Despite the increasingly hegemonic status of the English language, South African literary production in the first decade of the new democracy shows evidence of change. South African literature has been deeply affected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's fundamentally narrative mode: its public interest in converting traumatic memory into narrative memory. Included in contemporary debate are questions about the practice of ubuntu -- compassion -- and about the position of women in an emerging South African nation.

During the mid-1980s, South African literary and cultural critics began to call for new ways of writing to help free South Africa’s social imagination from the discourse of oppression. Njabulo Ndebele envisioned a writing that would no longer portray apartheid’s spectacular brutalities and its stage-managed oppositions, but a more imaginative means of “process and exploration” that he called “rediscovering the ordinary”. In Ndebele’s rhetoric, to rediscover the ordinary is to turn to the more intimate or hidden nature of an event or of a character’s feelings, turning away from both the spectacular and the stereotypical.

Soon after this, Albie Sachs, speaking on behalf of a new tendency in the ANC’s thinking on culture, loudly proclaimed that literature should no longer be thought of as a “weapon of struggle”. Said Sachs: “We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against. [...] But we don’t know who we ourselves are. [...] The artists, more than anyone, can help us discover ourselves.”

Such visions of the social role of art came as welcome antidotes to the surprisingly numerous critical predictions that South Africans would have nothing to write about after the end of apartheid. For both Ndebele and Sachs, apartheid and the struggle against apartheid had impoverished literature by suffocating the range of its human response. For literature to tell us what it means to be a South African, as Sachs had put it, it needed to engage with far greater complexity in representing the ambiguities and nuances of individual characters and events, and dispensing with the old categories that threatened to continue to divide South Africans into racial groups.
Literary criticism does not drive literature, of course, and if we turn to literature before South Africa’s great turn to democracy we can find all manner of examples of what Ndebele and Sachs were already asking for. It is simply not the case that the transition from apartheid to the present is marked by a “leap from the realism of political struggle to the uncertainty of literary experiment”, as one critic has put it. Such claims pay no heed to the bold experiments in form and content of our literary heritage and – perhaps more dangerously in the present context – they ignore the tedious predictability, turgid prose, and tired stereotyping of a certain amount of post-apartheid writing. These claims also pay no heed to the stealthy survival of apartheid discourse or to the continuing cultural domination of the white middle class.

Not only is the scope of this article too short, it is also far too soon to answer the question, “South Africa: Under a new dispensation?” Apartheid formally ended just over a decade ago, yet literary movements take decades to develop. They also take decades to be recognized, and to be progressively disentangled from the stranglehold of critical fashions. Even with the best will in the world, those who publish, read, and give awards to literature tend to favour what they can recognize. Even if we do spot in a particular writer a flash of something magically new, it may neither survive nor reemerge. The new becomes seen as new only when it becomes part of a discourse: a new literary language, a new cultural trend. It is thus to the future that judgements about the present must be consigned.

Nevertheless, understanding that I can offer nothing but the crudest outline and the most hesitant attempt to map out at most one of the directions that literature has been taking between 1994 and 2005, let me make a hesitant attempt to answer the title’s question.

First, some generalities about the language of literary production.

African language literature barely survived under apartheid, despite the vigorous poetry and fiction published by the country’s first black writers from the early decades of the twentieth century. Under apartheid the only viable market was the highly policed educational system, which promoted African language books only in the name of “separate development”, white supremacists’ word for multiculturalism. Whereas oral traditions have persisted – primarily but not only in rural communities – and although local radio and television stations broadcast in whatever languages are used by the local community, publishing by no means reflects the current demography, with its eleven official languages and a few more spoken by the smaller population groups. It probably never will, although some indigenous language books are entering the market and some of Zakes Mda’s plays are translated into all nine of the official African languages, as is Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom. The findings of a recent study conclude that there is “inadequate public interest in books written in indigenous languages, insufficient income from writing these books, and a lack of government support”. Public libraries do not regard such acquisition as a policy issue. This despite a clause in the South African constitution that speaks to “the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people” and resolves to “take practical and positive” countermeasures.

