Alternative Modernities in African Literatures and Cultures II

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The first volume of this double issue on *Alternative Modernities in African Literatures and Cultures* has explored theoretical aspects of modernity and its discontents in a range of cultural and literary manifestations. The second volume presents various examples of the ways in which modernity, and alternatives to and within modernity have been configured in literary historiography and in specific textual situations. The bias is towards literary production in South Africa against the background of the modernity predicated in the ideology of apartheid, and the essays are joined in their investigation of the possibility of transcending this latter-day turn of imperial domination. It is the very rigidity of apartheid's laws and social organisation that seems to preclude, on the one hand, the possibility of emancipatory production, while at the same time serving as a constant imperative to engage with and find ways of dissolving the frozen identity that racism seeks to enforce – thereby fashioning previsions of alternative modernities.

In the first essay, Zoë Wicomb examines J.M. Coetzee's most recent novel. The essay's concern goes beyond the immediate textual surface presented in *Disgrace*, and looks instead at the broader moment of transition in post-apartheid South Africa through the concept of translation. Wicomb's essay traces the notion of translation (or translatability) in the racialised modernity of South Africa back to the historical moment when Europeans first arrived to settle at the Cape and cultural "translator" Eva-Krotoa moved between the newcomers at the Castle and the Khoi-Khoi people. The use of the perfective in Coetzee's text is shown to be evidence of the foregrounding of translation, but, as Wicomb concludes in her detailed textual reading, the work of translation always retains a residue, an echo of the original.

In "The Politics of Identity: South Africa, Story-telling, and Literary History", Michael Chapman returns to considerations raised in his 1996 book-length study of *Southern African Literatures*. This seminal, even foundational work has been the subject of heated debate, and the essay considers some of the issues raised in this dispute against the broader background of literature in post-apartheid South Africa. It outlines the modern manifestation of identity

as being one of the "summarising tropes" of literary history, and proceeds to examine this in the context of the "South African story". The expansive inclusiveness of this story in the light of the nonapocalyptic transition that took place in the South Africa of the 1990s is reflected in the programmatic range of the original *Southern African Literatures* itself.

In "The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic", Lewis Nkosi too questions the possibility of a "founding historical narrative in the literature of South Africa". His view that in South Africa "the state is not commensurate with the nation" underlines one of the central concerns of this special issue – the predestined inability of modern statehood, thrust onto Africa by its colonial masters, to translate into "nationhood". Nkosi's perspective in this essay is one of a lifetime of engagement with the struggle against apartheid – both in his activism and through his writing. His intimate knowledge of the "War Room" writing that arises from the apartheid-driven conflict in South Africa translates into a personal "unpacking of his library" as he traces the Beckett-like murmurings of a range of South African narratives that lay claim to the dubious status of national literature. His conclusion is that the jury is still out, both on the matter of postapartheid literary expression and on the broader fruits of liberation.

Devi Sarinjeive's "Transgressions/Transitions in Three Post-1994 South African Texts" brings the focus to bear on narrative expressions of the 1990s transitional period in South Africa. The essay's examination of Pamela Jooste's *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter*, Bridget Pitt's *Unbroken Wing* and Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse* is predicated on an interrogation of modern definitions of identity as "a certain fixed reality systematically categorised or displaced within definite, unchanging boundaries". This is the identity of apartheid, forced onto millions of South Africans and now under challenge from a "postmodern shift" in which transgression of boundaries (racial, social, political and economic) is a central, if not always fully subversive, trope that manifests itself in these novels of transition.

Three of the remaining four essays continue this engagement with individual literary texts by South African writers. Sailaja Sastry presents a detailed analysis of shifting identities in Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse*. The shift or transitional postmodern gesture of the novel's resistance to apartheid classification is sought in the specificities of "coloured identity". Sastry also turns to Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and expands on this in order to encompass the performative nature of hybridity demonstrated in the novel and a rejection of the privileging of origin over experience that is characteristic of apartheid's modernity.

Nancy Pedri's "The Verbal and Visual Mirrors and Mazes of Postcolonial Identity in Breyten Breytenbach's *All One Horse*" directs its focus to one of Breyten Breytenbach's later books, arguably also a text of transition. The essay

concentrates on the visual aspects of the work (the self-portraits of the author) as much as the text itself, and explores the twin tropes of mirrors and mazes in relation to postcolonial identity in *All One Horse*. A key approach of this essay is the productive overlapping of (traditional) textual analysis with a more daring visual reading that Breytenbach's texts predispose themselves to. The plurality and flux of his work (both form and content) demonstrate a personal as well as political struggle for alternatives to the fixity that the categorisations of South Africa sought to enforce, on the self as much as on the other.

Kay Sulk's essay, "'Visiting Himself on Me' – The Angel, the Witness and the Modern Subject of Enunciation in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*", takes up a line from Coetzee's novel as part of its title, thereby anticipating the two literary tropes that the essay proceeds to uncover. It sees Coetzee's text as positioned in the beginning stages of the "interregnum" (the late 1980s) that was to herald the end of apartheid and the onset of the transition to a democratic order in South Africa. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and (in particular) his understanding of modernity as the privileging of those "who bear witness" are interpolated with the Foucault of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* to show the link between colonial racism and modernity in the novel.

Hybridity and its relationship to modernity and its alternatives also serve as the theme of the last paper in this issue, which broadens the perspective of this volume beyond literary production and South Africa. Patricia Purtschert's "Looking for Traces of Hybridity: Two Basel Mission Reports and a Queen Mother" considers the ways in which the same remarkable political coup in colonial Ghana (then called the Gold Coast) in the early twentieth century is reported in different ways by two observers, a European-trained missionary and a Ghanaian pastor. She uses the ambiguities that emerge in documents from the Basler Mission archive in Switzerland to show how the work of the Mission abroad and the identities it generates in its various agents are undercut by the reports. The paper underlines the ambiguous nature of missionaries in colonial contact sites as agents of colonialism and agents of modernity, encapsulating aspects of both emancipatory potential and colonial enslavement.

The colonial contact site remains one of the most interesting and problematic aspects of the emergence of a range of modernities in the context of Africa. The contact zone may be understood in the sense of local sites of slave trader, missionary and administrator contact with people on the continent itself, but these "sites" must also be understood in the broader sphere of what Gilroy has termed the Black Atlantic. This broadens the view to all contact that took place across the dividing ocean, also in Europe and the Americas. Indeed, this cross-Atlantic transfer still takes place in new and interesting ways, not as brutal perhaps as the middle passage, but still uneven and volatile.

The discourse generated in this transatlantic exchange is crucial to understanding modernity and its alternatives in Africa and beyond. While the Atlantic is one broad area of contact, so too are the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, implying contact zones also to the east and north. Several centuries straddle the emergence of modernity, suggesting a need for researchers to see the contemporary debate about Africa and globalisation in the light of previous global currents thrust up by the modern. Neocolonialism, internecine conflict, democratisation, industrialisation and urbanisation in Africa are the latest processes tied to global modernity that deserve to be investigated. So too does the terrible path cut through the continent's peoples by HIV/AIDS and the new solidarity and forms of local agency against global capital that are arising in response to the pandemic. Literary production and philosophical discourse are only two fields in which researchers will find rich expressions of African modernities. As more and more research is conducted into African modernities, debates about economic production, social theory, history and medicine will be added to by voices in gender studies, jurisprudence, science and geography, to name but a few. The increasing research possibilities are as multiple and unbounded as modernity in Africa itself.