

# Discourses on Difference, Discourses on Oppression

Edited by Norman Duncan, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Murray Hofmeyr, Tamara Shefer, Felix Malunga, Mashudu Mashige. Cape Town: CASAS, 2002.

Cheryl Hendricks

The Textbook Writing Project, based at the University of Venda for Science and Technology, seeks to “evaluate the use of self-empowerment authorship collectives as a means for redressing extant “racialised” patterns of authorship in the social sciences in South Africa and...to examine the relationship between discourses of difference and oppression “(Thakhathi:x11). This book is a product of that project. It is a collection of 21 essays that are interconnected through a common concern with the politics of identity.

There have been a number of texts on identities in South Africa. The distinctive features of this text are its authorship, magnitude, breadth and the varied approaches contained within a single volume. By bringing together the scholarship of South African black academics writing on identity, the text has succeeded in breaking the dominant publishing patterns. And it has done so on an as yet unprecedented scale where at least 17 of the contributions are by blacks, both men and women. This makes nonsense of

the often-stated argument that “we could not find blacks to contribute” and indicates an emerging pattern where these academics will create their own spaces to make their voices heard. The text displays a range of ideological, theoretical and methodological approaches: Africanist, Post-modernist, Political Economy, Discourse Analysis, Textual Analysis, Life-History Method, Literature Surveys, and so forth. It also addresses identity-related issues across differing contexts, that is, in art, literature, education, religion, trade unionism, agrarian politics, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, nation-building, language, gender relations and interpersonal relations.

This diversity is simultaneously both the strength and weakness of the book. Its strength is that it captures the multiple ways and spaces in which identities are being theorised in South Africa. The Post-modernist approach often tends to dominate discourses on identity in South Africa and is also strongly represented here. But this text reveals that an African-centered view is equally abundant and is making its way into

academic publications. The weakness is that because of this diversity the flow between chapters is often disjointed. This should, however, be expected of a book with this many ideological and theoretical persuasions and areas of focus.

Kwesi Kwaa Prah has the lead chapter and, curiously too, writes the introduction though he is not part of the editorial collective. His chapter provides an overview of the development of racist thinking, debunks its myths and contends that culture is more useful a concept for understanding social relations. Prah cautions us that ethnicity can be, and has been, abused. This point is also taken up in Sandile Schalk's chapter on ethnicity. Both argue that ethnicity is a valid social identity in Africa but that it needs to be separated from political mobilisation. These kinds of arguments reinforce Lonsdale's distinction between "political tribalism" and "moral ethnicity" and for a highlighting of the positive roles that ethnicity plays within our societies.<sup>1</sup> Abrahams outlines the basic tenets of womanist theory and its relevance for the African context. She asserts that "womanism is a theory which defines race, class and gender as mutually constitutive categories of analysis ...[and] rests on womanist language ...[that] is constructed through experience and struggle" (p. 41). The chapter also defines race, racism, black, brown and African identities. Being African, she contends, should not merely be equated with citizenship but with heritage and consciousness (p. 43). Although Abrahams accepts that these identities are social constructs she continuously points to the reality of differing experiences and uses a more essentialist view of identification and activism. Abrahams, Khushi, Manoma and Nodoba are explicitly Africanist in their approaches. Khushi notes the still predominantly Eurocentric nature of the South African education system and the need to incorporate an African world-view and knowledge-based systems while

Manoma laments the waning of African Traditional Religion. She argues that there is a need to "eradicate the deep-rooted Christian arrogance that leads to ignorance of other religions and indifference to the possible contribution of their adherents to the creation of a just society" (p. 282). Nodoba reviews the language policy and argues that a linguisticism (deemed superiority of English and its associated culture) prevails in South Africa, with adverse effects on democratic participation and service delivery and calls for an aggressive intervention to make indigenous languages into scientific languages. Prah's chapter concurs with this, advocating the need for the use of African languages in education and mass media communication. The language issue will continue to be problematic in South Africa precisely because it is so closely linked to social mobility. We are therefore likely to see a continuance of rhetorical gestures of multilingualism but realities of increased biases towards monolingualism.

Del la Rey and Boonzaier, Duncan, and Ratela, through the utilisation of interviews and/or group discussions, elicit the internal/personal struggles with identification in South Africa, the ways in which racialised identities are either accepted or rejected (discourses on identities), and the tensions between differing black identities. De la Rey and Boonzaier, employing a "life-history method", show the subjective, shifting and contradictory meanings of identification amongst black women activists. A recurring point within the chapter is the feeling of marginality that Coloured women are experiencing within the post-apartheid period. The authors agree with Stevens (1998) that perceived "racial threats" in the Western Cape emanate from competition over economic, political and social resources (p. 85). Duncan's chapter, "based on a series of group discussions with 26 adults from various working class, so-called

“coloured” communities in the Cape Peninsula ...” examines the way in which participants responded to the articulation of group differences (p. 114). From these interviews he draws the conclusions “that there are “no meaningful differences” (whether racial or cultural) between the various black groups constructed by the ideology of apartheid but that they emphasise differences between whites and blacks, that there are conscious attempts to reconstruct positive self images and that while the study reflects anti-racist dispositions, it also contains various elements that feed into the ideology of racism, i.e., stereotyping, dualism, and acceptance of racialised labels. De le Ray and Boonzaier’s chapter obviously refutes Duncan’s first conclusion. Part of the reason is located in the differing period in which the interviews were conducted, i.e., Duncan’s from 1990-1992 and that of De le Ray and Boonzaier being far more recent. But, a large part of this conclusion is influenced by his own ideological position, as he boldly confesses to in a footnote. The denial of “meaningful difference” has been quite commonplace in academic interpretations of Coloured identity but neither history nor present experiences substantiate this argument and defining what is “meaningful” and what is not (which he does not do) is itself subjective.

