

Review Article/Resensie-artikel

To Be a Cosmopolitan: Lewis Nkosi and Breyten Breytenbach

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Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi
Stiebel, Lindy & Gunner, Liz (eds) 2005. Amsterdam & New York:
Rodopi.

a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach: Critical Approaches to His Writings and Paintings
Coullie, Judith Lütge & Jacobs, J.U. (eds) 2004. Amsterdam & New
York: Rodopi.

Summary

Using as a starting point the recent publication of two review anthologies, the paper enters a debate that has currency in both South Africa and abroad: What purchase has the cosmopolitan project – as Kwame Anthony Appiah asks in his new book, *Cosmopolitanism* – in a world increasingly conservative post-9/11? To focus on South Africa, if Nkosi and Breytenbach were self-styled cosmopolitans, what would constitute their value in our literature, indeed in our society?

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gebruik as uitgangspunt die onlangse verskyning van twee resensiebundels om aan 'n debat deel te neem wat in Suid-Afrika sowel as in die buiteland relevant is: Wat is die sin van die kosmopolitaanse projek – soos Kwame Anthony Appiah vra in sy nuwe boek *Cosmopolitan* – in 'n wêreld wat sedert 9/11 toenemend konserwatief raak? Met betrekking tot Suid-Afrika, kan gevra word watter bydrae Nkosi en Breytenbach as selfgenoemde kosmopolitane in ons literatuur en inderdaad in ons gemeenskap lewer.

The publication of two critical anthologies, one on the work of Lewis Nkosi, the other on that of Breyten Breytenbach, is to be welcomed. Both raise issues – particularly issues pertaining to cosmopolitanism – that have currency in South African literary and social debate. I wish to expand here on a point I made in my essay, “African Literature, African Literatures: Art

Talk, Politics Talk?” (2006: 170), where I referred to Gilroy’s (1993) metaphor of the Black Atlantic as a multiple-centred zone: a zone which is difficult to label Africa, Europe or America, but which may alert us to a bi-, or to use Young’s (2001: 4-5) substitute for the term postcolonial, a “tricontinental” potential to add energy to the idea of Africa in the next, more global epoch. Or, more to the point: to add energy to the idea of South Africa in relation to a modification of the title of Nkosi’s first book of critical articles, *Home and Exile* (1965): what is gained, what is lost, to be at home in exile, or to be in exile at home?

As Nkosi phrases this “postcolonial” problematic: [e]xile “releases you into a wider world where you discover new communities, new designations, and therefore you construct ... shifting identities” (Molver 2005: 226). Why then a problematic? In his astute evaluation of Breytenbach’s *Dog Heart (A Travel Memoir)* (1998) Trengove Jones in the relevant anthology mentioned above identifies the limits of global expansion in the context of the local demand when he qualifies his own admiration of Breytenbach’s post-(postmodern/postcolonial) pursuit of travel, migrancy and nomadism. The ideology of “ceaseless transformation” may propagate the value of bastardised, hybridised cultures. But such a pursuit in Breytenbach can speak a kind of “imperviousness that is at times as rebarbative as it is hard won”. What then of a future? Is Breytenbach’s endless finding of oneself – Trengove Jones poses the question as rhetorical challenge – not in danger of endorsing political self-effacement? (2004: 271-294).

Trengove Jones himself does not think so; neither do I. Let me turn first, however, to the two anthologies. Both evince meticulous scholarship. In their introduction to the Nkosi volume editors Stiebel and Gunner point to a key consideration: “In an era when South Africa is positioned in a global and continental arena Nkosi’s chosen cosmopolitanism can be viewed as normative rather than wayward or idiosyncratic” (2005: xxvi). More of cosmopolitanism later. We are introduced, from the perspective of a post-apartheid South Africa, a post-ideological world, to Nkosi’s 50-year career as literary critic and creative writer. In the 1960s, in South Africa’s “silent decade” (the banning after the Sharpeville shooting of the liberation movements, gagging laws and detentions without trial), Nkosi’s critical insights helped keep alive a dialogue between South Africa and the African continent, between Africa and the world.

