That Loose Canon:
Rumours of South African Writing*

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The case has been made that through the post-apartheid transition, notions such as 'South African literature' have come to outlive their usefulness. Transnationality, the global knowledge economy, and the influence of poststructural and postcolonial theory are cited as factors which have diminished the analytic worth of a nationally defined canon. Critics have also pointed to an emergent cultural heteroglossia associated with the loss of the anti-apartheid project. Since 1994, many literary and popular texts written within or about South Africa, or by South African authors, have explored a wide range of themes and genres, lending support to this view. I argue, however, that growing instability around matters of social justice will continue to impose itself on the attention of writers, and that the conventions of South African writing will be modified rather than abandoned. I argue further that a case can be made for a criticism that is cognisant of the conversation between local and global, but is equally cognisant of how the national space itself both concentrates and splinters the material with which it engages by more cross-cutting forms of theory. The argument is related to 'post-transition' narratives that show elements of continuity and rupture: *Rumours* (2013. Auckland Park: Jacana Media) by Mongane Wally Serote, *Wall of Days* (2012. Cape Town: Umuzi) by Alastair Bruce, *The Smell of Apples* (1995. London: Abacus) by Mark Behr and *Bad Sex* (2011. Johannesburg: Umuzi) by Leon de Kock.

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In 1996, two years after the first democratic general election in South Africa, Mike Nicol made the following comment: 'I very much doubt that we will see a return to the political realism that characterised the work of writers like Gordimer and

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Brink during apartheid. Today the demands have shifted and these demands insist on new ways of telling' (1996, 7). Most observers of South African writing today would agree that we have seen such 'new ways of telling', and 'an open-endedness that makes room for new and various ways of thinking about the future', as Elleke Boehmer (1998, 51) has suggested (see also Sachs [1989] 1990). Indeed, this also has application for thinking about the present, and the past. Not all would agree, however, that the lens suggested by the term 'South African writing' is the most appropriate means of scrutinizing the heterogeneous body of works published over the last decade in the country, or within the diasporas that intersect with it. The case has often been made that through the post-apartheid transition and beyond, notions such as 'South African literature' have outlived their usefulness. The discursive turn, transnationality, the global knowledge economy, and the progression of 'post-the-last-post' conceptual frameworks are also cited as factors which have diminished the analytic worth of a nationally defined literature. Critics have pointed to the development of more dispersed theoretical frameworks, as evident in oceanic, diasporic, gender, animal, ecological, urbanization and spatial studies (De Kock 2005 and 2009; Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010; Gibson 2012; Kruger 2002; Poyner 2008, 103; Samuelson 2010). Daniel Roux (2000, 243) seems almost exasperated as he refers to 'the inchoate and amorphous nature of "postapartheid literature", a rubric that at times seems more like a theoretical encroachment on a body of literature than a serviceable description of it'.

I will concentrate, however, on only two arguments from this crowded field. One is rooted in local experience, namely the notion that the loss of the Struggle as a centre for South African writing is one factor in this current 'category explosion' (De Kock 2014) contributing to the view that SA Lit is a dated construct. The other is located in the discourse around globalism, namely the concept of transnationality.

The anti-apartheid Struggle no doubt had a convergent effect on our literature that would be exaggerated in a normal society, perhaps even grotesque. The obvious impact of its ending has been the liberation of writers to diversify their work, but what of the metacritical impact of this ending when it comes to the notion of 'South African writing'? It would be an oversimplification to suggest that the ending of apartheid could mean a resumption of business as usual, given the absence of a defining normality. As Michael Green has pointed out, the lapsing of the Struggle as *raison d'être* has exposed more starkly the vacuum of other 'principles of coherence (language, geography, religion, ethnicity, shared temporality and literacy) usually considered necessary for the construction of the modern nation state' (Green 1999, 122).

