is that Okpewho does not assign an ethical value to any of the three forms of a modern engagement with orality. It seems he has taken the stance that any modern engagement with orality indicates a movement forward in orality and literacy. Perhaps the very notion of orality existing in written literature or as written literature, whether as translation, adaptation, or exploitation, can only serve to substantiate its value as a form of creative communication. If we are then to ponder the role of Mda’s work in this regard, it would seem that Ways of Dying manages to simply be the next evolutionary step of orality.

But let me amend this statement slightly. If I am to use ‘evolution’ as metaphor for Mda’s creative form, it is important to note that this evolutionary model is not unilateral. The form and structure of Mda’s work has not replaced orality in one or several of its forms. Mda, rather, has possibly spawned a new form that will simply be added to the collection of differences of form and function that ‘orality’ already signifies. Moreover, my use of ‘evolution’ is not to suggest that Mda’s written oral form is the next advance in or a superior form of orality. Abiola Irele wrote in 1989 that in the early 20th century developments in literacy “favored a broadened awareness of literature and thus created the conditions for a scholarly investigation of African orality not merely in a purely linguistic framework...but also from a literary and artistic perspective” (74).⁶ He goes on to state that this influenced scholars to think of orality as a valuable part of and contributor to imaginative expression, “one that would point toward a universal concept of literature” (75). A problem arose, however, in that scholarship pitted orality against literacy. This opposition led to an influential rhetoric of dichotomy that in a sense reversed the “Saussurian order of precedence” that led to the values of orality being discounted (Irele 75). Orality, it seems, took a seat at the behest of academia’s insistence of literacy as a superior mode of communication, one that ‘naturally’ ushers in advancement, technology, and modernity.

This presents a problem for scholars who wish to debunk this mode of thought. We can easily fall into the trap mentioned above, of advocating a ‘return’ to the values of orality. What this ends up doing, however, is reifying literacy as the superior mode of communication by overdetermining orality as tradition rather than as an ordinary form of communication. I certainly have no intention of contributing to this tendency.

Advancement, technology, and modernity are not things to be feared or avoided, obviously, but they must not be treated as receptacles into which we throw orality. We risk its appropriation. We also must not argue for a completely separate form of communication that may or may not advance and work parallel to literacy. We must somehow negotiate these modes not as oppositions, but as contributions towards the same end; contributions with a paper trail of sorts, so that we will always be able to evaluate the history of advancement with complete clarity and understanding. This will—and possibly already has with Mda's novel—lead to new forms that do not erase their predecessors, but acknowledge them and leave the space for them to flourish in their own right.

Mda avoids the trap of characterizing orality as nostalgia by limiting the orality of the narrative to the storyteller, the communal voice. His characters are not placed in unnatural circumstances in which they take on only the performative aspects of orality, telling stories themselves, for instance, rather than allowing the communal voice to do so. Rather, the orality of his narrative creates the space in which the reader is able to witness the characters' experience. His characters are not performing orality, they are existing within it. In fact, their existence is actualized by the orality of the narrative structure. Thus the orality of Ways of Dying becomes more than performance. Mda's novel suggests that orality is not something that exists as an absolute entity, immutable. It is the ordinary process of creation, it is storytelling at its most fundamental level. It is not a method, or a characteristic of his writing. It is his writing. I must therefore correct an earlier statement that Mda's narrative reflects the oral tradition. His narrative is orality

evolved within the current culture, which serves to modify culture itself, helping to shape South African cultural identity.

Perhaps examining the passage from Ways of Dying in a little more detail will shed light on this claim. The communal voice labels its storytelling as gossip, reminding us that there is no objective truth in this telling. It is a personal narrative, a subjective narrative, which formulates a subjective identity of the community. The community of Toloki and Noria's youth is a living entity and has not disappeared with Toloki and Noria's own exodus from the village. This of course reflects the notion that past 'traditions' have indeed not disappeared, but remain, evolve, and are rediscovered daily. Ownership of the story is also established, but because the communal voice describes itself as village gossip, as soon as the story is told, there is an assumption that the story will be retold. It is certain that details will be changed or created, unintentionally because of the unreliability of memory or intentionally for whatever purposes the storytelling may serve. But the communal voice will always be invoked by the storyteller as he introduces the story—"They say it once happened..."—ensuring that the story will always belong the community, a community that continues to grow with each invocation of the storyteller. This idea of communal ownership is somewhat opposed to the ideas of ownership that came with Botha's free market economy. But the fact that the communal voice asserts it is at home in the city as well as the village suggests the change that has already occurred to a 'traditional' culture practice. Culture is not just a collection of immutable traditions. Change, transference, and evolution are vital organs of it. The very unreliability of the communal narrative forces us to not to be skeptical of the story, but rather to embrace the unstable nature of existence, particularly in the dynamic setting of

Noria's settlement. The authoritative storyteller is no less credible than the reader, thus implicating his involvement in the story. These stories are about the villagers, the villagers' children, and the villagers' children's children. Who better to tell it than this communal voice of the village, this communal voice that can travel space and time and tell the story it sees fit to tell?

