

Truth in Transit:  
Public and Private Discourses in the New South Africa

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I am dubious anyhow that one can separate the self that scrutinizes from the self that hides. . .

--J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*

After years of reading Nigerian, Ghanaian and South African literature—the most accessible titles in English which had made their way to the States, at any rate—I finally had the chance to travel through one of Africa’s fifty-three countries.<sup>1</sup> Certainly there was some mediated interference—I was journeying to South Africa with a head stuffed full of novels, postcolonial theory, my own presuppositions, my own desire to make Africa into a redeeming example for humanity (or, failing that, to make Africa “mean”)—and I didn’t quite know what to expect “on the ground,” so to speak, ten years into the new democracy. None of those tidy, mostly linear narratives could prepare me for the clash of public and private discourses, the name-calling, the sloganizing, the subterfuge and propaganda, the contested ideological “territories” in this young democracy.

The directions of the discourse around HIV/AIDS continually shifted according to who was telling the tale. In a presentation prefaced by tales of his own role in the African National Congress’s underground resistance, Dr. Sam Mhlongo, Director of Family Medicine at the Medical University of South Africa, denied that HIV had been isolated, and then maintained that AIDS statistics are continually distorted by western reporters intent on reinscribing Africa as a sexually profligate, morally lawless, and chaotic continent. He insisted that, instead of blaming Africans once again for their powerlessness, the west and African governments themselves need to shore up the basic infrastructure, so that access to clean water, food, and healthcare would be put in place.

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Only then would Africans have the means to fight off the opportunistic infections associated with HIV/AIDS. One member of our group confronted Dr. Mhlongo in outrage, suggesting that the physician's statement amounted to a denial that the illness exists and that millions of lives were endangered by such a viewpoint. A verbal battle ensued, leading to little more than two further alienated positions. Then, a few days later, we listened to Dr. Harry Moultrie, another leading AIDS researcher and clinician (white), who called Dr. Mhlongo a raving lunatic for not acknowledging the mainstream position that HIV/AIDS has hit epidemic proportions in sub-Saharan Africa. Both physicians directed us to websites and statistical "proof" that would confirm their positions. To the degree that each physician grew more indignant, the possibility of genuinely "seeing" the other's perspective became more unlikely. The territory each had carved out virtually guaranteed that a discussion could not take place with any degree of understanding or conciliation, for Dr. Moultrie was unwilling to grant that science had been sullied by racism, and Dr. Mhlongo refused to discuss statistics gathered by the World Health Organization and other international groups.

It happened repeatedly throughout our travels that speakers seemed to exhibit little sense of audience or context, and were unable to either adapt their views or to hold multiple positions in their minds. While we were in transit in Johannesburg, apparently paying no attention to the make-up of our obviously racially mixed group, a burly Afrikaner guide proclaimed that "life was better under apartheid," "there really was no apartheid," and that "the ANC is ruining this country." Another guide, likely reading us as just the usual group of historically ignorant, wealthy American tourists, boasted, "the Cape area is the greatest place in the world to grow up because of the surfing, hiking, and

wine-tasting.” As the van wove its way around cove after cove, we wondered (because we were not historically ignorant) why he didn’t mention the San and Khoi peoples of the Cape area who had been nearly obliterated through genocide. But were these utterly unrealistic expectations on our part? What tour guide in any country will own that his or her forebears wiped out entire peoples and that their histories are elided from daily consciousness? Still, in our group’s fractious de-briefing sessions at night, there were speeches, tears, and a low, simmering rage that echoed the clash of voices we heard each day. It was in these evening sessions that I began to try to make Africa “mean”: to connect its people, history, literature, and daily discourses across levels of power, access, and privilege. How would I be able to do this, if I could not, in a sense, excise my own perspective out of the picture?

