

# SIMUNYE? SEARCHING FOR NATIONHOOD IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

A Sunday in June, the winter sun timidly re-emerging from amidst the storms that welcomed me to Cape Town. I am being shown a small flat overlooking the beach and the caretaker is apologising for the inclement weather that has struck the Cape in recent days. He assures me that despite the rough seas and cold winds, "Summer is beautiful here. In December (his white cheeks suddenly becoming ruddy), the beach will be full of naked dollies. All the women from fifteen to fifty will be topless!" Though disheartened by the advertising, I quietly admire what is before me: the noise of an angry sea, the kelp-strewn sand, the abandoned melancholy of the beach in winter. Then,

peering down at the water's edge, we both see the same sight: two black men, naked from head to toe, bathing under a shower tap. The caretaker's expression changes to one of grandfatherly disappointment. "I'm not a racist (he looks at me for a brief moment as if to see whether I think that is a good thing to say), but those people never learn."

It strikes me (naive of me to not have grasped it earlier?) that the "naked dollies" my host had been touting just a minute before were all "dollies" of a certain privileged race. The naked black bodies, unselfconsciously on display at the moment, are not only of the wrong gender and awkwardly out of season, they are of the wrong race. Far from anachronistic reminders of summer fun, they are "blemishes" in this city of rarefied beauty.

I arrived in the fledgling new South Africa, slightly over two years after the Government of National Unity had come to power, wondering the obvious: just how a body politic - one body - might be forged of the many bodies fashioned and refashioned by apartheid.

## Unity Speak

Picture-perfect lips smiling national unity against the background jingle "Simunye - We are One!" This is the calling card of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) Channel One in the age of Mandela. At regular intervals, the message is repeated throughout Channel One's programming, which begins at 6:00 AM each day. The individual announcers are alternated, but always they are smartly dressed and infused with a high dose of optimism. Often they come in pairs, on occasion in sets of three. They represent, in a certain meticulous manner, distinct examples of the hues that adorn the palette of what is optimistically called the rainbow nation. Various racial combinations are accompanied by linguistic polyvocality: a black woman clicks away in Xhosa, then a white man renders a translation into Afrikaans; an unmistakable BBC English accompanies the measured facial gestures of an elegant man of Indian descent, and then, just to showcase one of the many wonders of the new South Africa, viewers can marvel at the sight of a white face announcing the day's schedule in Sotho or Zulu, Pedi or Tswana.

Tongue in cheek, my Xhosa instructor once quipped: "Just take an accelerated intensive Xhosa course and all our problems will be solved!" She was referring at the time not to the changes in SABC's programming but to a similar expression of wishful na-

tion-building in our course book (Mgudlwa, 1995). The textual dialogue merits quotation. Nomfundo, the fictional Xhosa teacher, is beaming with pride after Elna, her white, Afrikaner student, exchanges a few words in Xhosa with Don, a black petrol attendant. In a mixture of Xhosa and English, Nomfundo lauds her student:

*UNomfundo:* That's good. Loo nto ibonisa indlela entle eya kuMzantsi Afrika omtsha [This shows the way to a new South Africa]. You know what Don, ndicinga ukuba kubalulekile ukazazi iilwimi zabanye abantu, nikwazi ukuncokola nivane [I think that it is important for them to know the languages of other people, and to chat and get along with other people].

*UDon:* Intle loo nto. Ngenye imini sakuhlala ngoxolo nolonwabo kweli lizwe [That's nice. One day we will live in peace and happiness in this country]. (Mgudlwa, 1995:35)

Elna drives a BMW, that pervasive symbol of white South Africa's seemingly effortless success, while Nomfundo must resort to public transport and charitable lifts to get to and from her place of work. Nomfundo teaches at the National Language Project, the venue for the otherwise unlikely meeting of the two women.

In small numbers, people like Elna, wealthy South African whites, are signing up for crash courses in

Xhosa, Zulu, or whichever indigenous African language they wish to master.