Another quality to note in the passage above from Ways of Dying is the degree of narration established by the communal voice. The communal voice invokes itself when it refers to a separate storyteller who is in turn invoking the communal voice, the 'they.' So in this short passage we have the communal voice speaking directly to us, the readers, telling us that it is their story we are about to embark upon. To make us understand exactly who 'they' are, this voice must refer to a storyteller who would normally invoke the voice of the community. What Mda has done here is deauthorize himself as author. He briefly is the storyteller who invokes the communal voice, "They say it once happened..." Then the community voice tells us that the storyteller is non-existent in this narrative. We are getting the story of Toloki and Noria directly from the communal voice, which actually lends a greater sense of credibility to the narrative if it is to function as a lesson or proverb.

An important effect of Mda's orality is that we get a series of stories in a nonlinear fashion that function as proverbs do in the African oral tradition. The two main principles of this tradition are authority and association, which Emmanuel Obiechina writes is the way in which "an idea is given validity by being placed side by side with another idea that bears the stamp of communal approval and by its being linked to the storehouse of collective wisdom" (125). Mda has created the communal voice, which has

in turn put its stamp of approval onto the narrative of Toloki and Noria. Thus, the narrative begins to function as a proverb intended to teach as well as entertain. If the idea is to ‘rediscover’ cultural identity in South Africa, we must then ask if this narrative as proverb operates in opposition to apartheid official histories because of their history of repressing cultural identity. I think the problem here is not whether it operates in this manner, but rather the problem is the manner in which we are trying to qualify or categorize the narrative in opposition to official histories. To try to give the proverbs legitimacy in comparison to the official histories of apartheid is to begin on the wrong path. We need not seek the legitimacy of oral narrative in opposition to former official histories. As Obiechina states, it is the community that must give legitimacy. The narrative is inviting the community—by invocation of the communal voice—to challenge the official histories. In this way agency is taken up by the community and not given to them by the oppressor, one of Ndebele’s fears on the eve of negotiated liberation (Ndebele vii–ix).

Mda accomplishes this by allowing his narrative to refer to specific events that could have only taken place in South Africa, formulating a particular chronotope that gives the narrative the power to function beyond mere proverb. Bakhtin’s idea of chronotope is explained by Paul Prior and Jody Shipka:

Bakhtin came to view all chronotopes as embodied-representational—with concrete time-place events deeply furrowed with, and constructed through representations and with representations always deeply rooted in chains of concrete, historical events (186).

The overarching concrete event in Mda’s Ways of Dying is, of course, apartheid. Though never mentioned by name, it is represented by the archetypal images of the settlements; the extensive and complex laws Toloki must navigate in order to purchase his food

vending cart; the government death squad Battalion 77, which terrorizes the settlements, representing the infamous 32 Battalion of the South African Defence Force (SADF); the tribal chief and his supporters, representing Mangusutho Buthelezi and the IFP; and the “bejeweled” political elites representing the leaders of the ANC. This reflection of people and events specific to a particular time and place allows Mda’s invocation of the oral tradition to escape being essentialized as African. His narrative becomes one that can belong specifically to South Africa, relying on traditions that are shared by other regions of the continent and the world at large, but remaining uniquely South African by virtue of their “representations always deeply rooted in chains of concrete, historical events” (Prior and Shipka 186). His construction of a narrative in orality, referencing specific historical events in specific places, allows his novel to function as a uniquely South African cultural history that espouses a South African cultural identity.

Mda’s construction of an oral narrative in literacy provides a space to write a positive cultural history that challenges the static and dichotomous official history of white superiority versus black inferiority in South Africa. For black South Africans, that history is dominated by oppression and death. Mda is able to address this oppression and death in a richly written oral narrative that allow his characters and readers to examine their history in a fashion that allows them to accept it, embrace it, forgive it, learn from it, and keep moving forward with a new, more complex and dynamic identity. Mda’s characters and readers are able to relate the past to the way they must live their lives and define themselves in the present, which in turn allows them to face the future with an optimism that is not afforded to them by official histories. The communal voice reminds us of this in the following passage:

The stories of the past are painful. But when Toloki and Noria talk about them, they laugh. Laughter is known to heal even the deepest of wounds. Noria's laughter has the power to heal troubled souls. This afternoon, as the two of them sit in front of the shanty, exhausted from building last night's creation, and refreshing themselves with stories of the past and soured porridge, Toloki lavishly bathes his soul in her laughter. (Mda Ways 95)

The stories are, as Noria and Toloki believe themselves to be learning from each other, teaching how to live; teaching that the many ways of dying are not to be ignored, but witnessed and experienced in order to find a way to live.

Notes

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the history of apartheid that follows is provided by Nigel Worden's concise, yet extremely comprehensive history unless otherwise noted.

⁵ I attach the modifier 'racist' here not to inherently qualify capitalism as racist, but to remind the reader of Botha's effort to conflate race with class in the new free market economy.

