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Of Transitions, Fast and Slow: Writing South Africa at the Turn of the Millennium

David Chioni Moore

*I*n this essay, I undertake three tasks: first, to set a frame for consideration of contemporary post-transition South Africa, focusing on the “temporal suspension” of the immediate pre-transition period; second, to step back several decades and two continents away — to the African America of the 1950s — to provide further counterpoint for the contemporary South African situation; and third, to reflect upon the accelerated postcoloniality and indeed globality of South Africa at the turn of the millennium.

For all of my youth and through my early adult American life — the 1960s through the 1980s — South Africa loomed in a time warp I will call the eternal present. South Africa’s apartheid situation seemed unsustainable in the modern, postcolonial age, held together only at the cost of a fanatical police state and in the face of enormous internal and external pressure. Thus, everybody “knew” that South Africa would change. And yet, at the same time, nobody knew exactly how or when South Africa would change, in part because no actual change ever seemed to occur — only variations in the violence. Thus, some observers figured South Africa would *never* change, and the apartheid state would continue forever in its self-asphyxiating grip. Others predicted *cataclysmic* change: a massive black revolution as the intolerable pressure cooker burst.

For several decades, then, nobody in or outside of South Africa knew exactly when, how, or even if the apartheid regime would change, an uncertainty accentuated by the even greater lack of clarity over what would follow. Of course, those who predicted stasis were unburdened by contemplation of the future, but those who pictured revolution could hardly imagine post-apartheid South Africa. One

manifestation of this “eternal present,” this uncertainty about the future of South Africa, can be found in the nation’s novels, particularly in the literature of the 1980s, the decade preceding the release of Nelson Mandela. South African writing of that decade, both black and white, seemed trapped in what the critic Elleke Boehmer astutely called “the frozen penultimate,” particularly with regard to the closing pages of the texts.¹ That is to say, the South African novel of the 1980s only rarely ended resolutely—in reconciliation, flames, or some other way. Rather, the novels of that decade more typically provided no narrative closure whatsoever.

A few examples will make this clear. In Nadine Gordimer’s 1981 novel *July’s People*, the white liberal female protagonist is trapped in the black countryside during a violent overthrow, and in the very last paragraph of the novel runs toward an approaching helicopter, not knowing whether it holds white “liberators” or black revolutionary fighters. Likewise, Lewis Nkosi’s 1986 text *Mating Birds* ends in a prison with the fuzzy thoughts of a young black man who has been convicted of an alleged rape of a white woman, and who will shortly be hanged, though we do not see the hanging. Nearly all of J.M. Coetzee’s 1980s fiction ends ambiguously, from his 1980s *Waiting for the Barbarians* to his 1990 *Age of Iron*. The last paragraph of Nadine Gordimer’s 1990 book *My Son’s Story* ends with this odd line: “I am a writer and this is my first book—that I can never publish.” Finally, one might cite Mongane Wally Serote’s 1981 masterpiece, *To Every Birth its Blood*, which ruminates on a growing anti-apartheid resistance movement but ends, remarkably and symbolically enough, with a pregnant woman pictured in difficult labor but who has *not yet given birth*.

Of course, all of this narrative forestalling lost its purpose between February 11, 1990, the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and May 10, 1994, when Mr. Mandela was sworn in as the first majority-elected President of South Africa. The future had indeed, and finally, arrived. But what would come next was anybody’s guess. In scrambling for models for what post-apartheid South Africa would look like, one classic instinct seemed to be the recently labeled “post-colonial” model that had characterized forty other African nations after their respective liberations, and India after its independence in 1947. A majority nationalist government would suddenly take hold,

and the former rulers would unceremoniously depart. Decrees would follow, announcing major changes in the economy, perhaps even a switch to socialist production, and a revolutionary program of nation-building would ensue, ironically solidifying what was almost everywhere a colonial invention. According to this “classic” model, the transition would also play out against the backdrop of a local leader tacking between the Soviet Union and the U.S.-led West in the interminable Cold War. Of course, in this “generically postcolonial” scenario, the initial euphoria of independence would soon flame out, and a period of disillusion would set in. In most places, a comprador bourgeoisie would arise, and a renewed Western dependence or neocolonial relation would set in. Cultural prestige and cultural ambition would still depend on the departed colonizing power.