While chatting with my own instructor about the difficulties and rewards of struggling with a beginning Xhosa course, she commented on the dilemma she faces when her services are requested by managers of major companies who wish to pick up a few *prêt-à-porter* lines of Xhosa. Although faithful to her pledge not to offer a course catering exclusively to so-called business needs, at the end of each session the would-be Xhosa speakers invariably ask her for translations of the same lines: "How do you say - 'No overtime', 'You are late', 'No salary increase'?" Pieter-Dirk Uys, alias Evita Bezuidenhout in the show "Truth Omissions", elicits boisterous but nervous laughter from the floor when he informs the mostly white audience he is *au current* as he knows how to say "I'm on your side" in each of the new South Africa's eleven official languages.

I was surprised, as I am certain many visitors from overseas must also be, by just how multilingual South Africa's urban blacks are, often speaking at least two to three African indigenous languages in addition to English and Afrikaans. Is it possible that the desire of some of those whites who want to communicate in African languages obeys more than a desire for respectful reciprocity? Rather than trying to grasp the myriad cultural differences and subtleties involved in any

serious language learning, some of these executives, it seems, aim for literal translations (and translations of a specific kind), a method that emphasizes utilitarianism over understanding, acquisition over a process of learning. In a race to catch up with their idiosyncratically imagined version of the new South Africa, they seem shaken by a fear of losing control. One way to maintain the semblance of power is to assert oneself linguistically. And what greater victory than to usurp Caliban's tongue in order to curse him?

SABC's approach to the post-apartheid linguistic economy is not callous in this way but it presents a new South Africa à la United Colours of Benetton: suspiciously amicable and homogeneous in its picture-perfect diversity.

Now that officialdom's days of capriciously renaming Africans are over (I was surprised to learn that the country's current president became known as Nelson only because his first white teacher found it too difficult to pronounce Rholihlahla), non-black television announcers had better get their clicks straight when pronouncing the names of their newly acquired compatriots. Naming, and the transformative power it confers on those who name, has been a contentious site of critical theory for some time and it certainly has a place in any discussion of political and cultural practice in present-day South Africa.

At the 1996 annual conference of the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA), Carrol Clarkson delivered a paper entitled "Naming the New South Africa" (Forthcoming). She suggested that place names matter not because they have or lack some inherent bearing on the place in question but because names are "locked into organised nominal systems which have social, historical and political bases" (Forthcoming). In other words, the difference between "Eastern Transvaal" and "Mpumalanga", "Lake Metz" and "Darlington Dam", "Bloemfontein" and "Mangaung", "Triomf" and "Sophiatown", "the Great Trek" and "the Calamitous Invasion" is not arbitrarily related to the names themselves, but to those doing the naming. In agreement with Clarkson, "to give a new name to a place is to give a new place to a name in language" (Forthcoming), and, I would add, in history. Studies like Clarkson's point the way to new investigations of the emerging linguistic power dynamics. The task of renaming faced by the ANC government after more than four decades of apartheid (let alone 300 years of white domination) must be daunting. Since 1994 regional geographical boundaries have been redrawn and new names found for the old provinces, as well as for airports and certain other public facilities. But few other features of the South African landscape have undergone a second christening. In fact, one wonders why the extent of the renaming

process has been so limited and so slow in coming.

One thing that has changed, of course, is the national anthem. In a recent memorial ceremony honouring the previously unmarked grave of composer Enoch Mankayi Sontonga in the Braamfontein Cemetery, President Mandela (1996:3) stated solemnly: "We are formalising the honour that we have kept in our hearts and, as a united nation, acknowledging an epic contribution to Africa's quest for her dignity". In 1897, Sontonga wrote the words and music of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* which, while banned in South Africa until 1990, became the national anthem in countries such as Tanzania and Zambia. It would have to wait until 1994 to become South Africa's anthem. Adopted by the ANC in 1925 as its closing anthem at meetings, the song had an important influence in the lives of many South Africans throughout the liberation struggle. President Mandela acknowledged this at the ceremony in which Sontonga's grave site was proclaimed a national monument:

We owe this to countless men, women and children across generations who carried this anthem in their heart, in the face of bullets and the hangman's noose; in moments of terrible privation and in the joy of celebration. (Naidu, 1996:4).