Having left home as a young *Drum* magazine journalist, Nkosi carried abroad the aspirations of the “fabulous decade” of the fifties, according to which the urbanised *Drum* writers – Nxumalo, Mphahlele, Maimane, Matshikiza, Themba, Nkosi himself – achieved in reaction to Verwoerdian policies of retribalising the Bantu, a creative interaction of Beethoven and the penny whistle, of the Sophiatown shebeen and the African, as well as

the international, literary scene. It is modernism, or at least neo-modernism, in its styles of high and experimental art that Nkosi has continued to admire, specifically in the work of Joyce and Faulkner. Modernism – I use the term as portmanteau delineation of the imagination superseding utility speech – has remained for Nkosi, nonetheless, an “edgy” affair: or an affair never far removed from the edge; in concern and style never entirely of the centre. Joyce and Faulkner, we are reminded, had their sensibilities sharpened by the edges of Ireland and the American South, respectively, and in his essay “Robinson Crusoe: Call Me Master” (1983: 151-156), as Gagiano observes (2005: 5-26), Nkosi was ahead of his time in “postcolonialising” the British literary map. In what we might now call a postcolonial manoeuvre, he turns to Joyce’s insight:

The whole Anglo-Saxon spirit is in Crusoe, Joyce tells us. The manly independence; the unconscious cruelty, the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the practical, well-balanced religiousness. In short, the myth of industry in *Robinson Crusoe* is inseparable from the story of colonisation, of subjugation, exploitation and finally Christianisation; just as the violence is inseparable from the enterprise.

(Nkosi 1983: 154)

Nkosi’s essay dates back to the early 1960s. Despite his years in exile he has continued to transfer his insights derived from the larger picture to the preoccupations of his land of birth, and vice versa. Republished in the present anthology, his essay “Négritude: New and Old Perspectives” (2005: 267-290), for example, is instructive of both expansions and contractions in his own perspectives of home and exile. With his intervention in the negritude debate dating back to the late 1970s Nkosi takes issue with Mphahlele’s earlier attack on negritude as a reversion to romanticism, a mythic pre-modernity (Mphahlele 1962: 25-40). Nkosi prefers to place negritude in a philosophy of history: a necessary strategic idealism by Africans against race denigration. His conclusion, however, reveals alongside the larger view also the narrower view. Nkosi understands that Mphahlele’s attack on any hint of African essentialism in negritude was provoked, in the context of apartheid South Africa, by his need to avoid apartheid’s ethnic imperative of typecasting Africans as pre-modern, rural people. Nkosi, however, is unwilling, or unable, to follow through on Mphahlele’s other recognition: that because of early colonisation and industrialisation, Africans in South Africa had been “hybridized” long before the term shed its negative connotation to be returned, via postcolonial critique, to enunciation of possibility.

A similar challenge of dialectical engagement with Nkosi is suggested to us, the interpreters, again in retrospect, by the author’s most quoted critical

intervention, “Fiction by Black South Africans” (first published in 1966 and republished in the Stiebel and Gunner anthology). In this article Nkosi (2005: 245-255) condemned writing which, under socio-political pressures, betrayed the imagination to the journalistic fact. It is now said that his prescience anticipated by twenty years Ndebele’s (1991: 35-57) attack on several black writings of the 1970s which, in Ndebele’s view, elevated spectacle over and above the depiction of human complexity: “Life must supersede the idea”, Nkosi had phrased it (1983: 117). We may note, however, that Nkosi’s observation from the distance of exile preceded his subsequent silence about, perhaps his lack of sympathy for, or lack of understanding of, or simply his distance from, the “non-modernist” energy that transported black writing beyond the silent decade of the 1960s, through the Black Consciousness voices of the Soweto poets and *Staffrider* magazine, to the post-apartheid world of new fiction by younger talents such as Duiker (2000, 2001) and Mpe (2001), both of whom died before they could realise their full potential. As my illustration suggests, the wider perception of the exile may yield almost simultaneously its apparent opposite: limited engagement with the ongoing developments of home.