One main reason for any expectation of postcoloniality in the case of South Africa would be the pervasive assumption that the Beninois philosopher Paulin Hountondji has called the fallacy of “African unanimism:” the notion that there exists a single thing called Africa, homogeneous throughout its sub-Saharan expanse, despite its enormous size and dizzying diversity. Thus, on the global stage there has been, against much evidence to the contrary, an expectation that what would happen in South Africa might be “the same as” what happened in Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya some thirty-five years before. Blacks are blacks and whites are whites, to paraphrase Kipling. Blacks and whites in a sub-Saharan setting always means colonization, and what follows is postcoloniality.

The evidence that South Africa has not become a classical “post-colony” is apparent. In the first place, of course, South Africa was never a classical colony at all, but was, for three centuries at least, a settler colony, where the peoples of the dominating power lived in great numbers in the colonial space. The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are the four other most classic examples of such settler colonization (though of course the Dutch and English who settled in South Africa were and still are far friendlier toward, far more integrated with, and far less imperial toward the indigenous inhabitants than were, say, the good people who settled the four U.S. states I call mine — New Jersey, Rhode Island, North Carolina, and Minnesota — where massively genocidal legacies largely obviated the need for intentional apartheid). In this regard, it is worth noting a few other large-scale settler-colonial societies, including French Algeria, whose

million settlers eventually returned, and Latvia and Kazakhstan, which are to this day nearly half Russian in terms of population.

Therefore, in considering South Africa one must look as much to settler-colonial as to “classically” colonial models for culture and development. And here I will shift to a brief consideration of the United States. While in South Africa, I was fortunate to continue research on one corner of the global settler-colony parallel, namely, the relationship of the great African American poet and man of letters Langston Hughes (born in Joplin, Missouri, 1902, and died in Harlem, New York in 1967) with four pioneering black South African writers: Peter Abrahams, Bloke Modisane, Es’kia Mphahlele, and Richard Rive. As most American readers know, Langston Hughes was the most important African American poet in history, hailed even in his 20s as the “poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance,” and creator of some forty books of prose fiction, poetry, drama, humor, history, memoir, children’s tales, and more. Despite Hughes’ literary output, by the early 1950s he had been eclipsed in fame by younger, more confrontational writers such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright. Thus, among other reactions, Hughes turned his energies to Africa, which he had always considered a sort of distant home, and had visited as early as age nineteen while serving as a mess boy on freight ships plying Atlantic waters.²

Early in 1954—at a very early stage in European-language African literature and at a key moment in black South African literary history—Hughes began writing to every African literary contact he could find, to solicit short stories for a volume he projected editing, *An African Treasury*, which six years later would become the first anthology of African writing published in the United States.³ This new African engagement was a major change for Hughes. Only five years before, his large co-edited anthology *Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949*, had contained, in addition to African American writing, seventy-five pages of Caribbean work and some ninety pages of “Tribute Poems” by white authors, but only three poems by actual Africans, all of which were by one relatively obscure Ghanaian author and were borrowed from the pages of an *Atlantic Monthly*.⁴ But once his African engagement re-began in 1954, Hughes maintained his African connections until his death in 1967.

What is interesting from a pan-African versus settler-colonial standpoint is that of all of the diverse scores of *African* writers Hughes came in contact with during his dozen-year literary relationship with Africa,

the most significant four, in terms of the length and depth of correspondence, were the four *South Africans* noted just above: Abrahams, Modisane, Mphahlele, and Rive. In each case, the exchange of letters began with a relatively neutral 1954 inquiry by Hughes, noting that the recipient had been suggested and asking after any short fiction that might be available for Hughes' anthology. The response in all four cases was that of awe. Here the world's most famous Afro-diasporic writer had written to an obscure young South African and asked for fiction! Mphahlele's response of June 18, 1954, is characteristic: "It is indeed very flattering to me to have such warm complimentary comments from a great writer like you on my amateurish attempts (as I regard it)—for that matter, from a Negro to another." For each of the four correspondents, the tone of the exchanged letters rapidly relaxes, and multi-page missives ensue and last a dozen years, till Hughes's death in 1967.