Ratela teases out the discourses on interpersonal relations between blacks and whites, categorising them as a rejection of interracial relations, those that turn on notions of difference, those that align themselves with anti-racism, and those that gesture towards an Africanist discourse (p. 373). I found this chapter particularly insightful for it conveys discourses amongst the youth (in this case students) and indicates that after 10 years of constructing a non-racial society much has changed, but much has remained the same, particularly with regards to perceptions of race (a concept that he uses and blanks out at the

same time rather than the conventional use of inverted commas). For Ratela, whose work employs post-modernist conceptions, “there is no one kind of relationship as there is no single identity for all people, for all black people, for women, for disabled people, for masculinities” (p. 406). This argument has been largely accepted within academia, the debate is now centered around the conclusions one draws from it: Does this imply that there cannot therefore be identification and/or mobilisation on the basis of being black women, African, and so forth? The answers to this distinguish Africanists, nationalists, and post-colonialists from the post-modernists.

Dederen looks at white critics’ interpretations of black artists, in this case a carving by Albert Munyai, and perceptively shows that even though they are putatively from differing ideological perspectives, i.e., conservative, liberal and radical, they are variants of the same theme of a stereotypical other. Gqola critiques the way in which Rayda Jacob’s novel *The Middle Children* deals with black heterogeneity. She points out that the text’s approach to hybridity is conservative, refusing to identify the white-hued “middle” body with blackness and largely ends up reinforcing colonial discourses and/or stereotypes on race rather than being “self-consciously disruptive”. Mashige uses a selection of Black Consciousness poems to probe their impact on identity and difference within the cultural and literary milieu. He argues that these poets have opened up a space “for creative possibilities to facilitate the rediscovery of cultural values, the reclamation of dignity, the reshaping of black identity, and the articulation of the need for a transformed society in forging a national identity” (p. 96).

The chapters by Prins and Motsemme and Ratela focus on the testimonies of women in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Prins, using Antjie Krog’s text, highlights

the difficulties of representing traumatic testimonies and that because of the identity difference between the writer and the narrators we are left with a "fractured reconceptualised narrative marked by the gap between 'truth telling' and perception" (p. 369). Motsemme and Ratela highlight the limitations of the TRC as a nation-building exercise and how the use of familiar tropes of African women reinforced their marginalisation. They note that women were situating themselves in the everyday experiences and that their testimonies were more concerned with "immediate, intimate loss and private abuse...in ways that left the female victims bereft of something more precious than nation" (p. 319). Both Prins and Motsemme and Ratela point to the resonation of pain and the silences within these testimonies. The TRC was a mechanism to provide victims with an opportunity to express their anger and pain, but women, especially the victims of sexual abuse, registered silence. Motsemme and Ratela observantly read these silences as but another equally valid form of expression/language.

Mahosi looks at racism in the trade union movement (1941-1947), while Kiguwa and Molapo's chapters highlight persisting race-based discontentment and unaltered socio-economic and power relations in the post-apartheid era. Malunga's chapter is one of the more insightful chapters, detailing how traditional dance was used on the Messina Copper mines as a means of maintaining ethnic identity, networks, and support structures. The dominant literature on urbanisation and proletarianisation argues that it leads to a transcendence of ethnic identity. Molapo's study adds to a growing body of work that illustrates that within Africa processes of urbanisation and proletarianisation have often reinforced ethnic identities. Hofmeyer and Shefer reflect on discourses of culture and difference, the former addresses problems around self-realisation and universality,

while Shefer's study is focused on the construction of heterosex. Kirkaldy reflects on the discourse around cannibalism by missionaries in Vandaland.

One can glean from the above that this text covers an extensive range of issues. I believe that it would have been more beneficial to produce two thematically oriented volumes. The chapters are comprehensive, informative and well written. It is a text that will become standard reference material in the South African academy. A text, such as this, that purports to contribute to academic transformation has to be judged not solely on the number of contributions by blacks or the quality of their work but also on the transformative aspects of the work itself. It is in this regard that I find the work lacking. Though the focus on race is welcomed, most of the chapters are simply more of the same kinds of analysis produced by those who dominate South African academic publications. This is especially the case with the chapters analysing other texts. The text is too parochial. It, like many other South African texts, does not venture past the Limpopo (with the notable exceptions of Prah and Schalk), either by way of contributions, comparison or examples.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lonsdale, J. (1994) 'Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism' in Kaarsholm, P. and Hultin, J. (eds) *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Roskilde, Denmark: Institute for Development Studies, Roskilde University.

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### \*Correction

All the information concerning Raymond Suttner in the previous issue of *Tinabantu* was incorrect. At the time of writing he was no longer an Ambassador, nor a member of the ANC National Executive Committee, nor the South African Communist Party Central Committee. He had not been Head of the ANC Political Education Section since 1994. At the time of publication, he was and remains at this time, Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies, and the article that was printed was based on a book *Inside Apartheid's Prison* that appeared in South Africa in 2001, published by University of Natal Press. Presently he is also a Series Editor for Unisa Press, attached to the University of South Africa, History Department.

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