Such dialectical response to Nkosi – reading both with and against the grain of his own comprehensions – does not curtail his achievement. Rather, it permits his continuing significance in current debate. It is a similar significance which, in the anthology, is granted by Graham and Vancini, respectively, to Nkosi’s novels *Mating Birds* ([1983]1985) and *Underground People* (2002).¹ *Mating Birds* was not particularly well received in South Africa, where Nkosi suffered accusations of racial chauvinism,² while *Underground People* seemed to some to have arrived too late on the scene (the distance of exile?) after the epic novels of the struggle years, such as Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981).

Whereas the fixed male-gaze of complacent sexism has been observed to be a feature not only of Nkosi but also of Breytenbach, such an observation is challenged or, at least qualified, in the anthologies under discussion. In

1. Both of Nkosi’s novels have complicated publishing histories. Initially published by East African Publishing House, Nairobi, in 1983, *Mating Birds* was subsequently published in London (1985), Johannesburg (Ravan Press, 1987), New York (1988), and, most recently, by Kwela of Cape Town (2004). The novel has been translated into Norwegian, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, French, Italian, and Polish.

Underground People first appeared in Dutch translation as *Der Vermissing* (Baarn: Ambo, The Hague; and Novib & Brussels, 1993). (For full publication details see Stiebel & Gunner 2005: 333-334.)

2. See, particularly, Brink (1992), and Jacobs (1990).

the case of Breytenbach, Sienaert (2004: 221-247) and Visagie (2004: 295-327) point to a “non-duality” in the writer’s treatment of male-female subjectivity with an increasing concern in his more recent work for women as victims of male violence in contemporary South African society. In Nkosi’s defence Graham (2005: 147-164) in her discussion of *Mating Birds* argues that far from revealing in its authorial focus any dominant or domineering masculinity, the novel remains true to Nkosi’s concern for the complex, imaginative text: *Mating Birds*, which has been interpreted as realism, is self-referential in its play upon white phobias about sex between black men and white women; much of the negative commentary betrays not Nkosi’s sexism but the squeamishness of his white South African detractors. *Underground People*, according to Vancini (2005: 197-213), plays, again seriously, upon diagrammatic “Soweto” novelistic accounts of revolutionary action and ambition. (Interestingly, an idiosyncratic mix of sex and politics characterises Nkosi’s latest novel, *Mandela’s Ego* (2006).) The articles by Graham and Vancini invite the reader, particularly in South Africa, to revisit Nkosi’s fiction in the climate of a “new country”, where binary categories require to be subjected to a greater diversity of critical and creative response.

Diversity of critical and creative response defines text and reception in Breytenbach studies. In their introduction to the anthology Coullie and Jacobs (2004: ix-xxi) succinctly place the Afrikaans dissident writer in his biographical and political context, and we are then guided by the several contributors through a career spanning 40 years of complex social and literary life. We move from the poet of Afrikaans high-word, surreal art to the writer who, in both Afrikaans and English, and in several generic forms or mutations, gives to the abstractions of the “posts-” (postmodernism and postcolonialism) the specificities of psychological and historical definition. Breytenbach, the postmodern, deflates his own modernist father figures such as N.P. van Wyk Louw (see Viljoen 2004); Breytenbach, the postcolonial, crosses boundaries in which issues of belonging and belief (to be at home in exile or in exile at home) correlate with an aesthetic that, Trengove Jones (2004: 283) notes, fosters “transgression in a generic looseness”, a mixing of “historiography, art criticism, biography, autobiography, fiction and prose poetry”.