That Thabo Mbeki uses the English language to speak of the African Renaissance has been said to be more than merely expedient: it is seen as symptomatic of the
globalization within which an African Renaissance is being framed, with its pursuit of neoliberal economic policies and its attention to the burgeoning of an African elite. Something similar, perhaps, may be said about the continuing domination of English literature. In a country whose population may have a practical understanding of English but where only a minority know it as the mother tongue – or as well as the mother tongue – how will it be possible toforge the new and hitherto unrecognizable social and cultural formations fitting for a new democracy whose antagonist must be, surely, less the persisting discourse of apartheid than the cultural and economic imperialism of a globalized world? Under apartheid, the magazine Staffrider helped create rural writing groups and if it had continued to exist today, it would surely – as part of its programmatic invocation of marginal and subaltern voices – find a way to encourage multilingualism. But Staffrider is, in a sense, a victim of the new global dispensation, for the foreign funding it used to receive dried up once the South African revolution was internationally perceived to have been a success.

Apart from these depressing thoughts about linguistic and therefore cultural homogenization under global imperialism, it is fair to say that literary production in the first decade of the new democracy shows evidence of change, including the presence of once-marginalized or silenced voices.

If apartheid literature was consistently said to be dominated by three key figures, Nadine Gordimer (b.1923), J M Coetzee (b.1940), and Andre Brink (b.1939), the most startling change is not simply in the increase from three but also in the racial and ethnic diversity. Many of those once classified “non-white”, and many who were under political suspicion in the apartheid era, are now also accorded the status of major figures to whose work both local and international critics now enthusiastically turn. As under apartheid, the English language continues to dominate, and perhaps all the more so since some Afrikaans writers now prefer to, or have been driven to, write in English. Yet the Afrikaans language is through various means reinvigorated and distanced from its one-time status as the language of oppression. It comes even more fully into its own as a belated indigenous language now that a very slightly increasing number of black writers use it as their mother tongue. Language mixing serves as a possible metaphor for the new heterogeneities of this post-apartheid time, where writers use various languages within one text. After the relatively hesitant beginnings made in poetry by Sipho Sepamla and others in the 1980s, language is today more assertive and less well glossed.

In literary reception, too, there is change. Many journals and magazines actively seek out younger black critics, and perhaps one of the more encouraging signs of transformation is their emergence as critics of white writing as well as black. This trend can only increase. Although there are still discrepancies (according to the Bureau of Statistics), in black versus white education levels, with only just over five per cent of black South Africans in tertiary institutions as opposed to just under thirty per cent of white South Africans, the percentage of black South Africans completing secondary school has somewhat increased, and there has been a major increase in the percentage of black children in primary school. Also to the point, of course, is the radical change in the kind of schooling received, now that so-called Bantu Education is a thing of the past. This glimpse into the future may comfort us at a time when other statistics show a gloomier picture: many South Africans still lack electricity, let alone access to the electronic communication that alleviates lack of access to print culture; housing problems in cities
remain acute; violent crimes are on the rise, especially against women and children; and out of a total population of 45 million, an estimated 5 million have HIV or AIDS. All these statistics affect the politics of literary production, and thus narrow the scope of vigorous debate, albeit not to the extent it was narrowed under apartheid. A future generation of citizens educated but hopefully not cocooned in an elite will manage to clear new paths.

Let me turn more decisively to the immediate present, in so far as it is clear to me. Certainly it is the case that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) encouraged an extraordinarily vigorous debate that clearly informs today’s cultural production. While apartheid was characterized by silence and disavowal, the TRC gave space to a plethora of stories never publicly and sometimes never privately told before, and it drew together a large range of South Africans by encouraging their sometimes vociferous response. Even among its detractors, the TRC appears to be generally recognized as having “had a dramatic impact on the popular psyche” of South Africans, and certainly both the literature written during and after the TRC and the extent of public debate give evidence of the enormous “emotional, cultural, and symbolic power” of the TRC.