Present at the ceremony was Gauteng Premier Tokyo Sexwale, who renamed Braamfontein Park the Enoch Sontonga Memorial Park, and Showground Road, which runs next to the Park, became Enoch Sontonga Avenue. Premier Sexwale further emphasized that Sontonga's status had been restored "from the indignity of a kaffir to the dignity of an African" (Naidu, 1996:4).

This renaming and memorial ceremony took place on 24 September, a date that marks the two-year old Heritage Day. The Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology describes National Heritage Day as "an occasion to make our youth aware of the country's different cultural groupings. The youth should be proud of his or her heritage. The government wants to motivate the leaders of tomorrow to understand where they are coming from, where they are, and where they are heading to" (Haveman, 1996). Before I managed to dig up this official description, I asked many South Africans why that day was a holiday and what was being celebrated. No one seemed to know.

Along with the *Simunye* jingle, South Africa's national anthem, sung in four languages (Xhosa, Sotho, Afrikaans, and English), Sontonga's recently enshrined grave site, Heritage Day commemorations, and the newly unearthed archaeological finds in Thulamela (in the far north of what is still called Kruger National Park) form part

of a developing iconography of the nation. In the post-apartheid order, new images of linguistic and racial plurality are being created on a stage where tradition and post-modernity coalesce. Clearly the SABC aims to be a medium through which all these strains come together in a shapely, nationally unified framework. In so doing, after all, the SABC would only be carrying out the nation-building function television has served in other parts of the world.

If television is now a key medium through which people come to imagine themselves as members of a national community, how true does the SABC's *Simunye* rallying call ring? Is the emerging South Africa given a plausible picture on the televisual screen?

Ranging from multiracial beer advertisements to the latest MTV videos (featuring almost exclusively African-American rap and rhythm and blues artists), from black newsreaders with flawless English to polyglot soap operas like *Egoli* and *Generations*, the variety on offer has clearly expanded (Gabeba, 1996:42-43). But an open exchange of ideas are sorely missing, although imitations abound.

My first week in South Africa was spent in a Northern suburb of Johannesburg. The most frequent topic of conversation amongst people I met there seemed to be crime. In part, I imagine this is because violent crime of the sort that white South Africans

are now experiencing is a new phenomenon. "We never used to even lock our doors", I was told. Although the Johannesburg real estate market has slumped with white fright, one aspect of the construction business is booming there: the building of walls. As the nation builders hope to tear down the walls that symbolically separate people, contractors in South Africa's largest city are erecting barriers that hermetically seal the white home from the changing urban panorama outside. The friend I stayed with had lived in Lebanon during the civil war and she finds Johannesburg far more frightening. The talk about violent crime, of course, is not merely due to its being a relative novelty in the suburbs. It is not difficult to find substance behind the fear.

When crime is treated on television, one realizes just what different worlds whites and blacks (not to mention other South Africans) continue to inhabit. Invariably it will be whites behind the camera, the microphone, and the steering wheel, at once producing the visual images, recording words and living as besieged victims. Blacks are at the other end of the camera's lens: behind bars, sitting uneasily (face covered by a white mask) across a table being interrogated, or lying wounded on the ground after a police chase. *Crime Watch*, a recent series on crime sponsored by Nedcor, one of the country's largest bank holding companies, offers a prime example of the regressive ideology informing much of the crude research

being carried out in the name of "building a safer society".

By refusing to look into the economic inequalities between blacks and whites and by paying little more than lip service to crime as experienced by black people, the alarmist tone of these types of programmes invariably finds a facile solution in the call for more prisons and the reinstatement of the death penalty. Indeed even within the ANC one can now hear calls for reconsidering the ban on the death penalty. Once the legal means for dealing with "cheeky" blacks, the use of the death penalty has re-arisen but under the supposedly non-racialized justification of crime prevention. Indeed, in the new South Africa, the obsession with crime seems to have taken over where the obsession with "subversion" left off. Not coincidentally, convicted former Vlakplaas commander Eugene de Kock swiftly changed roles from "terrorist" stalker to organized crime hunter in the early 1990s when the apartheid authorities determined they were no longer at war with the ANC (Pauw, 1996).