Despite these bewilderments, during the period of transition a second (albeit more partial) centre of literary and critical gravity has emerged, namely the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). One might discuss this from the perspective of critics and commentators, given the extensive body of research about the TRC

that has accumulated, but I prefer to take my cue from a truncated and hopefully representative selection of writers.[1] Antjie Krog, who of course is both writer and critic, used the TRC in *Country of My Skull* ([1998] 1999) in a manner that resonated with its design: as a means of retrospection and confession, which were presented as the preconditions of public catharsis. *Country of My Skull*, perhaps more than any other text, affirmed the value and purpose of the TRC and its surrounding Rainbow Nation mythology. By contrast, Achmat Dangor – positioning his protagonists as victims of apartheid rather than beneficiaries – worked a counter-allegory of truth and *retribution* in his Man-Booker nominated novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001), and questioned the legitimacy of the TRC process (Barris 2014). A further variation can be found in the anti-hero of Mike Nicol's *The Ibis Tapestry* (1998), who is positioned not only as a beneficiary of apartheid, but as one of its agents. The point Nicol seems to make is that while remorse is possible at an individual level, truth can only be a heteroglossic projection of rival interests, while the attempted *national* project of reconciliation is undermined by its own premises (Kissack and Titlestad 2006; Barris 2012). An obvious example is J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which explores and problematizes the conditions of possibility for reconciliation, if I may dispense with such a complex work in one sentence. More absolute dissent is to be found in Mongane Wally Serote's recent novel *Rumours* (2013), which asserts that the entrenched privilege and racial hostility of white South Africa was never interrupted by the demise of apartheid in the first place (see also Mbembe 2008, 6), which by implication reduces the TRC project to an absurdity.

This very limited review of how writers have treated the TRC suggests that its initial discursive gravity is weakening, a trend that will no doubt be reinforced by the political and economic fallout of the Marikana shootings, and other disillusionments. My point is that dissolution of the Struggle as the original rallying point will probably be followed by the dissolution of the TRC narrative as a secondary motif, while the literary imagination moves further from the transition and its possibilities, and as the deferred revolution now surfacing in service delivery protests, marathon strikes, the flinging of faeces, and burning of buses gains momentum.

There must be limits to how often one may staple the word 'post' to itself, but as we move through and beyond this post-transition as a turbulent, disappointed and angry society, the shallow foundation of the 1994 social compact stands exposed. In my view, the growing instability around matters of social justice will continue to impose itself on the attention of writers, though in a less organized and compelling fashion than did the Struggle. I doubt, however, that this turbulent energy will be entirely sufficient to define a new and still distinctly South African literary moment. My point is really that political engagement will probably transform or rearrange itself, or alter its weighting within the whole system of writing, but given the material conditions, it is unlikely to disappear as a significant factor.

A comparison of Mongane Wally Serote's recent novel *Rumours* (2013) with his earlier writing demonstrates such a rearrangement of political engagement. In the late apartheid years, Essop Patel remarked that Serote 'is profoundly dedicated to the culture of the oppressed and exploited, as well as being actively engaged in asserting the highest ideals of the revolution' (1990, 187). It is a description that Serote would probably endorse, although he has emphasized the need to balance engagement and literary quality (Serote 1992, 146–148). In response to Albie Sachs's ([1989] 1990, 239) call to abandon culture as a weapon of struggle, Serote expressed agreement

> . . . with the argument that when we've reached a point where we're continuously demanding culture to serve that function, then we are not responding to the full dynamics of culture. We have now, I think, reached a point where we should explore other areas with culture. But to say categorically that culture cannot be used as a weapon of struggle is, I think, incorrect. (Serote 1993, 183)

The political advocacy of his novel *Rumours* (2013), published two decades later, demonstrates that Serote has not abandoned this position, even in the post-transitional period. However, the focus of his engagement has shifted in response to post-apartheid social dynamics, some of which have altered, while others have obdurately resisted change.

The focalizer of *Rumours*, Keke, is a struggle veteran in crisis. He gives up his job, loses himself in alcohol, is estranged from his wife and children, and eventually becomes homeless. A chance encounter leads him to a Malian shaman named Ami, who leads him through a process of healing and self-rediscovery. She articulates a key insight, namely that Keke's depression is not a private matter – it is symptomatic of a societal illness: 'How can society be normal after you've just fought for over three hundred years, during the last fifty of which you were being annihilated by apartheid? All of you, whites as well as blacks, have been injured spiritually' (Serote 2013, 108).