Each of the four letter sequences is different. By the start of correspondence in 1954, Peter Abrahams was established in London and had already published four works of fiction, and thus the Hughes-Abrahams letters became to some degree an exchange of equals. Es'kia Mphahlele, though the same age as Abrahams, was much earlier in his literary career, but the next dozen years would find him as an exiled teacher and cultural administrator in Nairobi, Dakar, London, Paris, Accra, and Massachusetts. Consequently, Mphahlele's letters are the writings of a nomad to a settled, centered man. Bloke Modisane was in an anguished European exile for much of his relationship with Hughes, and only produced one book in his life, but that book, *Blame Me On History*, was a worldwide sensation, and Modisane shares its fame with Hughes. Finally, Richard Rive, of Cape Town's District Six, remained at home for the majority of his exchange with Hughes. He sent Hughes detailed, ironic analyses of the local situation, including, at one point, the observation that since Rive's writings had been banned, he was legally forbidden to even look at the words he was putting down on paper for his good friend Langston Hughes.

I wish, in this brief essay, that I could offer some of the flavor of these scores of letters stretching from 1954 to 1967, but space will not permit.⁵ Instead, I shall summarize by returning to the broader point of this essay and noting that there is an evidently far *greater* level of sim-

patio and mutual understanding between Langston Hughes and his four South African correspondents than there is between Hughes and any of his other African epistolary partners. Though at times it is clear that Hughes and Modisane, or Hughes and Rive, are obliged to “educate” each other as to the specifics of their countries — at one point Hughes notes that “Negro” in the United States encompasses both “black” and “coloured” in South Africa’s vocabulary — the letters are on the whole characterized by implicit cultural, and, I might even say, racial understanding. In an early letter, Abrahams writes, “Please tell your fellow American Negroes through your newspaper column how tremendously important their achievements are to the Africans. They are a unique source of inspiration” (14 January 1954). And, in a later letter, Modisane notes — as Hughes no doubt would have understood — that “Coming, as I do, from South Africa, everything I write, therefore, must of necessity be a broadsheet against apartheid or race discrimination or whatever; most all of [my reviewers] have fastened on this and not, I think, on what my book begins to say” (10 October 1963).⁶

A fuller consideration of the correspondence between Langston Hughes and his four South African interlocutors will have to await future scholarly articles as well as a published edition of the letters, for which preliminary work is currently under way, and for which approval has been given by the two living members of the initial five-man correspondence group. Es’kia Mphahlele and Peter Abrahams are both now age eighty and both still writing. For American audiences, an edition of Hughes’ South African correspondence will both reveal a less well known side of Hughes and illuminate key cultural dimensions of South Africa’s apartheid struggle. But for South African readers the impact of such a volume should be even greater. As strong as Abrahams, Mphahlele, Modisane, and Rive were as writers, their *published* writings were always written under conditions of exile, internal banning, censorship, or protest. Thus, the revelations of their less-guarded letters will be important as South Africans revisit their past, to better understand, as the German literary critic Erich Auerbach has put it, “the diverse background of their common fate.”⁷ In particular, to return to the broader theme of this essay, this common South African fate is, unlike that of the other forty-odd sub-Saharan nations, something different from the “postcolonial.”

One major reason that South Africa is other than postcolonial is, as I have said, that South Africa, like the United States, is a settler and not a

classic colony. Therefore, the events of 1990–1994 should be characterized less as a decolonization and more as a caste- or “race”-based change of regime. But perhaps a larger reason for the non-postcoloniality of South Africa today is the relatively invisible (in the sense that it is present as absence) end of the Cold War and the concomitant and very visible rise of western capitalist democracy as virtually the *only* model on the planetary stage. This dual process has gone hand in hand with the phenomenon of globalization.