The market economy seems to be the mechanism that now enforces the racial segregation once upheld through the nefarious combination of legislation and brute force. The white and non-white train stations of Cape Town have simply been renamed first-class and third-class, but they remain roughly white and non-white. As Njabulo Ndebele presciently observed in 1991, the idea of the new

South Africa is based upon the notion that the defeated give up little or nothing (1994:156). Conceived as a level playing field, the market now serves to consolidate for the not-so-new South Africa what was accumulated through conquest in the old South Africa.

On the other side of the spectrum from *Crime Watch*, one finds programmes like *People of the South*, a self-consciously relaxed talk-show led by Dali Tambo in which diverse segments of the South African population are invited to participate. On one occasion, Tambo seated a guest from the ANC next to an NP member of parliament. After each had been interviewed, the two, upon request from the host, stiffly embraced. In a country where President Mandela has sat down to tea with former first lady Betsie Verwoerd, why should it surprise anyone to see a black ANC woman who spent bitter years in exile embrace a self-described Afrikaanse, an NP representative who, incidentally, proclaimed that "the best thing about the ANC is that they have taught South Africans that government has to be built from the bottom up not from the top down"?

Ultimately, can the SABC be blamed for pursuing visually (through image rehabilitation) what the country politically and socially so desperately needs if it is to hold together? Why should one scorn efforts, however artificial, at creating a climate of national unity? Clearly, at least the

seeds of unity are necessary if peaceful coexistence is to be a reality. But one cannot refrain from also asking: national unity at what cost? And, who sacrifices what? As the twentieth century draws to a close, the very idea of the nation-state - undermined by such forces as a global market economy, cyberspace, and mass international migration - is a waning idea. So, is forging a nation out of the disparate shards of pain and oppression that make up South Africa a worthy cause?

At a July 1996 forum in Cape Town called "At the Fault Line: An Inter/National Reading Event" in which writers read from their work and spoke about the process of reconciliation, a young black member of the audience declared that he had no interest in being a part of the same nation to which the likes of F.W. de Klerk belong and that he would rather select his own nation of intellectuals and political activists with whom to fraternise irrespective of where on the African continent or beyond they may live.

Yet, perhaps Antjie Krog (1995:119) captures a more generalised mood when she writes: "Is it hoping for too much to expect of a few ordinary human beings that they will restore the moral fibre of a whole society? But we are a remarkable country with a remarkable people - we should at least give it a try. Indeed, already a powerful, if controversial, mechanism has been put to work to that end.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 through an act of parliament, was given the mission of investigating gross human rights violations at the same time that it was to strive to forge bridges between victims and victimisers, perpetrators of violence and oppressed subjects. While it would be simplistic to draw close parallels between the SABC's highly stylised television images of unity and the unity sought through revealing real life accounts of the excruciating physical and psychological pain experienced under apartheid, points of convergence between them exist.

Both the image rehabilitation of the SABC and the quasi-religious catharsis yearned for through re-visiting the wrongs of a not-so-distant past are processes that form part of the nation-building strategies of the new South African government. Clearly, the two overlap in the televisual space as the SABC regularly broadcasts coverage of the TRC's hearings in a variety of languages.

Since April 1996, gruelling accounts of torture, loss, and death have been aired through coverage of the Commission's hearings. SABC's cameras have been present to visually record the fabric from which the new national texture is being cut. That only brief segments of the hearings have been made available regularly to the South African public at large is an issue that merits attention. Why has the SABC chosen to provide limited time to ex-

posing the cruelties perpetrated under apartheid? Is it fear of numbing the public with harrowing memories, or fear of trivialising real pain through aseptic reporting?