This partly counters Jane Poyner's comment that 'post-apartheid fiction reveals that the private can serve productively as a corrective to the public, suggesting that the "dichotomies" of public/private, political/ethical need reconceptualising'(Poyner 2008, 103). Serote's novel implies in fact that the public dimension is so invasive of the personal that the latter cannot be understood (or, more crucially, changed) without reference to the former. In this sense, in adhering to the conventions of social realism, *Rumours* demonstrates a continuity with Struggle writing, and with Serote's earlier practice.[2]

On the other hand, a second, broader element of the argument in *Rumours* subtly strengthens the pole of interior life in the 'public/private, political ethical' dichotomies referred to by Poyner above, suggesting that a reconceptualization has in fact been performed. It can be seen in the somewhat idealized Pan-Africanism that permeates the novel. To this end, Ami persuades Keke to join her in rural Mali,

where he is exposed to rituals designed to reawaken him to his spiritual identity. It is not a universal human spirituality that Serote has in mind: it is a specifically African spirituality which he sees as the only means of restoring Keke to health, and metonymically, of enabling black South Africa to negotiate a balanced and integrative relationship with modernity. I am not sure that this representation of an African spirituality that is universal to and undifferentiated by the many cultures, languages and histories of the continent is entirely credible. It seems to reflect instead a teleological anxiety to create an empowering and restorative discourse, in order to balance what Serote regards as the corrosive element in a globalism dominated by the West. Whatever value one places on the construction of this form of Africanness, however, it does imply a revaluation, a rebalancing, of the public/private dichotomy. Ami's analysis quoted above ('All of you, whites as well as blacks, have been injured *spiritually'* (Serote 2013, 108; my emphasis)) implies that Keke's personal malaise can only be understood by paying attention to the social dimension. However, Serote's evocation of spiritual identity as the cure to the systemic, societal pressure of the postcolonial, postnational, global West, implies antithetically that the personal and ethical poles are required to heal the structural and societal dimension. In Keke's case, this becomes a quest to recover something of infinite value that has been lost because it has been silenced not only by the long endured violence of colonialism, but also by the pressure of modernity. Serote's vintage Struggle ideology thereby transforms into a narrative of struggle that is both personal and psychological, which demonstrates a particular cusp of dis/continuity.

Meg Samuelson likewise identifies a cusp between pre and post-transition that is discernible within the seam of political engagement. She conceptualizes this in terms that are different to (but intersect with) what I have argued above:

> There is certainly still a politics to this literature, but it is one that is starting to engage more with struggles that are unfolding elsewhere or both here and there, as it takes cognisance of the nation's embedding in the global. Rather than a turning away from political engagement and/or from the past, this literature is, on my reading, characterised more by its *rearrangement* than its *abandonment* of the chronotopes of South African literature and its expanding field of enquiry. (Samuelson 2010, 116; original emphasis)

It is clear that political engagement (whether as envisaged by myself or by Samuelson) will not exhaust or be narrowly definitive of what might constitute South African writing. However, the notion of 'rearrangement . . . of the chronotypes of South African literature' implies that a reconceptualization is taking place, as suggested by the ways in which *Rumours* both sustains and departs from the tradition of Struggle writing.

I turn to the argument of transnationality, and associated constructs such as global capital, global information, migration, hybridity and so on, all premised on the borderless world. Notions like these are sometimes presented as if they have   a

totalizing power to dislocate everything local. Bill Ashcroft, for example, idealizes the concept of transnationality in describing it as 'a conception of the nation not as state entity, but as fluid and migratory, according to which its subjects are released from the myth of fixed identities, the literary parallel being literature's affective power, its power to inhabit an image of hope, as it were, beyond the postcolonial' (cited in Chapman 2011, 61). Yet the effects that such globalisms entail surely must work down into the molecular level of society, namely individual lives. It is worth considering the following observation by Mrinalini Chakravorty and Leila Neti, which affirms an increased mobility between categories of power, and yet insists that transnationalism entrenches old differences:

> Transnational modernity accelerates mobility between unevenly constituted zones of finance, technology, culture, race, geography, and gender. The aleatory character of these new mobilities produces a structured difference between lives considered invaluable and those deemed disposable. Transnationalism suspends humanity for those populations whose lives and bodies are routinely circumscribed by the struggles of (in)visibility, (in)security, and an uncertain possibility of substitution that threatens to breach, at any moment, the continuation of their life narratives. (2009, 195)

The crux of their observation is clearly the 'structured difference between lives considered invaluable and those deemed disposable'. It is one of the premises on which apartheid – that bastion of nationalism, of fixity, of nationalist identity, that cast iron refutation of everything global, transnational, fluid, and hybrid – was constructed. It seems to me that while the legal and political machinery of apartheid has been dismantled, and there has been significant class mobility, there is no difference between then and now for well over half the population. The global themes of 'finance, technology, culture, race, geography, and gender' that Chakravorty and Neti mention are all features of that distorted bubble that stretches from Camps Bay to Khayelitsha, as will be the concerns of oceanic, diasporic, gender, animal, ecological, and urbanization studies. Such material will also be read in the counterpart bubbles that stretch from Mexico to Arizona, or from Jamaica to London. But the social dynamics constructing local differences will bear their own texture and ontology in each local case, their own particulars of manifestation. This subsystem of local variants does not transfer automatically to critical discourse, but I believe that a case can be made for a criticism that retains a South African focus; that is cognisant of the discussion between local and global energies; that is cognisant of how the national space itself both concentrates and splinters much of the substance it engages with by more cross-cutting forms of theory.

Several critics have established grounds on which the antitheses of local and global find a measure of agreement. In a 2005 article entitled 'Does South African literature still exist?' and subtitled 'Or: South African Literature is Dead, Long Live Literature in South Africa', Leon de Kock expressed a degree of ambiguity about his position, as the title and subtitle indicate. In a more recent article (De Kock 2009),

he is less ambiguous. He attributes the international reception of Krog's *Country of My Skull* to the resonance of the book for various internationally dispersed 'pockets of ugly nationalist enclosure where leaders were ignoring the newer world-ethical imperative to open up rather than close down spaces of human mobility and the freedom to choose from a postnational, rather than a national menu of options for . . . identity' (2009, 29). In support of his view, he quotes Homi Bhabha's reference to 'the great social movements of our times – diasporic, refugee, migrant' – which have resulted in the 'right to narrate' (p. 30). De Kock locates his argument in the flowering of globalism that followed the ending of the Cold War. I feel, however, that like many others, he overstates the case for transnationality in this regard. If one steps back from the persuasive shibboleths of transnationality and globalism in general, it seems to me that the 'right to narrate' – and the power to 'open up rather than close down spaces of human mobility' – has been inscribed in other influential books published under greatly different world conditions, such as *Cry the Beloved Country* (1948) and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* ([1947] 1952), which were published at the dawn of the Cold War. Both were critiques of nationalist chauvinist excess, although not necessarily of nationally defined options of identity.

Even so, despite the boundary-dissolving pressures of transnationality that De Kock and others articulate, he baulks at saying that the category 'South African literature' has become entirely redundant, because his 'sense is that the "trans" in "transnational" creates a cusp between the national and what lies beyond it, not a severance' (De Kock 2009, 31).

The elaboration of seams noted above, between past and present practice, or between local and global awareness, is suggestive of the intersectionality of critical filters. It would be futile to argue that the body of writing should not be understood outside the parameters of a national literature, certainly not excluding a platform of reference to transnational cultural and socio-economic conditions. However, the point I make is that the notion of South African literature retains a degree of utility because a segment of writing in or about this country – which one might characterize as exploratory in other terms – retains a stubbornly local focus.

Where narrative is transnational, it tends to consider displaced persons, issues of migrancy in the face of disproportionate ratios of power, language and ownership, and the exploitation and commodification of human beings across borders. A novel like *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswane Mpe aligns well with this thematic cluster, despite the writer's generously loose understanding of the term 'borders', which range between the rural village of Tiragalong and Hillbrow, between Johannesburg and Oxford, between Heaven and earth, because the characteristic obsessions of transnationality noted above are present. Yet the sense of place and of local culture, of urban and rural energies (and admittedly their hybridity), are also powerfully represented.