As we traveled to universities and heard lectures, met with community leaders, performed community service work and debated long into the night about what we were seeing, some of us began to clamor for reading lists, statistics, solid points of departure that might help us begin to better contextualize the present history, even as we were living it. At the University of Free State in Bloemfontein, a conservative Afrikaner region, a full week’s program of lectures and events awaited us, and we thought: here are experts, and so our questions about the new South Africa will be answered. But here, in lecture after lecture, we encountered paternalistic and despairing attitudes toward rural Africans, race and gender stereotyping, and an unapologetic Afrikaner pride that bordered on fascism. When an Afrikaner professor of anthropology spoke in glowing terms about Afrikaner history, culture, language, and folk festivals, it was as if she was completely oblivious to the eight Africans and African Americans in our group of

sixteen. Misquoting part of Thabo Mbeki's speech "I am an African," she declared her passion for the South African landscape, yet, ironically, this recalled the imperial eye that gazed upon Africa as unspoiled potential for the European conqueror—something quite different from Mbeki's vow to share the land with those of Africa's many races. One gender and ethnic studies scholar in our group wept softly as the professor made these remarks, while another teacher in the group demanded, "What courses has your faculty put in place to work on decolonizing the curriculum and white attitudes toward Africans?"

What was so astonishing to us was the professor's failure to see double, not to see *at once* both African and European histories in South Africa, to feel these histories superimposed one upon the other. We thought: isn't she an academic? Doesn't she read? Perhaps her views might be explained (although not explained away) by acknowledging that all ideas exist in the service of a countervailing ideology, and that the particular narrative of history we tell ourselves is full of elisions, erasures, and disjunctions. Or perhaps we can see this *individual* failure to read double, to avoid reading from the perspective of multiple ethnic groups, as a vivid, present-day echo of the Afrikaners brutally marginalizing black South Africans as their own National Party came to power in 1948, just as they themselves had been economically and territorially displaced by the South African British earlier in the century. Her statements have a kind of retributive logic. But does this explain such occluded vision in someone who calls herself a professional anthropologist? On the other hand, can we expect a rehabilitated, progressive politics only ten years into "the new dispensation"? What was perhaps most remarkable of all was that the black Americans in our group weren't particularly

surprised at her unabashed sense of privilege, for this was part of the daily reality they encountered back in the U.S.

Apart from academic contexts, what does the official, public discourse in South Africa sound like, and how is it contested and subverted? What does this heteroglossia of voices tell us about the country's political reality and the possibilities for its development? In keeping with the character of a nation whose institutions, ideologies, laws, and land boundaries were contested, the South African government created a system of economic and political division designed to protect the interests of its white European colonizers. The architects of apartheid used euphemism and convoluted patterns of doublespeak to force its policies on non-white South Africans—in effect creating a social panopticon—to further its general goals of disinformation for the white minority. Laws and social initiatives were (and some would say still are) deliberately crafted to veil their literal meaning. In 1913, the Natives Land Act, far from securing land rights for black South Africans, actually made it illegal for them to own property. Likewise, as Susan VanZanten Gallagher points out, in 1952, the Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act didn't abolish passes for non-whites, it added women to the groups mandated to carry them and expanded the number of documents they needed to carry in their new "reference books." Although one might infer that the university system was being expanded for black South Africans in the "Extension of the University Education Act," in reality they were barred from the regular University of South Africa and forced to make do with newly established "tribal colleges" in which education was delivered in Bantu languages. The reality of one of the most violent upheavals in South African history--the removal of native peoples to the "Homelands"—could not be hidden

in a label (“home”) redolent of domestic comforts and a return to completely fictitious origins. The barren landscape to which they were consigned was not made any more attractive by the prospect of “tribal self-governance,” especially when those tribal leaders had virtually no political power.

The ultimate euphemistic ploy, though, can be seen in the way the apartheid state attempted to subvert the proscription against state-sanctioned violence by developing an innocuous language of its own: Pumla Gobodo-Madikezela, in her riveting interview of Eugene de Kock, the commanding officer of the apartheid death squads, writes that

Policy documents that had circulated at the State Security Council showed that expressions such as ‘making a plan,’ ‘taking out’ enemy leaders, and ‘neutralizing’ ‘eliminating’ or ‘removing’ certain people from society formed much of the lexicon of death within the upper levels of power. Although the documents were by any reasonable interpretation damning, explicit language that might have foisted clear accountability upon the leaders was carefully avoided, creating a gray zone of deniability that made it exceedingly difficult to determine the chain of command. (*A Human Being Died That Night*, 65)