Like an abscess that must be lanced and drained and then allowed to heal by granulation from the bottom up, South Africa dresses and re-dresses its past wounds. But the healing itself leaves other scars (Ramphela, 1995: 34). The *Simunye* logo does little to fulfil the promise it announces - fostering oneness - but in its failure reveals some of the skeletons lurking in the cupboard where facile dreams are made.

## A Head of Her Time

If pain looms large in South Africa's transition from apartheid to national unity, it is also embedded in the literary historiography of this country's posthumously re-adopted author Bessie Head. Inextricably bound to the study of Head's literary output is a retelling (or re-imagining?) of certain details about the author's life. Criticism on Head almost invariably includes details about her painful biography.

Even before setting out what aspect of her literary work is to be examined, critics are quick to seize on the intimate details of Head's life. For example, in the first chapter of a book entitled *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and*



*Literature in Southern Africa*, Cecil Abrahams writes:

[Bessie Head's] mother, who was white, was admitted by her family to an asylum when she was discovered to be pregnant by their black stable boy. It was in this asylum where Bessie Head was born and where her mother committed suicide when Head was barely one year old. In what I consider to be her most successful novel, *A Question of Power*, Head depicts the peculiarity of her position:

First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing-home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned. The woman on the committee said 'what can we do with this child? Its mother is white.' (Abrahams, 1990:3)

Subsequent chapters of Abrahams' edited book present close textual analyses of Head's fiction and examine such topics as narrative strategies in her work and "the politics of madness". Yet the starting point is the story of Head's birth and the "tragic" circumstances of her life. The fascination with the author's racial "hybridity" and tragic personal relations form the unstable bedrock upon which most criticism of Head is constructed. It is an unstable foundation not merely because subsequent publications have revealed that the facts

may be different in important respects (Birch, 1995; Eilersen, 1995), but because of the curious conflation of fiction and biography. Abrahams, like so many other scholars of Bessie Head, endows Head's novels with the power to speak authoritatively about the writer's life. What is more, one gets the impression that it is the biography, true or not, that drives the urge to examine Head's fiction.

In a most uncanny way, Head has suffered a fate similar to that of another figure some may claim as one of Head's ancestors: Sarah Baartman, the legendary Khoi woman who today is the subject of heated debate in South African academic circles (Abrahams, 1996). Like the mutilated remains of Baartman, still captive in a glass jar at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris despite activists' attempts to repatriate them and give them proper burial, Head's life and work (perilously represented as one and the same) seem destined to endure the confinement and scrutiny most of her critics are bent on imposing on her. Why the insistence on prying into the intimate details of Head's life? Why have even self-described post-colonial critics failed to shed colonialist desires to inspect, possess and tag, to dismember and reconstruct Head's *oeuvre* according to their particular credos and ideologies? Where are the voices to plead for her release? Why have feminists and lesbians appropriated the often homophobic writings of Head, an author whose letters and historical writings evi-

dence a certain reverence for forceful, patriarchal men?

When Bessie Head set out for Botswana in 1964, she could not possibly have imagined she would be charting a path that so many critics would follow years later - myself included. I first encountered Head's work while preparing for my Ph.D. comprehensive exams as a post-graduate student in New York in the late 1980s. At the time I was compiling a bibliography of women's writings from what was then called the Third World. *A Question of Power* (1973) was the text I chose to include in a final list of twelve primary books on which I would be examined. I selected Head's third novel because it made sense in the context of my thematic concerns regarding the relationships among nation, race, gender, class and history in literature. Along with other authors from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, Bessie Head stood in that list not as a representative of South African literature, but as a gifted writer who struggled through many of the issues writers in the post-colonial context aim to disentangle. Funny, then, that I should bring up Head now in an essay that concerns itself with the forging of national unity in South Africa. If I did not squarely fit Head in the context of a national South African literary history then, it was because I believed no such thing existed. I saw South African literature, like the people living under apartheid, as subdivided according to such categories as lan-

guage (of expression) and race (of the author) (February, 1991). The elaboration of an all-embracing national history of literature in South Africa has been postponed until the last decade of the twentieth century, although partial attempts have been undertaken. I find it sobering that today someone like Sandile Dikeni (quoted in Gevisser, 1996:16) can openly say:

I am not black...When you are Third World, you are not universal. They box you, I, Sandile, suddenly become a black South African writer. Gordimer is a writer. Brink is a writer. They do not publish in the African Writers' series. But me, Wally [Serote], you can count us, we are black writers.