⁶ Irele attributes these developments to the work of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, the Chadwicks, and Marshall McLuhan.

CHAPTER III

THE ROLE OF ART, MUSIC, AND THE IMAGINATION IN THE REDISCOVERY OF THE ORDINARY

Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying exhibits how access to the cultural resources of art, music, and the imagination enable people to live in a dignified and ordinary manner. For a long time, apartheid managed to restrict access to these cultural resources. By doing so, the system of apartheid created the illusion of a unified central force of evil. This gave those in power a distinct advantage in being able to predict and monitor the resistance movements. This tactic solidified the power imbalance and made it extremely difficult for the majority to overcome their minority oppressors. But the longer-lasting effect was that the elimination of the detailed processes of life in art, music, and the imagination contributed to the dehumanization of the oppressed and the oppressor. This is essential to note because I believe it is these detailed processes of life, what Ndebele refers to as the 'ordinary,' that humanize the oppressed and enable them to recognize themselves and others as individuals, as human.

The effects of such a system were totalizing and often invisible. Ngugi wa Thiong'o comments on the ability of racism to hide difference in the colonial condition for instance:

[R]acism and the tight caste system in colonialism had ensured that social rewards and punishments were carefully structured on the mystique of colour. *Labour* was not just *labour* but *black labour*; *capital* was not just *capital* but *white-owned capital*. Exploitation and its necessary consequence, oppression, were black. The vocabulary by which the conflict between colonial labour and imperialist capital was perceived and ideologically fought out consisted of white and black images, sometimes freely interchangeable with the terms "European" and "African". The sentence or phrase was "...when the whiteman came to Africa..." and not "...when the imperialist, or the colonialist, came to Africa...", or "...one day these whites

will go...” and not “...*one day imperialism, or these imperialists, will go...*”! Except in a few cases, what was being celebrated in the writing was the departure of the whiteman with the implied hope that the incoming Blackman by virtue of his blackness would right the wrongs and heal the wounds of centuries of slavery and colonialism. Were there classes in Africa? No! cried the nationalist politician, and the writer seemed to echo him. The writer could not see the class forces born but stunted in a racially demarcated Africa. (159)

This is the sort of illusion that befell anti-apartheid writers such as Alex La Guma and Ezekial Mphahlele (Ndebele 44). As such, their writing would merely reflect the obvious and inhibit any ability to actually direct change. Breyten Breytenbach specified this problem to South Africa:

Sometimes one is more impatient with one's friends than with one's enemies. We all agree that Apartheid is Evil. We often take the short cut. We oversimplify, we condemn out of hand. And perhaps sometimes we do it more out of consideration for the good of our own souls and not necessarily because we reject in a reasoned way the socio-political and economic (and cultural) exploitation, discrimination and humiliation of the history and the system that, inadequately we call Apartheid. (166)

Particularly interesting is Breytenbach's notion of the inadequacy of the term 'apartheid,' or 'separateness.' The separateness affected by apartheid served to produce a dichotomy, Manichean in nature, which made it difficult for any resistance movement to actually know exactly how its oppressor operated. This oversimplification of the system of oppression also produced the often damaging effect of theorizing an essential black or African way of life that was supposedly the natural opposite of oppressive systems such as colonialism and apartheid. Ngugi explains:

The uniformity of African values was often captured in the realm of political parlance by the grandiloquent phrase, African socialism. Socialism (and therefore its opposite, imperialist capitalism) was reduced to a matter of beliefs, moral absolutes, and not that of a historically changing economic, political and cultural practice. Values without the economic, political and cultural practice that gives rise to them even as they in turn reflect that practice were seen as racially inherent in a people. (159)

This argument can be extrapolated to “African Renaissance” and the danger of such phrases, because “Africa” is pitted as the opposite to “Europe” or “the West.” So it invokes an idea of a return to some heralded past that no longer exists or never existed in the first place.

There was a movement in South Africa, however, that knew its oppressor well. That movement was the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), and its leader Steve Biko. Biko’s brutal murder and its blatant cover up only seems to indicate the government’s fear that this was a movement with much potential. BCM was heavily influenced by Aimé Césaire’s and Léopold Sédar Senghor’s idea of Negritude. Césaire defined Negritude as “the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history, and our culture (qtd. in Irele “Négritude” 203). It is extremely important to take note of the context in which this definition was made. It was a response to a specific situation, a specific history of oppression. If Césaire felt the need to categorically define the blackness of Africans, their destiny, history, and culture, it was because the colonial powers had already done so. The difference was to voice it himself, from the marked body of a black, and to restore dignity to his being and the being of his peers. Does this preclude difference among Africans? No. Négritude was thought of in response to the essentializing domination of colonial power. But I must be careful not to suggest the notion of Négritude as a response to colonial oppression means that constructions of blackness and Africanness exist only in opposition to whiteness and Europeanness. Peter S. Thompson writes in his update on Negritude:

A related, and more passionate, dissension has been that all these assumptions of racial or continental unity, and the glorification of Africanness of which they are a

premise, are simple reactions to the degrading views of whites (Asante-Darko 153). Negritude loses prestige because it appears an obligated or dictated response to Europe. This view first crystallized as a reaction to Sartre's statement that Negritude was the minor term in a kind of dialectic with Europeanness, destined to phase itself out in the synthesis (like Senghor's *métissage*) of a future universalism. Clearly, this offends on two counts: that blackness only exists in opposition to whiteness, and that Africanness—to whatever extent it exists—will have a common destiny with Europe. (213)

Thompson is hinting at what I believe is this continued effect of oversimplification. Just because Negritude theorizes that there are cultural resources that are being denied to a large group of people does not assume that constructions of blackness and Africanness are static, immutable, universal, essential, or ontological. Thompson goes on to criticize the critics of Negritude for ignoring the changing manifestations:

Less commented on are the *engagement* and the efforts of both Senghor and Césaire toward a “subjective Negritude.” This includes their militancy, their reaction (especially Césaire's plays) to colonialism and slavery, their definitions (especially Senghor's *métissage culturel*, or “cultural cross-breeding”) of a new role for Africans in a multiracial world. “La Négritude, c'est une certaine manière d'être homme, surtout de vivre en homme” ‘Negritude is a certain way of being human, above all of living as a human’ (Senghor 139). (Thompson 211)

So while this notion does historicize Negritude, it certainly does not declare it dead. In fact, it declares it more of a living breathing entity, capable of adapting to the changing cultural environment and political conditions surrounding it. As Thompson notes, there is a certain elasticity to Negritude that has allowed most to see what they want in the theory (212). I certainly am not immune to this tendency. This elasticity of definitions, however, is its strength. Africans of all kinds have been beaten and battered beyond recognition, and yet they still rise up and declare themselves free from tyranny and oppression over and over again. Is it not appropriate to incorporate this same sort of resilience to a concept that was born out of the origins of resistance against colonial oppression? This resilience does not preclude change, adaptation, or evolution. It encourages survival.

I do not wish to belabor the point, but I do believe I must address one of Negritude's most vociferous critics, Wole Soyinka. Thompson points out the intimacy of Soyinka's theories with that of Senghor and Negritude:

It is fair to note that Soyinka's starting point—"reference points"—is the same as Senghor's end point, and that the two are never as far apart as Soyinka makes it seem. Further, over the years he has ignored the Senghorian appeal to "universalism" and has reacted to Negritude as if it had remained static and narcissistic. Soyinka's position appears to the non-partisan eye fairly close to the later conciliation and *métissage* of Senghor, and it "by no means implies a complete denial of the past, but rather a new integration which situates the past and the traditional culture within a moral perspective" (Irele 112). Analysts like Irele have reconciled Negritude with many of its enemies, finding, for example, "no better fulfillment of the idea of Négritude in modern literature than in the work of Soyinka himself" (112). (Thompson 215)

The basis of much of Soyinka's critique of Négritude seems somewhat hypocritical. Joining others in lamenting that Négritude's danger and fault lies in that it is merely a response to Europe and colonialism, Soyinka fails to see that his own theories of cultural integration and recognition of difference within the continent is also a response, a response to the early definitions of Négritude. Now, the danger of such arguments does not lie in the notion that they are responses to arguments that came before them. Indeed, response is the nature of argument, persuasion, and the creation of knowledge. The danger instead lies in the tendency of the responder to qualify his dialogic partner of being incapable of further response or even change. That is the silencing power of oppression, to reduce an argument to two voices: the establishment and the opposition. Soyinka's refusal to engage more current iterations of Négritude is a regression to the oppressive discursive techniques of colonialism.

Biko may have been aware of the major criticisms of Negritude. That is why upon examination of Biko's writings on BCM, it is easy to recognize a specificity of location

and history in his ideas. He writes that Black Consciousness “seeks to channel the pent-up forces of the angry black masses to meaningful and directional opposition basing its entire struggle on realities of the situation” (31). It seems that he was taking the precaution to not speak on behalf of all Africans or all blacks. But he did need a unified force that recognized that certain cultural resources were being denied to them, and that the first step to resisting a totalizing force such as apartheid is to regain access to those cultural resources. It turns out, as Ndebele warned, that the regaining of access to culture was not only the first step, but a necessary continuing process in order to combat the lingering effects of apartheid. Mda, heeds this warning, and takes up the project.

The very first time Toloki enters the settlement, music is present. The children surround him and make up a song about him. According to Biko, music plays a role in all facets of South African life:

Music in the African culture features in all emotional states....Girls and boys never played any games without using music and rhythm as its basis. In other words with Africans, music and rhythm were not luxuries but part and parcel of our way of communication. Any suffering we experienced was made much more real by song and rhythm. (Biko 42)

Mda takes this notion a step further by exemplifying the ubiquitous nature of music.