It is, in essence, the sudden arrival of the globe, virtually instantly after the fall of apartheid, that most sharply distinguishes South African society from the many liberated societies that have gone before. The rapidity of this arrival, especially relative to the experiences of South Africa’s more traditionally postcolonial African referent nations, has been accentuated by two major factors. First, the 1990s bore witness to an overall much higher level of global interconnectedness than did the 1950s or 1960s. Jamaica, Indonesia, and Egypt, for example, were not confronted by pervasive global mediascapes or economies immediately after their independence. And second, South Africa had been culturally and economically isolated for the several decades before Mandela’s release, the result of a concerted international effort by anti-apartheid forces. Thus, the arrival of “the globe” was that much more dramatic. A half a century ago, the great French statesman Georges Clemenceau observed that the United States was the one nation in the world that had moved from a state of barbarism to a state of decay without the usual interval of civilization. In a similar but more serious spirit, I would like to argue that globalization has caused South Africa to, in a sense, “skip over” the “usual interval” of postcoloniality — the interval of nation-building, economic paradigm shift, reversion to neocoloniality, and more. The new South Africa therefore finds itself “all of a sudden” like an econo-cultural Brazil, with enormous rich-poor gaps, race and ethnic tensions, a mix of high technology and enormous natural resources, an unsettled cultural relationship to a European source, and a key but changing role in international affairs. But little has prepared South Africa for this shift.

Let me here offer a handful of fragments from the globalized South Africa. Today in South Africa it is perfectly ordinary to see a restaurant advertising “English, Indian, also Pakistani & Chinese Cuisine / We Specialise in Pizzas.” It is perfectly ordinary to see the evening television news dominated by a jokey, friendly format derived from U.S. models, with three speakers at a big desk, one comfortably from each

of three visible ethnicities and gender-mixed. South Africa's fast-food restaurants—the “Steers” chain, for example—are run essentially on a U.S. McDonald's model, but mix influences running from the English (“Old English breakfast”), to the South Asian (“Tikka Chicken Burger”), to the truly deterritorial and unhistorical (Taco Chicken Burger). The road between Pretoria and Johannesburg is lined with gleaming global New Economy outposts, from Siemens, VodaCom, and KPMG to Oracle, Psion, and the inevitable Mercedes dealers. Meanwhile, the city centers on either side are rapidly emptying of the nation's economic engines. The United States, which has never been in a position of traditional coloniality with respect to South Africa, dominates programming on South African TV: old Cosby reruns, the detective series Mike Hammer, *Sex in the City*, NBA hype specials, a *National Inquirer* television serial, and medieval sword and sorcery series; movies from the Godzilla remake to Terminator 2, Saturday Night Fever, Striptease, and What's Up Doc; and a full range of American-style knockoff programming from music video to daytime talk shows. All of these play a colossal role in South African television programming. Not surprisingly, South African youth culture borrows heavily from U.S. African American culture and turns it to its own creative ends, as it has since at least the 1950s.

In the realm of the national economy — which is never, anywhere, disconnected from a national sense of culture — one hears once revolutionary socialist government officials and historically courageous liberal academics who feel overwhelmingly constrained to conform to GATT-style models, and speak in terms like “competitiveness” and “global markets.” People who fought apartheid at risk of life and limb from the 1950s to the 1980s somehow roll over in the face of transnational imperatives at the dawn of the millennium. Two framed posters aimed at South African employees and found at South Africa's major airports are symptomatic. One is captioned “Have You Seen the Big Five?” — a clear reference to the tourist's safari pentad of lion, elephant, leopard, rhinoceros, and Cape buffalo — but sports a photograph of five stereotypically dressed visitors: an American, Brit, German, Italian, and Japanese. The second airport poster, again clearly aimed at the tourist-trade employee, depicts dollar, pound, mark, yen, and lira notes, with the caption “The Friendlier You Are, the More You'll See of Them.”

Outside of the airport, on a relatively ordinary commercial street in Cape Town, I stop in a local bookstore, and find, well, what *can't* be

found? The travel book section is very large, and includes the Lonely Planet guide to Iceland, Greenland, and the Faeroe Islands. On separate shelving, one portion of the fiction section is a rich but odd mix of contemporary African writing from across the continent. Interestingly, all South African authors, black and white, are classified there. Steps away is New Age, loaded with astrology, science fiction, yoga, ecofeminism, goddess literature, sword and sorcery, and more. One shelf beyond that sits a row of Native American materials, including Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the first "serious" book I read, at the age of nine in 1972, and which I have not seen in a U.S. bookstore in a decade. On the opposite wall is an enormous selection of computer texts, and a full selection of European and Greek and Roman classics. Outside the bookstore, the global flows continue: my taxi driver is a Bulgarian émigré; I attend a lecture on South African healthcare systems which notes that the nation imports some five hundred Cuban doctors every year; that evening at dinner I learn that the first text translated into the Afrikaans language was the Qu'ran, since Afrikaans served as a lingua franca for imported Muslim slaves and indentured laborers from Malaysia and environs; and the next day I hear of a new play in which two of the characters, resistance writers of the 1980s generation, conspire to boil their old manuscripts in beer, to artificially age them and prompt higher auction prices from rich American research library collections.