So, what was I doing ten years after Head's death going to the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe? To use Dikeni's apt metaphor, I suppose I was hoping to "unbox" her. While searching through the many cardboard boxes that today contain her personal and professional papers, I was looking for traces of the autobiography that would tell her story, not the story others are telling of her. After Head published her last historical novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984), she received an invitation to write her autobiography for Heinemann. Possibly in an attempt to put an end to interrogation by her ever-hungry interpreters, Head agreed to write the autobiography hoping that after its

publication she would have to answer no more questions about herself.

Perhaps long with an eye to writing an autobiography, perhaps because she was a meticulous person, Head had for many years kept copies of almost all the letters she wrote and received, as well as notes she took on readings and drafts of her prose. Yet after her death a thorough search was carried out and no draft of the autobiography was found. Even after reading reports by several researchers attesting to the inexistence of the manuscript, what drew me to the Khama III Memorial Museum was the vain hope of tracing some part of the autobiography. I somehow anticipated finding a wilful act of self-creation, rather than the critics' representations. Yet, I found no traces of it (Head, 1995).

In my search for the evasive literary footprints of Head's life, I did, however, come to appreciate the conundrums such literary research entails. What I was doing in Serowe, while scavenging through Head's papers, was poking into the privacy of boxes she might have collected with the aim of writing her autobiography. Based primarily on the material Head intended to use had she lived long enough to get the task done herself, Gillian Stead Eilersen wrote the biography *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears* (1995). In a certain way, the book desecrates the life it pretends to enshrine - not because of its content, but on account of its method

(plundering the author's personal effects) and because it leads inexorably to the question: Why is the literary corpus Head left behind not sufficient to satisfy scholarly attention?

Had she lived to write it, Head would have called her autobiography "Living on an Horizon". When asked by her agent why not call it "Living on the Horizon", Head responded that she wished to establish an affiliation with the Hindu holy man Swami Vivekananda, who had said: "For myself I always have an horizon" (quoted in Eilersen, 1995:279). She also explained that the title was "definitive of one who lives outside all possible social contexts; free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment, but shaped by internal growth and experience" (quoted in Newmarch, 1994:439). Now that Head can no longer answer any questions, should we not be satisfied to engage with her through the gift of her fiction?

The life of the text cannot be supplanted by the life as text - even in the current fin-de-siècle mood where everything transmogrifies into "text". Had it not been for the formidable marketing savvy of exploiting the misfortunes of Head's life, one cannot refrain from pondering, would her books have survived her? Is it her life alone that sustains the critics' interest? Had she not come to symbolize the ultimate "interstitial space", the junction of body and text, of "hybridity" and "liminality", would the post-colonial intellectual set have

taken her up? Why must readers interested in her work be subjected time and again to the uncertain story of Head's origins, her madness, unhappy life, or alcoholism?

Ultimately, like the emergent South African nation, Bessie Head offers a tempting site crossed by races, by languages, and by opposing ideologies. On her body and throughout her texts, the paths of exile and home merge, the black and white worlds meet uneasily in a dubiously "coloured" consciousness, and sexist and non-sexist discourses incessantly end up at loggerheads. Who can claim Bessie Head: South Africa, which dispossessed her from birth, or Botswana, which reluctantly adopted her only after her novels had put that country on the literary map? Poverty marked Head's life, as it has the lives of so many other Southern Africans. Yet the fertile pattern of creation Head forged through her imaginative powers holds a promise of the possibilities inherent in a new South Africa.

Ironically, Head, *apatride extraordinaire*, may yet prove to be among the foremost writers for the post-apartheid era because apartheid could not contain her. Through the limited physical distance she maintained between herself and South Africa, she strove to gain control over a reality that threatened to destroy her, and she succeeded. In so doing, she secured a place in the canon of the developing national South African literary history because she wilfully

formed a sense of self and of place outside the limits of the nation. Head endured the pain of departure from a country that rejected her but now reclaims her, posthumously, as an integral part of its future.