After Toloki and Noria have built her new shack, the children arrive with water that will allow Noria to create a clay-like mixture that will harden into a suitable floor (Mda Ways 69). Mda is able to accomplish several things in this passage. He is able to invoke a traditional method of home-making in the settlement of urban South Africa. He is able to reinforce the importance of passing on the cultural resource of music to the children when Toloki replies to Noria’s scolding of the children’s song about Toloki, “Let them sing, Noria. Never stifle the creativity of children” (69). Ways of living, such as music were

indeed stifled for many South Africans during the apartheid. Of course music was still sung, composed, performed, and danced to, but for many it only came in the form of protest song and dance. Mda and his narrative seem to be reminding his reader that the cultural resource of music has indeed not disappeared, but has been there all along, not just in the exteriority of an official freedom dance or liberation song, but in the interiority of the ordinary as well. Mda is able to reflect Biko's notion that music was integrated into many activities:

...they sing other songs, some of which they have heard their parents, and their brothers and sisters, sing at demonstrations, and at political rallies and funerals. Soon the song becomes stronger, with the voices of adults joining in. The women of the neighbourhood, following the lead of their children, are bringing all sorts of household items to the shack. (Mda Ways 69)

The narrative has expertly woven the symbolism and spectacle of protest songs into a normal everyday task of home repair. The songs then take on a deeper significance of a return to the ordinary, everyday experience of living. They have returned a dignity to those mundane tasks performed in a locale that is despised by the government and even well-to-do black South Africans such as Nefolowhodwe from Toloki's village.

Mda is also able to highlight the communal aspect of South African society that Biko states so well in the following passage:

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. (Biko 42)

The problem in this case was the burning down of Noria's shack. This fledgling shanty community lives together and thus to provide for one of their own is not a burden. This is a good point, however, to highlight Mda's reluctance to paint the community involvement as perfectly idyllic. Bhut' Shaddy was happy to provide his taxi in order to

gather the materials for Noria's new shack, but not for free. Mda is able to write in the realities of their existence, when Bhut'Shaddy says that he will need money for the petrol. The gritty details have not been glossed over, and these events have thus avoided becoming symbols of redemption from the oppressor. Mda continues his attention to the details, even when it comes to the high concept of love. When Noria and Toloki have finished building the new shack, Bhut'Shaddy has changed his mind and tells Noria that he wants to return the money to her because he loves her. But it is not true love he feels as he replies to her refusals by saying, "I need you, Noria. I have no one to eat my money with." Noria tellingly replies, "You need me for the wrong reasons, Bhut'Shaddy" (Mda Ways 70). Mda here has been able address the complexities and details of a modern capitalist South Africa with the communal tradition: the negotiation of money for goods and services and communal support. Though Noria insists on paying back Toloki, we get a sense that her payment won't necessarily come in the form of money, but possibly by means of sharing or bartering.

The tradition of music takes on a more imaginative aspect in Mda's narrative as well. In this way, it becomes deeply personal for the characters, tied to their personas, their ability to express themselves, and the way they perceive themselves. The differences in the way the characters treat the music and the imagination that accompanies it bears relevance to the themes of community and individualism. We are first introduced to Noria's singing through her relationship with Jwara, Toloki's father, in their home village:

Jwara, for that was his father's name, earned his bread by shoeing horses. But on some days—Toloki could not remember whether these were specially appointed days or whether they were days when business was slack—he created figurines of iron and brass. On those days he got that stuck-up bitch, Noria, to sing while he

shaped the red-hot iron and brass into images of strange people and animals that he had seen in his dreams. Noria was ten years old, but considered herself very special, for she sang for the spirits that gave Jwara the power to create the figurines. (Mda Ways 29)

Music is literally life-sustaining for Jwara. He is only happy when he is able to create with the help of Noria's singing. Many men throughout the village and those who travel between the village and city have this same intimate connection with Noria's singing and laughter. Mda contributes to the intimacy by using language that equates Noria's private singings with physical pleasure. She is in some way prostituting her voice. Mda ultimately paints this as a tragic enterprise as it leads to Toloki's flight from home and Noria's eventual fall to physical prostitution in the nearby town. When Noria discovers the power her voice has over men, she abandons the tradition of communal sharing and begins to use it for her own economic gain, accepting various gifts, such as clothing, jewelry, and sweets, from the men who long to listen to her. This eventually leads to her fall from grace and her subsequent flight from the village to the city. Mda's critique of the pitfalls of individualism and capitalism is subtle but certainly evident in this story of Noria's singing.