If it is the writer’s responsibility – as Breytenbach has it (1986: 133) – to “recognise the interstices”, to be the “thin edge that could split the cracks”, then his forms of expression pursue his philosophical intent. His heartland, the Cape Boland, shifts from essential connection in the early *’n Seisoen in die Paradys* (1976)/*A Season in Paradise* (1976) to the “bastard tongue” (Breytenbach 1986: 15), the bastardised homeland of *Dog Heart* (1998), where connection is strengthened, paradoxically, by the recognition of a

“fallacious purity” (Breytenbach 1998: 115). In *Dog Heart* the concept ancestors, for example, is not reserved as in *A Season* for primordial empathy with San/Bushmen traces in the Boland of the writer’s birth, but also finds historical continuities and discontinuities in his half-slave (Malay, Coloured) family tree; in his French Huguenot and German settler forebears, in his rejection of Afrikaner nationalism at the same time as he revivifies the *taal* as non-nationalistic exploration, in his absorption, through the influence of his Vietnamese wife, of Eastern spirituality: a spirituality that helped him turn even his seven years of political imprisonment to the endeavour of artistic growth (see Breytenbach 1984, 1985; Dimitriu 2004). It is a homecoming that, after years in exile, can be only provisional in anticipation of further leave-taking.

As he glances this way and that, Breytenbach (1998: 50-53) offers his moving tribute to the mingling of Buddhism and Cape cooking in the late philosopher Marthinus Versfeld: an episode in *Dog Heart* which, as is characteristic of both the postmodern and postcolonial Breytenbach, is abruptly juxtaposed and tested against the dog metaphor, or the reality, of an “unphilosophical” country. The San myth of //Kaggen, the trickster god, may transfigure mutilation to purposes of regeneration, or is it male boasting?: “When the girl prepares his private parts as food, they spring into her. //Kaggen shouts, ‘Oh, I have tasted the girl that nobody has tasted!’” (1998: 158). Despite the mythic memory, however, the new South Africa retains its harshness, its dog shit:

When he finds the bloodstains, he weeps. It is evening near a station in a suburb of Cape Town. A man grabs a woman and drags her off to the nearby bushes, he half-undresses her and forces himself upon her. When he is weak with spent desire, she bends over swiftly and tears off his penis with her teeth.
(Breytenbach 1998: 158)

Exclaims this writer who has drawn into his thinking the pressures of centres and others, “I am an African bastard” (1986: 126) from a continent where “*métissage* is continually absorbed” (p. 128). In an illuminating essay on Breytenbach’s Africa, Jacobs identifies in the contemplative “travelogue-novel” *Memory of Snow and of Dust* (1989) Breytenbach’s complex attempt to incorporate South Africa into Africa and, by analogy, to reincorporate both into non-binary, non-hierarchical interstices of North and South. Or we may use Said’s phrase of “overlapping territories, intertwined histories” (1993: xxviii). We encounter from the Ivory Coast an actress dressed in “international” African chic; an expatriate South African who complains of endemic corruption; a “roving ambassador” of the liberation movement – the figure is treated pejoratively – who diagnoses the difficulties facing the

revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso as typical of the African Big Man, or personality cult; the ever-cynical Ka'afir (the pun on kaffir and Africa) discusses politics in Africa as a "matter in declining order of: Protocol, Posture, Pretension and Porruption" (Breytenbach 1989: 159). As she views the continent while travelling in and out by aircraft Meheret, the Ethiopian journalist who lives in Paris, observes that Africa is "beyond the realm of dichotomy" (p. 159). It is a continent that ties Breytenbach's travelling art to the smell of his own soiled heartland, or his dog heart. But should we be tempted to read into his work an element of Afro-pessimism, then the passion of his commitment invokes the purpose of responsibility, whatever the political order of the day. Breytenbach, the exile, cannot deny his fearful attraction of home even as he defines his artist's contribution as a "precursor of alternatives" (1986: 143).

Nkosi, too, is a precursor of alternatives: the alternatives suggesting that the two writers share several understandings. Neither believes in the rhetoric of a single, or unitary South Africa: the rhetoric of nation-building at the core of ANC governmental pronouncement. Neither subscribes to the ideal of a unitary South African literature. The South African novel, according to Nkosi (2005: 316), has always been "homeless" in that ever since Olive Schreiner in the 1880s successive generations of novelists from this country have had difficulty in locating "home" in either Africa or Europe. Yet both Nkosi and Breytenbach would agree that the homelessness of exile has the advantage of the bird's eye or the jetliner's view, in which the nostalgia of return is tempered by critical qualification.

