

## Book Review

### *Accented futures* by Carli Coetzee

Some time ago I wrote a text for an art magazine. Later, in a revised draft of that text, I included a comment – annotated as such – from the editor of the magazine. I thought I was being very clever. By way of this rather infantile gesture I was trying to expose the invisible hand of the editor and how a text can be transformed into something other than what the writer had intended. Perhaps more idealistically, I wanted to be able to juxtapose my own sense of what I wanted to say against how an informed reader (the editor) might read the same text and then let the reader decide what to make of that disjuncture. In the end, the stunt didn't yield quite the subversion I wanted.

In many ways this is a well-rehearsed gesture in the realm of visual arts: directing the viewer's gaze to things that, while they lie outside of the 'frame', have a very strong influence on how what is contained within the frame is read. *Accented futures* is a wonderful invitation to do just that: to consider the contexts and knowledge that are brought to bear on acts of communication and translation. For me, as a visual arts practitioner, it is also an invitation to consider the interplay between word and image, in particular through reference to the public art project "Returning the Gaze" discussed in chapter four. Similarly, it is an invitation to consider the relationship between original and copy – as well as slippages between authorship and plagiarism as signalled in the analysis of the work of South African artist, academic and archivist, Pippa Skotnes.

The title, *Accented Futures*, is in part a gesture to the core concern of the book: what the author terms 'accented discourse'. Carli Coetzee makes it very difficult to pin down exactly what this accent is. The book is a thickly woven, multi-layered tapestry of theory, anecdote, self-questioning, and examples and this makes it next to impossible to trace one thread or pattern and not get lost in another. Nonetheless, I would like to use this concept much more loosely for two reasons: firstly, and most importantly, to get my own head around this idea of accented discourse and to find useful ways in which I can engage with it – in other words, to layer my own 'accent' onto Coetzee's text; and, secondly, to attempt a broader appraisal of Coetzee's text.

One of the concerns I have with the book is my sense that Coetzee perceives the people in the various examples quoted in it as individual autonomous subjects, even when those subjects are located at a specific "address", to use her concept. A similar understanding is evident when she mentions communities, such as in the chapter dealing with HIV/AIDS education. There is a pervasive understanding that subjects make individual choices for or against accentedness based on individual choice, but not much is said about the conditions under which those choices might be made.

While acknowledging the fact that accent as a concept comes laden with conceptual bag-

gage from linguistics where it denotes “auditory features of pronunciation which enable one to place the speaker socially or regionally” (7), the book uses the term, following the work of Hamid Naficy, to denote ‘a way of thinking about “home”, and finding ways of reading and teaching that aim to understand and bring local meanings to bear on interpretation [with emphasis on] discord and conflict’ (7). As she further notes, “accentedness is thus not seen as a drive to reconciliation and homogeneity; instead it is an attitude that challenges those in power and aims to bring to the surface conflictual histories” (7).

This understanding of accented discourse dovetails with the idea that the one problem that faces South Africa and frustrates efforts at a common identity is communication and understanding. This, in my opinion, has also been a major flaw in multiculturalism, identity politics, and aspects of cultural studies.

In her discussion on the labour of translation, Coetzee makes a very valid intervention by pointing to asymmetry in translation, to misunderstanding and a refusal to be understood, thus reversing privilege and who benefits from translation. In the discussion of the interaction between European sailors and the Khoisan translator, she points out that the *raison d'être* for this communication is, in the first place, trade and that it takes place in a way that makes the Khoisan merely means to an end. In this sense then, the centrality of language rather than the political economy in her arguments still positions individual commitment and sentiment around language and communication as the primary vectors along which division is sown and maintained.

Such an analysis is lacking in how she deals with these instances of miscommunication in contemporary South Africa. In other words, what is lacking is a more direct questioning of what is a black subject in a South Africa that is economically and structurally white. This is not to say that a meditation on language, translation and accentedness is irrelevant; but I am looking for a more robust declaration of how South Africa is, and will in the foreseeable future continue to be, an unequal society and that the likelihood of any affirming accentedness in the future is but a dream.