Noria's singing returns to us near the end of the narrative, when joy has finally returned to her life because of her relationship with Toloki. As Toloki draws animals and flowers for the children of the settlement, Noria asks him to draw pictures of children as well. He replies that he was never skilled at drawing humans. And so Noria suggests she that she try singing:

After all, Jwara was only able to create through Noria's song. Noria sings her meaningless song of old. All of a sudden, Toloki finds himself drawing pictures of the children playing. Children stop their games and gather around him. They watch him draw colourful pictures of children's faces, and of children playing merry go-round in the clouds....The drawing becomes frenzied, as Noria's voice

rises. Passers-by stop to watch, and are overcome by warm feelings. It is as though Toloki is possessed by this new ability to create human figures. He breathes heavily with excitement, and his palms are clammy. His whole body tingles, as he furiously gives shape to the lines on the paper. His breathing reaches a crescendo that is broken by an orgasmic scream. (Mda Ways 199)

Mda couples Noria's singing once again with physical pleasure with a reference to Toloki's "orgasmic scream." This time, however, the pleasure is intimated more as a communion with spiritual or natural forces than with pleasures of the flesh. Toloki's art is presented as an interaction with the entire settlement, a community involvement as the children laugh, play, and peer with wonderment at Toloki's creations. Instead of the twisted creatures of Jwara's dreams, Noria's singing inspires the life-like representations of human faces. The children "are able to identify some of the faces. These are the faces they know, faces of their friends, their own faces. They laugh and make fun of the strange expressions that Toloki has sketched on their purples and yellow and red and blue faces" (199). The art Toloki produces seems to be a melding of the real and surreal, an art based in a reality but daring to imagine and push reality into an imaginative realm. The effect is to allow Mda's characters to gain a knowledge of themselves, but it is a knowledge associated with the imagination. Senghor describes this process in Prose & Poetry:

The African is moved not so much by the outward appearance of the object as by its profound reality, less by the *sign* than by its *sense*. What moves him in a dancing mask, through the medium of the image and the rhythm, is a new vision of the 'god'. What moves him in water is not that it flows, is liquid and blue, but that it washes and purifies. The physical appearance, however intensely perceived in all its particulars by the neuro-sensory organs, indeed, through the very intensity of such perception, is no more than the sign of the object's real significance. (qtd. in Irele 206)

If knowledge and the imaginative faculty are inextricably linked, then the conception of self can only be mediated through social acts of artistic expression; or more accurately, communal acts of artistic expression. Thus, despite his ability to create the figurines as

Noria sings, Jwara, isolated in his workshop, dies of starvation when Noria leaves the village. In contrast, Noria's singing and Toloki's drawings bring vitality to the communal space of the settlement through the laughter of the children. Toloki and Noria's art is created in the communal space of the settlement; adults and children alike are able to witness the creation, and they comment on its profundity and its meaning. Though they cannot articulate it, they know it and see it. Jwara's figurines are created in the closed space of his workshop, and there are no witnesses to his process of creation. The figurines have no meaning, nothing profound can be found in them. Ultimately it is the witness of creation that is important. It becomes a shared experience.

Regardless of the difference in the treatment of the creative process between Jwara and Toloki, Mda makes it apparent that creation is a life-sustaining process. This is exemplified in the stories of Jwara and Toloki's creations. For Jwara, his creative process coupled with Noria's singing is a literal life-sustaining process. He comes to rely on it in order to survive. When Noria abandons him and flees the village, Jwara is unable to move from his workshop. He neither eats nor sleeps, and his family and the rest of the village leave him there to decay. He is only discovered to be dead years later when his wife enters the workshop with the intention to sell the blacksmithing equipment he no longer uses. She and the neighbors enter the workshop and see Jwara, "sitting as they remembered him, but with biltong-like flesh stuck to his bones. His bulging eyes were staring at the figurines as before. Glimmering gossamer was spun all around him, connecting his gaunt body with the walls and the roof" (110). Jwara has literally become attached to the decaying building, a building that has not been alive with work for years. His death is incomplete, however. Because no one witnessed his death, none want to be

the Nurse to communicate the way of dying to the ancestors. Witness of death and the subsequent communal sharing of the death is required to complete the process, and thus Jwara is simply forgotten. Jwara's spirit remains unsettled and we come to find that he haunts the dreams of his old friend Nefolovhodwe. It seems that Jwara cannot be at peace until his last wish is fulfilled—that his figurines be given to Toloki, the son he refused to acknowledge. Jwara requires that his creations are witnessed and appreciated before he can settle in the afterlife. If his death could not be witnessed, his life's work needs to be before he can rest. This sharing of his creations with Toloki and consequently the settlement, allows Jwara to re-enter the community, and thus be at peace.

For Noria and Toloki, the sustenance is not quite as literal, but it is just as important. They too, are haunted by death, by the threat of being swallowed up by the violent city and times that envelop them. And so they turn to each other and begin to create. The creation of music and art opens the closing walls around them and they learn from each other a new way to live. They find that even in the darkest of times, the creative process resulting from an intimate intersection of music and art can keep them alive.