While official discourses in South Africa today talk vaguely, romantically, of an African renaissance, Nkosi and Breytenbach talk of an Africa in need of "self-reinvention" (Breytenbach 1995). The emphasis falls on "self". In his speech to Parliament on the government's Millennium Project – the preservation of ancient maps of Africa, of the manuscripts of Tombouctou – President Mbeki glorified Africa in the inspiration of Egyptian pyramids; he blamed Africa's woes on colonialism, and more recently on neocolonialism. However shrewd Mbeki's grasp of modern economics, his language here is the language of the gallery, the language of the rally: what Mazrui (1986: 73) calls "romantic gloriana".

Neither Nkosi nor Breytenbach has patience with "romantic gloriana". (Neither, evidently, has Mbeki in another forum, the World Economic Forum on Africa.)³ Both writers remain, nonetheless, attached to the

3. The key to a successful South African society, Mbeki told the plenary session of the Forum, in Cape Town, was to ensure that the diversity of its people had equitable access to political power and resources: "This is the challenge not only for South Africa, but for many other countries on the

continent; both evince what Gilroy calls the “double-consciousness” (1993) of home in exile and exile at home. Both would endorse Appiah’s (2006) conception of the cosmopolitan. In avoiding popular reference to an exciting or a glamorous character associated with travel and a mixture of cultures, Appiah grants cosmopolitanism its gravitas. As representative of many different countries and cultures – he continues, as he links his own Ghanaian upbringing to his current international reach at Princeton – the cosmopolitan measures a respect for “difference against a respect for actual human beings” (p. 113). We have obligations to others “beyond kith and kin, nationality, or even citizenship” (p. xv); we connect not “through identity, but despite difference” (p. 135); we understand the world as more complex than divided between the “West and the rest” (p. xxi). Such is the “localised cosmopolitanism” identified by Robbins (1998: 260): “No one actually is or ever can be cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere The interest in the term cosmopolitanism is located then, not in its full theoretical extensions, where it becomes a paranoid fantasy of ubiquity and omniscience, but rather (paradoxically) in its local applications.” Or, as Appiah (2006: xv) concludes, cosmopolitanism is not “the name of any solution, but of the challenge” of the next, more global epoch.

If, as I said at the outset of this essay, Gilroy’s (1993) metaphor of the Black Atlantic suggests a multcentred zone that is difficult to categorise as Africa, Europe or America, then the sensibility of both Nkosi and Breytenbach defies definition within any single categorisation. Although Nkosi admires the modernists Joyce and Faulkner, he admires also the fusion of traditions and styles in the writing of Amos Tutuola and Camara Laye: the former utilises indigenous African traditions to energise the surreal – we might say, magical realist – *Palm-Wine Drinkard*; the latter integrates with his African particularity the accumulated example of modern European literature (2004: 245).

It is also the modern European – more precisely, the modernist European – inheritance that lends Breytenbach’s writing its distinctive tenor: the metaphors of romantic symbolism; the art labyrinths of language games; the mirrors of illusion and allusion that complicate the boundaries of ethics and aesthetics. At the same time – and here resides a category explosion beyond that of “modern European literature” – Breytenbach’s moments of colloquial power, his unusual observations, are indebted to the earthiness of his Afrikaans speech: an earthiness that, to a convincing degree, can be appreciated in the translations of his work. His moments of calm – as I have suggested – signal his disciplined path to Zen Buddhist wisdom in service of

continent which have to manage their multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-faith societies” (*The Mercury*, 1 June 2006, p. 2.).

his life experience: amalgamations of East and West, Africa in South Africa, or South Africa in Africa; the philosophical detachment and the taste, the smell, of Cape Dutch/Cape Malay cooking that he found so appealing in the life and work of Marthinus Versfeld.