There are more recent novels, such as *Wall of Days* (2010) by Alistair Bruce, and *For the Mercy of Water* (2012) by Karen Jayes which suppress South African specificity, while retaining indirect links with the country. Both novels are dystopias which allusively address contemporary local historic issues such as conscience, redress and the abuse of power, while neither materializes local particulars. *Wall of Days*, for example, is set in a drowned world that has resulted from an ecological apocalypse. There is limited land available, and resources of food, shelter and energy are correspondingly meagre (see Barris 2012 for more detailed discussion). The war and constrained resources that follow from this lead to a society that has, in the fairly recent past, exterminated the old and disabled in order to preserve the community as a whole. In the present, the town silences its own past, refusing to own the atrocity. This lasts until the exiled leader of the community, the man responsible for devising this drastic programme, returns. His presence disrupts the wilful silence of the community, forcing into the open issues of collective guilt, moral responsibility, retribution, and political amnesia. While this situates the narrative within Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) discourse, Bruce expresses an interesting ambivalence:

> What occurs at [the central character] Bran's trial is not what happened at the TRC. It is a trial after all. Likewise the process of deliberate forgetting of history, which is what seems to have taken place at the settlement, is not the same process as the TRC nor as what South Africa has been through since. The deposing of tyrants (or the overthrow of powerful leaders depending on where you sit) and the erasure of their legacy is not peculiar to South Africa. It is certainly the case though that the TRC, in a particularly Judeo-Christian way, was about coming to terms with collective and personal guilt and there is no doubt that this theme runs through the novel. (Bruce 2012, 120)

A weakness of Bruce's position is that while the TRC was meant to pre-empt the possibility of mass forgetting, many would argue today that the project has been unsuccessful. In other words, such political amnesia can be construed not as a difference between *Wall of Days* and the TRC narrative, but a similarity. There are other links with South African (cultural) history too, such as a reference to the Adamastor myth, and the motto of the town, 'In unity, strength', which simply translates from the Latin '*Ex unitate vires*', the motto of apartheid South Africa. Despite these linkages, I do not dispute that the novel occupies a transitional space between the national and transnational. Bruce's allusive method, as he suggests above, does generalize its scope of reference beyond one particular history.

These novels typify the cusp of trans/nationality that De Kock describes. There are, however, novels that are might stretch the local thematic boundary while remaining within it, such as De Kock's *Bad Sex* (2011). I choose this novel because it speaks to both points I have raised, namely modification rather abandonment of South African chronotopes, and the question of trans/nationality. *Bad Sex* is not about struggle as a racial or class conflict grounded in material conditions. In this novel the

dynamics of struggle shift into the arena of gender and sexuality, into more private and psychological spaces. In this regard, it bears comparison with Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995).

Behr's novel has been much discussed (see for example Stobie 2008 and Barnard 2000) – so I will not attend to it in detail. The central crisis in Behr's novel occurs when the young son of an apartheid general, a paragon of the Christian Nationalist ideology that underpinned apartheid, witnesses his father raping his own (male) best friend. Stobie cogently observes the intersectionality of oppressive political and sexual systems: 'The systems of sexual violence, family violence, gender oppression, racial oppression, fascism, and religious bigotry are shown throughout the text to be interlinked systems with similar effects, which do not only dehumanize and degrade their victims, but are also an assault on the integrity and humanity of their perpetrators' (Stobie 2008, 79).

The Smell of Apples was innovative in extending the locus of oppression from racialized power to rape, *without dislocating the grand narrative critique of apartheid*. Instead, Behr revitalized the traditional critique of apartheid by approaching it through the image of a violent sexuality, and by representing the jarring links between such depredation and the psuedo-religious ideology that was used to underpin apartheid. Such an ingenious shift must surely qualify as a rearrangement, a redistribution rather than abandonment, of the traditional themes of engaged writing.