## Black Holes

Since long before coming to South Africa, I had been an admirer of one of the country's exports: Ndebele beadwork and painting. On my way back to Cape Town from Serowe, armed with the most recent edition of the South Africa road atlas by MapStudio, I ventured into the serpentine roads Northeast of Pretoria in search of the spectacularly painted Ndebele houses I had admired in photographs. Browsing through a magazine at a stop en route to Botswana, I had read about an Ndebele coronation ceremony said to have taken place somewhere in the vicinity of a town called Dennilton. The pictures showed not only the women's elaborate costumes and decorations but also images of ornately painted village houses (Powel, 1995:8). I jotted down some names and made a note to myself to try and visit those places on the return trip.

Disregarding advice volunteered at the public library in Groblersdal by a very proper Afrikaner (she raised her eyebrows in disbelief when I told her of my intention to see traditional Ndebele homesteads and quickly recommended I head south toward a recon-

structed Ndebele village at the Botshabelo Nature Reserve), I persisted in nurturing the sentimental quest for the genuine article. But the beautifully painted Ndebele houses, the stuff of postcards and coffee table books, proved to be just that. I eventually found tiny Dennilton - not without difficulty, as it appears to have been renamed Philadelphia - but no one there seemed able to point the way to the elusive traditional villages. My road atlas came accompanied with the logo "You'd be lost without it", but I became lost because of it once I ventured away from the white villages so assiduously charted. After several hours of meandering through hundreds of kilometres of roads not marked on my atlas, I came across some brightly coloured houses. Following many stops on the road to ask people where I could find Ndebele mural art, by twists and turns I ended up catching sight of a stunning, freshly painted house which first caught my attention because of the flashy Mercedes Benz parked in front of it. As I walked into the open homestead, I found an elderly woman who was changing into a variety of colourful blankets and posing for a group of French tourists who obligingly slipped fifty-rand notes into her eager hands. Given the midday heat, the incongruous surroundings (no festivity at hand, as far as I could tell), and the fact that everyone else seemed to be going about their business as usual, it seemed odd to witness this "invention of tradition", to borrow a phrase from Eric Hobsbawn

(1992). Here was a "native" playing up to non-natives' expectations and disingenuously dishing out Ndebele culture for tourist consumption. And, yet, was this not, at some level, what I had come to witness? The scene I am describing was, for the performer, business as usual. Her business. That it should have unnerved me to see this woman dressed up in full regalia for the amusement of a few foreigners who would boast their trophy-photographs upon returning home took me by surprise. But why should she not reap as much benefit as possible from the tourists' appetite for "authenticity"? The only difference between what she was doing and what I was hoping to witness is that she, not I, was fully cognisant of the fact that she was selling a product and thus engaging me in a perfectly rational capitalist exchange. I was the voyeuse of a forged reality that would be presented to outsiders according to the terms established by those doing the showing. *Weeks later in a quarterly supplement of the Mail & Guardian on of all topics, "Reconstruction" (Lloyd 1996), I was to find an article about this very upholder of ancestral custom. Under the rubric "Keepers of the Culture", Fiona Lloyd decries the lack of role models for township women and hails the Ndebele artists whose house I visited as someone whose steps should be followed. When renowned South African painter Esther Mahlangu boards an*

international flight, people stare. They see an elderly woman in full Ndebele garb: brass rings gleaming around neck and ankles, a traditional blanket over her shoulders and exquisite beadwork about her waist. Mahlangu laughs at the reaction of fellow travellers: "I do not paint with my clothes but with my heart and my talent", she says. "But I'm proud of my cultural heritage, and I know my ancestors are happy that I travel all over the world to share our culture with others." (quoted in Lloyd, 1996:v.)