There is one more instance of music I'd like to address, and that is the "singing" of Toloki as a professional mourner. Grant Farred has extensively critiqued Toloki's role as an "undermining element" to the community:

For all Toloki's wailing, there is a solipsism in his role in the funeral. Clad in a strange costume performing a unique task, Toloki undermines the communal element so central to the burial ceremony by drawing attention to himself. It is the "I," the artist and creator of appropriate tragic behavior, who takes narrative precedence over larger social (and personal) losses incurred by the other mourners. (189)

What Farred fails to take into account when critiquing Toloki's role at the funeral is what the mourning process had become prior to Toloki's services. It is not Toloki who has appropriated the act of mourning from the seemingly ubiquitous funerals in the settlements, it is the political struggle. Rather, Toloki's mourning invigorates the audience and brings them to life as they bury their dead. In addition, his performance is able to connect the mourners with past traditions of mourning; as a woman confesses to Toloki, "You added an aura of sorrow and dignity that we last saw in the olden days when people knew how to mourn their dead" (109). The people of this dilapidated urban settlement are able to forge a connection with their past, with their villages, and their ancestors through the musical mournings of Toloki. And if we attend to the musicality of such performances we are once again reminded of Biko's thoughts regarding the role of music in "all emotional states.... Any suffering we experienced was made much more real by song and rhythm" (Biko 42). In this instance, Toloki's imaginative profession of mourner has removed the notion of spectacle from the violent deaths of these individuals. For the families, the deaths of their loved ones cease to be symbolic of the oppression of apartheid and the devastating consequences of resistance. Toloki's melodic mourning returns the details of life to what is a tragic yet ordinary occurrence. Mda is able to show his readers the problem of ignoring such details and using the dead as symbols in the opening scene of the novel. In that scene, the Nurse begins to politicize his speech on the death of Noria's son. The result is that the process of mourning is disrupted, fights break out and the mourners are divided along political lines, effectively allowing the very system of oppression they are trying to escape to silence an important cultural process of mourning and honoring the dead. Noria and other sympathizers are denied access to the

cultural resource needed to grieve. As a professional mourner, Toloki has found a way to grant access once again to this cultural resource. In this way, Toloki's actions are quite the opposite of solipsism, but instead so completely unselfish that it would appear that he himself is unaffected by the death that surrounds him. If Toloki were to take the grief and mourning of those at the funeral upon himself, then he would have appropriated their cultural rite (and right) most selfishly. But his ability to merely perform the mourning, distance himself from true grief, and provide the space and atmosphere for the funeral attendees to grieve, he has given them back what the political struggle had taken from them, a cultural rite (and right) to mourn their dead.

When Toloki is reunited with Noria, she has endured a rash of suffering, the death of her second child Vutha and the burning of her shack. Toloki and Noria's appreciation for each other deepens significantly when they stay up through the night to build Noria's new shack. The new shack is described as follows:

The sun rises on Noria's shack. All the work has been completed, and the structure is a collage in bright sunny colours. And of bits of iron sheets, some of which shimmer in the morning rays, while others are rust-laden. It would certainly be at home in any museum of modern art. (Mda Ways 68)

Taking their cue, the neighbors come to admire the new shack:

When the neighbors wake up that morning, they all came to witness the wonder that grew in the night. They marvel at the workmanship, and at how the plastic and canvas of different colours have been woven together to form patterns that seem to say something to the viewer. no one can really say what their message is, except to observe that it is a very profound one. (68)

The people of the settlement exhibit Senghor's notion of the object being valued more for its 'sense' than its 'sign' (Prose & Poetry, as qtd. in Irele 206) when they remark on the profound nature of the shack. A significant factor to note is that in its construction, it was not intended to be an artistic expression, it wasn't intended to be profound. In the

darkness of night, their only light the moon, Toloki and Noria constructed a shack, a shack in which Noria could live. Yet its existence, the extension of their hands, its very being, the consciousness of it, is an artistic expression.

The intersections of art, music, and imagination that Mda masterfully weaves signifies a uniquely South African cultural identity. The specificity of the cultural identity is rooted in the temporary context of their performance in terms of location and time. The cultural acts contributing to the identity are not necessarily unique to the land within the political borders of South Africa. For instance, Toloki's profession is a confluence of Far Eastern religions he read about in pamphlets from traveling monks. However, the context in which he performs his profession takes place in a very specific place and a very specific time that can be described as South African. This South African cultural identity is thus found in the ways his characters 'rediscover the ordinary,' informing the manner in which they live in a harsh reality in a very specific time and place. And yet these characters have hope, they are infected with a sense of optimism. But this optimism isn't directed explicitly towards the goal of a political liberation. The optimism held by the characters is merely attending to the everyday activities that constitute living. This optimism in the mundane is perhaps the product of being granted access to culture, that which makes us human.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

There is in fact no Truth. We are too fragile and volatile for that: we work with too many uncertainties. There is rather the continual shaping of something resembling, poorly, provisionally, 'truth'.

—Breyten Breytenbach, "The Writer and Responsibility"

In 1991, Njabulo S. Ndebele posed the question: "with the demise of grand apartheid now certain, what are South African writers going to write about?" (vii).