Now it’s true that such veiling and myth-making can be found in government and corporate propaganda around the world; Geoffrey Nunberg in *Going Nuclear* notes the White House’s military names for the war in Afghanistan “Operation Infinite Justice,” and “Operation Enduring Freedom”—both hopeful-sounding, but oxymoronic titles that reconfigure mass bloodshed in unctuous, redemptive terms. Many would argue, though, that the sheer scale of government and corporate doublespeak in South Africa trumps that

found in other countries of the world. Most damaging, in today's South Africa, many in business characterize the country's new democracy and free market economy as being on a par with those of first-world nations, obscuring the fact that South Africa is still very much a developing country attempting to recover from four centuries of economic inequity. Sampie Terreblanche in his *History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* notes that "those in the third-world sector. . . are still 'exploited' by neglect and by the perception among members of the white and black elite that South Africa is a first-world country with a developed free market economic system" (60). What works as a set of slogans for the South African business community and lures for foreign investment is simply meaningless to the average jobless black. The traveler is bombarded with slogans proclaiming "the new South Africa," "the rainbow nation," "11 official languages," "the new dispensation," "City of Tswane. Celebrating 10 years of freedom. 'We are the same,'" as if transcendence of old political barriers could be accomplished by simply reworking the phrasing.

Privately, black South Africans also express their resentment of governmental and corporate appropriation of the ancient African ethical sensibility. Ubuntu and the phrase umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu reflect the notion that "a person is a person through other persons." These are affirmations of an essential humanness embodied in African customs of hospitality and communitarian responsibility. When these terms show up in advertising or in public information campaigns to support bureaucratic protocol, many see them as just more evidence of corporate PR and self-promotion for the elite.

In conversation, one hears some academics talk in terms that openly critique government programs. In an informal lecture to our group, John J. Williams, Professor of

Economics at the University of the Western Cape declared that Black Economic Empowerment is really “Black Elite Empowerment.” Further, the government built one million new homes, but its budget is really underspent due to bribery and corruption. And, because apartheid by race is really now apartheid by class, universities are still segregated by race and income; thus, the University of Western Cape is really the “University of the Working Class”(but nothing wrong with that, I might add, except that English majors don’t have the money to buy books for their courses—but that’s another matter). Our host at UWC even herself slyly admitted at a dinner party she threw for us, “We don’t just *say* ubuntu; we live by it”—seeming to acknowledge some slippage in the way the term is currently bandied about. Her remark indicates that the original term has been commodified and needs to be reclaimed.

Giving us yet more evidence of the deconstruction of official discourses, one literature professor offered the following image: “South Africa is really one huge security prison that has been decorated with a ‘rainbow nation’ sign.” American anthropologist Michael Herzfeld proposes that *disemia*—the popular reworking of government discourses—can be understood thus:

Official discourse creates a rhetoric of definitional fixity and absolute morality, and depicts the populace as falling far short of the abstract ideal. Conversely, everyday usage—the semiotic or hermeneutic common sense of people trying to make sense of an oppressive bureaucracy—constantly erodes these fixities, and critically rejects official idealizations as a poor

substitute for social experience. (*Anthropology through the Looking-Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*, 133)<sup>2</sup>

Herzfeld's notion of the doubled nature of official discourse—its original expression and its popular reworking—may help us make sense of the way truth seems to be continually in transit in South Africa. Ideas are launched, deformed, and literally heard twice, at least by those who speak disemically. To what extent the initiator of the discourse pays attention to its doubled, parodic nature is another question.

Fanon tells us that oppressed peoples have a great deal of experience “reading double,” ferreting out the duplicity in the European enlightenment project and its colonial manifestations. Locke and Rousseau asserted the values of equality and freedom in civil society, yet the colonizing powers crafted discourses of cultural difference and economic exclusion. The biggest peril today is in not making the linkages, not realizing how the South African power structure has struggled to keep political, economic, and religious discourses separate, when in fact they are tightly interlocking. But this would be to face what Bhabha has called a “re-cognition” of apartheid's pathological control. Today, it is easier to cling to old modalities of thought that are cloaked in euphemism, doublespeak, and intricate discourses of otherness.