Curiously, Lloyd adds: "Mahlangu uses her art to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary life - most notably when BMW commissioned her to transform one of their cars into an Ndebele house on wheels" (1996:v). That the reporter misses the irony involved in painting a BMW with traditional Ndebele patterns is surprising. Is Lloyd suggesting township women should pick up the brush to cover the Kombis that transport them daily from their places of work to the sprawling squatter camps in bright designs so that Ndebele art can join the post-modern age of multiculturalism?

Beyond Ms. Mahlangu's entrepreneurial savvy, I was struck by the fact that the roads that would take me from Dennilton to Pretoria via Bronkhorstspuit were filled on either side with populous black towns whose names were simply missing from the

map - a fact all the more startling when considering that even the tiniest white enclaves through which I passed on my travels were dutifully marked. While I was able to see some names marked on the green motorway placards, there was no trace of these townships on the road atlas. Why not? A strange case of cartographic amnesia?

Upon my return in Cape Town I could not let the matter rest. First I phoned MapStudio, the company that produced my road atlas, and they referred me to their research unit in Johannesburg. Were they aware of the "black holes" in their maps? "Oh, yes, a legacy of apartheid", I was told. Upon asking whether updating these historically impaired maps was in the works, the courteous reply came that it was "not on the agenda for this year".

I then went to the Department of Land Affairs, located on Cape Town's (still called) Rhodes Avenue. There they corroborated MapStudio's information and referred me back to them. MapStudio ultimately suggested I look up a book published in 1992 by the Human Rights Commission, *The Two South Africas: A People's Geography* (1992). As the book's title suggests, the Human Rights Commission's contention was that geographically there is more than meets the map reader's eye in the national territory. This was true four years ago and continues to be the case to this day.

That road atlases are lagging behind schedule is perhaps understandable. Yet, at a symbolic level this enduring cartographic erasure seriously undermines efforts presently being made toward national unity - be they by the Government of National Unity, the SABC, or anyone else involved in the Herculean task of making a nation where one neither exists nor seems eager to be born. If the people who live in the uncharted cities in Mpumalanga (and the many others like them around the country) are to be members of the new social fabric, if they are to be full participants in the *Simunye* that proclaims "We are one", they must then first become an integral part of the visual map charting the new nation.

## Time

My neighbour drops in as I am trying to conclude this essay. He comes with the unlikely pretext of asking about how much rent I pay, but what he really wants to ask about is emigration. "This country hasn't got much time left, you know." I look at him in a bemused sort of way because he seems to have crawled off the pages of Vincent Crapanzano's ethnography entitled *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (1985). "Just the other day", he begins to explain, "I was held up at knife point by two blacks when I went fishing - I don't care what race they are", he half apologises for the superfluous detail that isn't at all superfluous to his story - "but luckily I

fought them off. It's a war, you know." Then the non sequitur that explains it all, "I used to walk along the rocks below the cliffs. Now there are at least a hundred people living there." "Where?" I ask. I had not noticed.

"In the caves. It's filthy, you can imagine how it smells. It isn't safe for the girls to go running along here at night any longer. When I visited my friend in Santa Monica (in California) he laughed at me when I locked the front door to his house. He doesn't even lock his car." My neighbour and his girlfriend drive twin BMWs and a jeep and they are quite concerned about their sporty chattel.

Although in the new South Africa the market enforces what thuggery secured for white people in the past, the market is not in itself an impervious force. The danger of the new South Africa to those who lived well in the old one is not as mundane as job security. The danger is the informal economy of violence, that pernicious alternative to *being one*, and the changing racial and class geography of the cities and countryside. If black squatters cannot be prevented from living cheek by jowl with white holiday-makers and urban beachboys, power, if not resources, is in the process of being reapportioned.

When I first arrived in Cape Town, I stayed for a week in a student residence hall. The student population of the hall is now fairly evenly divided

amongst the enduring apartheid categories of black, coloured, and white, and the Afrikaans name of the hall has been replaced by an African one. But when they go to eat in the cafeteria, the students separate themselves: the whites occupying the central tables, the coloureds those immediately surrounding the centre, and the blacks the fringes, near the windows and doors of the reluctant microcosm.

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