Cosmopolitanism, following Appiah, is the word that I deliberately invoke, particularly in relation to a recent article by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) researcher, Chipkin (2006: 10), who asks provocatively, “Is South Africa Burning in Paris?” Or,

Is the cosmopolitan project in crisis? In Holland, Dutch authorities seem to be in no mood for multiculturalism. In America, the nation is coming in for increasing criticism as many, including Samuel P. Huntington [*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*], reflect on what it means to be an American citizen. Was the South African transition a high point of a cosmopolitan politics that is fast receding?

(Chipkin 2006: 10)

Chipkin is provoked by the same scenario against which Appiah defends cosmopolitanism: a new conservatism, intensified by 9/11, in reaction to another reaction, to that of local and regional identity politics pitted against neoliberal globalisation in its manifestations of business, culture and power. We have a return in Europe and the USA to language, cultural and religious homogeneity as the condition of citizenship. We have aggressive assaults on minorities and migrants, whether guest workers or, in Paris burning, on the French-born descendants of an earlier generation of Islamic Algerian and Tunisian immigrants. We witness Fortress Europe in denial of its colonial legacy.

Or, to turn the eye southward to the intertwined strains of Europe in Africa: strains impossible to disentangle despite invocations to romantic gloriana. We have as permanent presence independent African states created on the European nation model. But nations without language or cultural homogeneity, in which the spectre of racial or tribal competition, or xenophobia towards “other” Africans crossing borders, or the megalomania of Big Men, is linked to failed economies. We are reminded by Chipkin that the year of South Africa’s first democratic election in 1994 was also the year of the Rwandan genocide. It is against the post-9/11 rejection of cosmopolitanism that Chipkin articulates the importance of the South African experience: the challenge of a successfully functioning unitary state composed of heterogeneous people who have nothing obvious in common, but that they must live in, and preferably learn to share, the same territory (Chipkin 2006: 11).

The challenge, paradoxically, is not about nation-building with its propensity for myths and metaphors of origins, but, as Nkosi and

Breytenbach recognise, about a healthy scepticism towards the nation; about openness, rather, to the traffic of the world, where to be at home in exile while in exile at home is to be cosmopolitan. But having said this, let me introduce immediately a qualification: have not so many South African writers been cosmopolitan as to render the term meaningless, or to tie it to a form of colonial opportunity or opportunism? Nkosi's exile was politically enforced (having been awarded a Nieman Fellowship in 1960 he was given no option but to leave South Africa on an exit permit); Breytenbach, well before his political imprisonment, had exile thrust upon him by the apartheid state's refusing his Vietnamese wife a visa to accompany her husband to his Boland home. A more familiar form of departure, at least for white South African writers, has been voluntary escape from what is perceived to be a "thin" culture to an imagined richer alternative abroad: the trajectory of William Plomer or Laurens van der Post or Dan Jacobson, to name but a few.

It is not as though Plomer, van der Post or Jacobson ignored South Africa; possibly their brand of cosmopolitanism, to reiterate Appiah's distinction, veered towards the name not so much as challenge, but as solution. Van der Post may have wished to recuperate the Bushman as Jungian archetypal check against an overly rational, technology-driven West. We do not experience in his response, however, the tenor and temper of Western/African interaction that we experience in Nkosi and Breytenbach, where an equivalence of conversation is subjected to the ongoing exploration of home and exile, where inward belonging and global dispersion are set not in either/or contrast, but in the both/and of multiple encounters. Or as Nkosi has expressed the matter:

In the old days cosmopolitanism was measured in terms of one's visit to the metropolitan centres of Europe and America. Currently, South Africa enjoys the privilege of being a genuine cosmopolitan centre to satisfy any so-called citizen of the world. But for artists, academics and business people, what is offered is a cosmopolitanism that is combined with a sense of discovery of what is fresh and exciting in a new democracy.

(Nkosi in Meyer 2004: 130)

To be cosmopolitan is simultaneously to be rooted and rootless, attached and detached; it is to retain the trickster quality, always somewhat sceptical, whether looking North or South, always the precursor of alternatives. Such is the character of both Nkosi and Breytenbach. The two anthologies serve as timely reminders of their achievement.

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