Whereas members of the largely Afrikaner National Party descanted upon the heroism of the Great Trek and the development of the country's infrastructure, and raised the purity of their mission to mythopoeic heights, those whose lives were rigidly managed by the country's social panopticon found their voices in the interstices of power, in the space between calcified mechanisms of control and the irrepressible, lively

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<sup>2</sup> In the broader African context, we might also note that in the disemic discourse surrounding Kenya's struggle for independence that came finally in 1963, *uhuru* (freedom) was popularly known as *uhuru wa bendera* (flag independence), a term which points to the intractability of neo-colonialism.

strategies of disemia. For Bhabha, colonialist discourse already bears the seeds of its own collapse in its characteristic ambivalence about authority:

To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. Then the words of the master become the site of hybridity—the warlike, subaltern sign of the native—then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain. (“Signs Taken for Wonders” in *The Location of Culture*,121)

Bhabha argues that there is an ambivalence about authority built into the discourses of power: these discourses are subject to splitting and hybridity from the very start because they rely on a symbol-sign relationship that is unstable: a myth of origins, of original authority that is transmuted through multiple textual manifestations and thus called into question from the start. I would take this even further, following JanMohammed’s psychological argument about the dialectic of colonizer and colonized in *Manichean Aesthetics*: each needs and indeed courts the other for his identity, yet each also hates the other. The colonizer needs the inferiority of the colonized to feel superior and to maintain materially the colonial state; the colonized needs the colonizer as an ideal to which he can aspire, yet also hates the colonizer because to the degree to which he moves closer to the colonial ideal, he alienates himself from his original identity. But not only is there a psychological splitting, there is also a profound level of self-hatred on both sides: the colonizer must hate himself for his immoral wielding of power; the colonized must also hate himself for abjuring his own principles, and indeed, his very center of being.

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Thus far, I have characterized the polyphonic clash of voices one hears in South Africa, and have brought to bear some theoretical perspectives both native to the country and some imported from without. The epigraph to this paper alludes to the doctor's realization of just how slippery perception can be. Like Coetzee's character, I must confront what is at stake in making something "mean." Can I think about South Africa in a way that allows it just *to be*, apart from what I or any other westerner would make of it? Mulling these considerations over in my mind near the end of my trip, I paid particular attention to the way individuals introduced themselves. In Langa township, we met women who had dedicated their lives to being community activists. One by one, as they stood up to speak about their lives and work, each woman introduced herself in this way: "I am a mother [pause], and I am a grandmother [pause]. And I work on behalf of the women in this community, teaching them to start their own businesses."

I listened to these women recount their struggles to prove themselves in jobs far beyond what their employers initially thought them capable of. They had succeeded, but unlike the protocol in our western society, the way in which they introduced themselves began with their family and community identity first, and their own individual story, which exemplified community success, second. Why I could not see this major clash of cultural perspectives right up front, I'm not sure. There we were—hard-driving teachers and intellectuals using anthropological and literary theory to make Africa "mean," piling theory upon theory, just as Coetzee's doctor in *Life & Times of Michael K* said, exasperated, and getting Michael K's name wrong: "Michaels means something. . . ." My intentions were innocent, open, ethnographic in the best sense, but also somewhat

misguided. In being caught up in political discourses, entranced with traditional African ethics, convinced of Africa's role in redeeming and healing the west, had I missed what was right in front of me? Levi-Strauss captures exactly this tension between the perceiver's own subjectivity and the new locale: "Perhaps, then, this [is] what traveling [and anthropology are], an exploration of the deserts of my mind rather than of those surrounding me" (qtd. in Mudimbe 33). I went back to my journals and read, randomly, a sentence uttered by Gugu, a Mozambiquean student in the Truth and Reconciliation seminar in the University of Cape Town's English Department: "We're fighting against not what we're conscious of, but against what we're *not conscious of*, what's behind the paternalism and prejudice—that's what we need to be conscious of." For behind these, I thought, lie the truly undiscovered country.

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