

Dobrota Pucherová

The Ethics of Dissident Desire in Southern African Writing

Susanne Gehrmann, Flora Veit-Wild, Tobias Wendl (Hg.)

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**The Ethics of Dissident Desire
in Southern African Writing**

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For my parents

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INTRODUCTION

Being African is not a game of pick and choose. It is something deeper, more religious and cultural than a mere utterance. It is a way of life: a ritual. Being African is an ancestral thing, without whom, one's Africanness is meaningless.

Mothobi Mutloatse¹

I don't care for purists. They are dangerous and full of lies, there is a little bit of everything in everything. That is the truth they work hard to hide. I don't care for people who want to prescribe what it means and doesn't mean to be African. [...] Why must Africans be quintessentially kind, open and generous when everyone else can be cold, calculating and greedy?

K. Sello Duiker²

Desire is a notoriously problematic concept in the postcolonial discourse. Colonial desire, as Edward Said (1978) has analyzed, has always involved the othering, exoticization and commodification of the colonized, with devastating consequences. The production of Asia, the Middle East or Africa as a feminine figure of seduction, a luscious landscape inviting ravishment and possession, is one of the most enduring practices of colonial discourse linked with sexual violence. In the history of southern Africa, race, gender and desire have been inter-related in highly problematic ways. The region's experience of settler colonialism involved not only the violent European desire to exploit and dominate the people on the basis of scientific racism and economic convenience,³ but also male anxieties to belong and become indigenous to the conquered land, which often found expression in the rape of indigenous women. The resulting mixed-raced people were however believed to be degenerate even by liberal and otherwise progressive South Africans (see Schreiner 1923) and their racial "impurity" posed a threat to the spread of white population (see Gilman 1985a: 107). Thus, according to Robert Young (1995), sexual desire for raced and gendered other(s) was central to the development of colonialism, racism, and capitalism in southern Africa, which came to define settler nationalisms in the region. Settler desire for colonized women at the same time emasculated colonized men, who responded to colonial violations by shunning cross-racial desire, solidarity and friendship, and by an emphasis on masculinity in the construction of black identity. Race, gender and desire were thus at the centre of the formation of national identities in the region, coming into being through each other.

1 Mutloatse 1979.

2 Duiker 2001: 438.

3 On this, see Dubow 1992, which argues that Afrikaner nationalism was born from scientific racism and the development of Christian nationalist thought.

In an analysis of selected South African and Zimbabwean writing between 1960-2005, this book argues that in southern African fiction and poetry there has simultaneously existed a curiosity about and an attraction to otherness as a way of escaping the constraints of exclusive nationalist discourses in the region. In a context where rationalism failed to offer ways out of colonial violence, desire for the other – associated here with the irrational and libidinal – becomes a boundary-breaking energy that can redefine both the body and the nation. Taking its philosophical direction from the ethical philosophy of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, this book redefines desire in these texts not as a violent force, but as a risk of abandoning one's own identity and an unconditional opening up to the otherness of the stranger. Such imaginary trespassing, it is argued, can lead to self-transformation through the acceptance of, rather than in opposition to, alterity. Associated with friendship and hospitality, ethical impulses that have been analyzed by Jacques Derrida as leading to a more inclusive democracy, desire analyzed in this book is an expression of a yearning for political change.

This book's comparative approach arises most immediately from its thematic focus. Through the trope of dissident desire, the creolisation and hybridity of culture and identity in southern Africa is emphasized, placing the region at a crossroads of cultures and as part of a cosmopolitan community. It is argued that ethnicities in South Africa and Zimbabwe have never existed in isolation from each other, despite apartheid and colonial imposed separations, but have always experienced what Sarah Nuttall calls "entanglements" – "a condition of being twisted together or entwined" – to produce creolised identities (Nuttall 2009: 1). Creolisation and hybridity are here understood not at a biological level, but as cultural borrowing, or what Zimitri Erasmus calls "cultural creativity under conditions of marginality" (Erasmus 2001, qtd. in Nuttall 21). This cultural borrowing happened also at a cross-national level; as will be argued, South Africa and Zimbabwe have evolved as countries through the cultural exchange over centuries of settler colonialism, workers' migrancy, slave trade with South Asia, trans-Atlantic political alliance with the African Americans, and, most recently, the diaspora of Zimbabweans in South Africa. The geographic proximity and historical similarity of South Africa and Zimbabwe – their shared experience of European settler colonialism, land dispossession and social segregation – prompted political and cultural alliances between the two countries that make it useful to analyze their cultural production in relation to, rather than in isolation from, each other.⁴ What I hope to show throughout this book is how political identities in southern Africa are formed through cross-border cultural interaction rather than within the confines of a colonial-

4 See e.g., Robert Mugabe's speech "We Need Arms" (July 1978), in which he expresses solidarity with the South African anti-apartheid resistance movement by way of acknowledging the deaths of Steven Biko and Robert Sobukwe, and the 60th birthday of Nelson Mandela, then in Robben Island prison. On cultural alliances in popular music, see Makwenda 2005.