In the past half decade, in sum — a short time in a world-historical sense — a multi-ethnic, multi-racial South Africa has emerged from its own nefarious internal situation and planetary isolation, into a world of global flows. The literary world, which throughout the 1980s was trapped in a "frozen penultimate" situation, has perhaps not yet been able to react, either formally or thematically, to this great transformation. And it may be that the generation of black resistance and white liberal writers who so eloquently chronicled apartheid and its contradictions will not be the ones to characterize the South African future. Serious new books are published, but even they do not quite capture the South Africa of the present. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly's *Writing South Africa* focuses its many contributions on South African writing of the previous quarter-century, but reading it, one is ever more convinced that the South African present was largely unantici-

pated by the past generation's writing. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee's *Negotiating the Past* assesses apartheid and post-apartheid imaginings of South Africa's complex history, but again much of that history seems to offer little preparation for the global present.

Finally, Malegapuru Makgoba's *African Renaissance* is the most forward-looking of recent compendia of South African re-thinking, containing thirty essays from a major September 1998 "renaissance" conference in Johannesburg. New South African President Thabo Mbeki, the figure most associated with the notion of a new "African Renaissance," offers the prologue, a short piece whose last sentence is "Yesterday is a foreign country — tomorrow belongs to us!"⁸ But alas, the book itself is a hodgepodge, even *within* many individual essays, of Pan-Africanism, African federalism, old-guard Fanonian and even Diopian critique, *ubuntu*-style African humanism, attacks on Europe, faith in science, mistrust in science, and more. Little clear-cut direction, robust understanding, or savvy strategizing for the future can be found. All of that unsettlement, however — in the book, in *all* the books, and in the nation more generally — will make South Africa an enormously important regional and global space in the coming years, less as an available datum, as we have seen, than as a crucial project.



Notes

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1. Elleke Boehmer 1998: 51.
2. The standard account of Hughes' life is Arnold Rampersad's two-volume biography (1986, 1988).
3. Hughes would follow the prose-focused *An African Treasury* with a major poetry anthology, *Poems from Black Africa* (1963). In that same time period, Hughes also penned the first book on Africa expressly for children, *The First Book of Africa* (1960). Interestingly, as early as 1925, Hughes penned a poem on South Africa, though apparently did not touch the subject again for nearly thirty years. The poem "Johannesburg Mines" appeared in *The Messenger*, February 1925, p. 93, and is found in Hughes' *Collected Poems* (1994: 43) as follows:

Johannesburg Mines:
In the Johannesburg mines
There are 240,000
Native Africans working.
What kind of poem
Would you
Make out of that?
240,000 natives
Working in the
Johannesburg mines.

4. Puzzlingly, Hughes and Bontemps' 1970 revision of the anthology did not increase the African representation, but rather only updated the African American poets offered.
5. The strongest introductions to Abrahams, Mphahlele, Modisane and Rive are given in their own autobiographical writings: Abrahams (1954, 2000), Modisane (1963), Mphahlele (1959, 1984), and Rive (1981). Modisane, Rive, and Mphahlele were all associated with the pioneering South African magazine *Drum*, whose history is chronicled in Nicol (1991) and Stein (1999). Abrahams himself sketched Hughes' Harlem after a visit there, in the magazine *Holiday* (1960).
6. Several illuminating studies have been published on the broader relationship between South Africans and African Americans. See in particular Magubane (1987), which covers the whole continent, and Nixon (1994).
7. Erich Auerbach 1969: 11.
8. Thabo Mbeki, prologue to *African Renaissance: The New Struggle*, edited by Malegapuru William Makgoba (Sandton and Cape Town: Mafube and Tafelberg, 1999), xxi.

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