De Kock's *Bad Sex* takes this dislocation further, in that it is also a critique of masculinity within a distinctly South African context, but it abandons the grand narrative preoccupation with the social dynamics of race, at least as a central concern. It fuses confessional and *bildungsroman* in its structure, opening with the narrator Sammy in therapy. This frames the novel as his account to the therapist of his growing up. De Kock's treatment of gender and sexuality sharply distinguishes his novel from Behr's. Unlike Marnus's father, the general, Sammy's father is a factory worker, and he presents a picture of defeated maleness. Conversely, femaleness is presented as a demeaning and corrosive force that is not to be trusted. These conflicting role models are reflected in Sammy's adult sense of identity, and the conflict is reinforced after he is sexually abused for an extended period by a male neurologist treating him for *petit mal*. As a consequence, Sammy finds himself impotent in his early sexual encounters with women. This difficulty is paradoxically resolved after an unexpected and more positive homosexual encounter. Having surrendered to this aspect of his sexuality, he moves on to satisfying encounters with women, signifying an intention to normalize homoerotic experience – in direct contrast with *The Smell of Apples* – as part of male identity.

While there is a shared focus on paedophilia and bisexuality, the differences between *Bad Sex* and *The Smell of Apples* are more instructive than these similarities. Sammy's family does not identify itself as markedly Christian, ethnic, or nationalist, although chauvinisms of gender and race permeate the culture of family and

community in a manner that is more diffuse, and less aggressively articulated. It is clear in *Bad Sex* that territory is something to be fought over, yet the nature of territory is less clearly defined. There is no war on the border, indeed no grand narrative about which to fight a war. There are only street skirmishes (for example, De Kock 2011, 44) in the working class suburb of Mayfair, Johannesburg, where Sammy grows up. The more important battlegrounds are intimate and domestic in scale, fragmented into amorphous urban skirmishes around misogyny (34–37), heterosexuality (38–40), homophobia (46), racism (50), reflected in individual street brawls (59) and power struggle, mostly (but not exclusively) along the axis of gender. Above all, this narrative forms no allegory of totalitarianism.

   It is clear from this summary that *Bad Sex* might productively be viewed through lenses such as masculinity or other gender-driven studies. Yet in refracting the linguistic, societal and spatial argot, and in its demotic characterization of Mayfair, *Bad Sex* is distinctly South African writing. The local grain is captured by Jane Rosenthal in a *Mail & Guardian* review: 'Sam is a "Mayfair boykie" of Portuguese-Irish-Afrikaans extraction and his childhood is a battle for survival in a world of brandy-and-Coke braais, mother gossiping with vicious intent in the kitchen with her hugely fat friend, Suzy and, factory-worker father off to the Libertas Hotel' (2011). Even as Sam grows up and his narrative takes on the register of his more educated and professional self, the diction remains distinctly (white middle class) South African, and the situations are filled with local particularity. In short, the chronotope is explored in terms which suggest evolutionary rather than absolute change.

   I have no doubt that writers with some claim to South African identity will continue to disengage, and continue to explore apolitical and asocial themes and genres, or speak as an uninflected voice to the international market. I acknowledge too that various theoretical narratives will be parsed into our local body politic and body of writing, conceptual frameworks that might render the local particularity illegible. However, I suspect that the South African literary imagination will remain politicized in important ways, and will remain tuned to what is unique about our social and personal circumstances at apolitical levels as well. This should sustain the viability of the concept 'South African literature' over time, and for a reasonable spread of commentators.

Notes

1   See Klug (1998, 318–319), Soyinka-Airewale (1999, 47), Chait (2000, 17–19), Moodley and Adam (2000), Gqola (2001, 96–98), Vestergaard (2001, 24–26), Diala (2001–2002, 50–52), Graham (2003, 11–14; 2008, 128), Irlam (2004, 695–696), Young (2004, 149–153), Titlestad and Kissack (2006, 51–52, 61–65) and Myambo (2010, 93–101).

2 It is worth noting that Serote's vintage engagement segues partly into a postcolonial form of nationalism. In the much-reiterated view of his characters, the entrenched racism of

most whites has never been surrendered, the South African media are mouthpieces of Western hegemony, and no criticism of 'the Movement' (that is, the African National Congress) is regarded as justified. Black commentators and journalists who are critical of the Movement are dismissed with equally essentialist aplomb: they are not truly African.

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