Commenting on the end of apartheid, he almost laments the non-spectacular end by negotiation. He finally concludes:

The behaviour of individuals and social groups generated by this situation seems to me to offer much for the South African writer to explore. The need for a more penetrating and nuanced understanding of this historical moment is not simply the result of an intellectual argument, rather it is reflected in the complexity of the situation itself which should produce its own level of challenge. There is much scope for reflection, experimentation, and innovation. (ix)

The challenges of the post-apartheid situation should be reflected in the writing of the post-apartheid author. This is not to say that as a cultural agent the writer is required to mirror what surrounds him or her, but at the very least, the writer should be aware of the many processes in action and the minutiae that attend them. This will ensure that no matter what the subject of that writing, the author does not run the risk of adopting the totalizing discursive practices that have the tendency to silence.

I believe it dangerous to have attainable goals. They offer the illusion of being finished with a task. It is especially risky when the work we do is intended to produce knowledge for our peers and society-at-large to engage with. But there are some goals

that are able to remain sufficiently open to change by their very nature. One of those should be the establishment of ‘cultural autonomy’:

...to acknowledge the right of any community or peoples to determine what constitutes the progressive or retrogressive aspects of its own culture. Further, it is to accept the preliminary responsibility of ascertaining and bringing to knowledge every aspect of society that has gone into the creation of its periodic cultures. Finally, it is to impose upon the creative intellects of that society the task of re-interpreting, through their contemporary experience and visionary acuity, the material and lessons of those cultural properties—without the dominance of external preconditions! This process constitutes what we have described the assertion of a cultural autonomy. (Soyinka 187)

Apartheid was able to inhibit the autonomy of culture. Its paradoxical elimination of difference, its extensive and detailed oppressive institutions that effectually cloaked details and ordinary aspects of life with the spectacular prevented the majority of South Africans from accessing the natural and autonomous advancement of culture and its resources. This in turn was reflected in much of the literature during apartheid. Mda was able to break free from the suffocating grasp to produce a body of literature that ‘rediscovered the ordinary.’ Perhaps it was his position in exile, like Ndebele, and his subsequent move to the United States that afforded him a clear vantage point. It may have enabled Mda to observe the existence of culture in a place that for so long had been denied it. What is important to note, which I may have failed to convey is that apartheid did not exist outside of culture as an evil agent, hiding culture from South Africans. It was very much a part of the culture. Being part of a culture, however, did not prevent it from acting upon it in an oppressive manner. But in order to do so effectively, apartheid had to act everywhere. And as it did, it made it difficult for its victims to see it anywhere but in its very obvious and visible official symbols. In order to ‘rediscover the ordinary’ in their own lives, South Africans first had to discover the ordinary in the processes of

apartheid. These processes could only be discovered in what Breyten Breytenbach described as the “grittiness” and the “texture of everyday life” (167).

In these pages, I have attempted to exhibit how Mda has answered the call of Ndebele, Soyinka, Thompson, Breytenbach, and many others who for the past few decades, have theorized on how the writers of post-apartheid South Africa might better contribute to the literary tradition; how they might accurately reflect the brutality of apartheid; how they might intimate the struggle to live with dignity in the aftermath of such brutality. I cannot be sure at this point if I have been successful in the endeavor to acknowledge it in Mda’s work. I have a constant anxiety of not doing enough, not researching enough, not writing enough. But this comes with the illusion that I am required to espouse a Truth at the end of these pages. I must constantly remind myself that this is not required nor desired. The goal of these pages should be to enter a conversation; to articulate a response with the knowledge that what I write will also garner a response. I look forward to hearing that response, and in turn have the opportunity to respond once again. In that way, I will finish with a response to Zoë Wicomb’s apparent inability to respond to an ineffectual education system and its effect on perceived illiteracy in competition with the call for literature to solve South Africa’s cultural problems:

Concern with literacy and the symbolic power of language can be visually articulated in challenging works by artists in a way that cannot be explored in writing, which relies on linguistic competence. So it seems strange to be talking about literary production when to learn to read and write involves jostling and struggling within an educational system that offers no alternative to the brutal conditions of the township. If we think more broadly of culture, the way in which people behave, then it may be more appropriate to talk about our ravaged culture of violence. Where other countries speak hopefully about the dominant culture being regenerated from below, from the marginalized everyday culture of the people, we can only remain silent. (Wicomb 180)

Wicomb is correct in one regard: it seems silly to champion literature as the way out of the 'dark ages' of apartheid when its victims are illiterate and their access to literacy remains embroiled in bureaucracy and the remnants apartheid greed. Why champion one form of art over another as the 'voice' of the people? For whom are the literate writing? But Wicomb is perhaps mistaken in her perceived inability to meet this challenge with anything but silence. Is she so easily discouraged? Perhaps she is mistaken for assuming that writers should be writing for the illiterate. Perhaps it is those who have the power to champion other forms of art who she and other writers should be speaking to. Only then, those illiterates may have the means to have their voice heard, perhaps not in literacy, but in other ways, that are just as profound. Ways that allow neighbors to wonder and remark at such profundity, not as a critic would, but as one who accepts that they may not understand all that is at work. But they are able to look upon it and, as God remarked on his creation, declare, "It is good."

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