I will concede that my reading is possibly an instance of unaccentedness – to insist on a reductive reading of what the text seeks to do; but in other ways, I also desire a way in which cultural analysis can speak to the political economy in a way that is tangibly transformative to both.

South African everyday existence provides us with many instances where the idealized notions of nationhood are shown to be, if not a fallacy, then at the very least, unstable. Language is one of the many intersecting fault lines which threaten, every so often, to erupt into violence.

The obvious disparities between black and white constantly work to undermine any attempts at forging an inclusive dispensation. If two individuals are unable to enter a space of dialogue as equals; and where in most instances people’s relationships are exploitative in nature, speaking as if accented living is always possible and openly practiced itself becomes an instrument that blunts accenture and denies the possible risks, in material terms, that such accentedness might entail.

I am concerned here about places where the cosmopolitan sensibility breaks down, where accenture or the performance of mutual dialogue marked by discord threatens to break into open violence.

As I read the book it seemed to me that the contexts which appear to support accented interactions – the few exceptions being the example of the mobile cinema in Lesotho and Jacob Dlamini’s township in the East Rand – turn out to be privileged spaces within the academy. This is not to say that accentedness can thrive only in an academic environment, but it suggests to me that accentedness is not generally tolerated in our society and that this has to do largely with how subjects are positioned in terms of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, geography and the like. The possible danger here would be to take the exception as a model for the ideal.

One of the more recent manifestations of such violence is the xenophobia that has racked South Africa in recent years. According to some reports, often told as a joke, foreigners were asked to name body parts in *isiZulu* and were either attacked or spared violence based on their ability to name those parts and in the right (linguistic) accent.

Another recent example is an incident that has been widely circulated in cyberspace as a joke, and has been repeated as the utterance “don’t touch me on my studio”. It is significant that the discussion – which spiralled into an altercation between a guest on a TV show and the show’s anchor – started as the result of a discussion around the killings on white farms. There is a great deal of insensitivity to the fact that both the guest and the TV anchor are not first language English speakers and that such jokes at the expense of the protagonists’ imperfect English are symptomatic of a linguistic and class snobbishness. A further reading might also lead to the observation that, whereas both parties made linguistic blunders, it is nonetheless the black subject’s utterance that predominates the discussion proving that, even in such instances, some blunders are more equal than others.

To paraphrase the South African commentator Andile Mngxintama, it is no use telling black and white children that they are equal when their material reality tells them something different.

*Accented Futures* offers two other related analyses around the issue of language – those of physical violence and structural violence that are lightly touched upon in the discussion around Thembinkosi Goniwe’s artwork ‘Returning the Gaze’, when Coetzee offers a reading of the plaster worn by the subjects in the artwork. In this discussion, Coetzee directs the reader/viewer to the fact that the plaster on the black subject (the artist himself) is a call to the viewer to confront the subject’s injury, but the book stops short of reflecting on what constitutes that injury.

Yet another reading might suggest that accentedness, in its positive light, is necessarily a feature of conscious and deliberate agency, whereas the TV show incident cited above might be an instance where people, to use a certain vernacular, ‘forget their English’. This phrase denotes a state of such anger that one’s competency in spoken English or one’s performance of English ‘manners’ is temporarily forgotten and the ‘real’ person emerges from behind the façade of respectability.

Again what this example allows me to do is to read the underlying violence that is implied in daily interactions between South Africans and how dealing with that violence requires, in addition to moral and ethical arguments – such as the ones Coetzee makes around translation and accenture – a fundamental and permanent alteration in social relations, not just in pedagogical spaces but also in places of work, of worship, of play, and not least in our interactions with public and private intuitions.

Reviewed by Khwezi Gule