The TRC offers and promotes not a single narrative, however it might have striven for a single organizing principle around the slogan of “truth and reconciliation”, but multiple, conflicting narratives. Above all, South African literature has been deeply affected by the TRC’s fundamentally narrative mode: its highly public and well-publicized interest in converting traumatic memory – fragmentary, repetitive, chained to the past – into narrative memory with its continuities, its structural separation of past and present, and its creation of agency – a narrative mode continually diversifying in disagreement and contradiction even as it tries to unify. This complexity occurs on account of its definitions of truth.

The TRC developed a set of mutually constitutive truths, all of which qualified its production of factual truth. In the negotiation between what it chose to call “social or dialogue truth” and “personal or narrative truth”, the obvious dangers of a stage-managed social consensus are at least ideally kept at bay, for the actual processes of the TRC focused the Commissioners’ and the public’s attention on “the complex motives and perspectives of all those involved”. Moreover, despite the social decree implicit in the idea of “healing or restorative truth”, where – in the words of one post-apartheid literary character – the TRC was no more than a social Band-Aid, the TRC process strove to turn to the creative “context of human relationships” in order to let healing occur.

In other words, in the process of collecting stories and helping reconstruct them, the TRC gave rise not simply to new forensic facts but above all to textured facts, whereby events and actions were seen to have occurred in a context that had also been experienced by others besides oneself. The TRC made available to all South Africans not only at least some of the hidden stories of apartheid but also the means by which to produce new and fuller and more densely textured stories of their own personal pasts and the pasts of others. And it offered a new understanding of the relation between individuals in its promotion of what it called ubuntu: the compassion consequent on the understanding that “a person is a person by and through others”.

Even given the commodification and sentimentality of the term ubuntu, even given the
widespread distrust of the TRC – reconciliation was too bound up with the ANC’s negotiation with the apartheid government, amnesties were given too easily, reparations have not sufficiently come through – I believe the TRC has had massively beneficial cultural effects. It represented a radical shift in power relations. The TRC staged an intersubjective contestation that had not occurred under apartheid. It afforded to victims of apartheid a degree of power as speakers, as well as a new power as the interlocutors of white South Africans, whereby they were positioned as the ethical subjects apartheid had assumed them not to be.

This is to say, those who had been harmed by apartheid were given an ethical choice as individuals to forgive or not to forgive. South Africans became deeply involved in assessing perpetrators’ testimonies to the TRC, for the staging process gave visibility to perpetrators’ repentance as performance, and gave rise both to public debate about a strategically performed sincerity, for instance, and to literary representations of such a problematic. South Africans have also become involved in assessing the degree of mediation in the narratives told by testifiers: the mediation involved in the initial statement taking prior to the TRC hearings, the selection of witnesses for public hearings depending on the degree to which their testimonies fitted the TRC mandate of politically motivated human rights abuses, and also the mediation involved in the acts of transcription and English translation.

The TRC was clearly not an event but the representation of an event. It represented in each hearing something that had already taken place; and its narrative mode necessitated a visible degree of mediation. To an audience already well educated in political suspicion, the TRC and the representations of it in fiction and drama particularly have given occasion to vigorous debate, debates about who is being served by and what is at stake in the use of certain terms, debates about silences and elisions, about the appropriation of others’ words. Moreover, the TRC process invited black South Africans to engage in their own self-interrogation about brutal responses to apartheid. Included in contemporary debate are some sharp questions about the actual practice of ubuntu and about the position of women in an emerging South African nation.

In the final section of this article, I will use a recent novel by Njabulo Ndebele as an exemplary text. Ndebele has argued in a recent essay that the TRC brought about the “restoration of narrative”, by which he means a restoration of the historical time that was interrupted by apartheid. Black South Africans now live in their own time and inhabit their own stories rather than existing on someone else’s terms in an imposed stagnation. As he puts it in his novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, “the struggle [against apartheid] rerouted many of us away from our destinies”; “We have an acquired will to perform roles that do not accord with our being.” This is the context he provides for his fictional reconstruction of the well-known political figure Winnie Mandela. In a path-breaking fusion of biography and fiction, a fusion which we may relate to the TRC’s adjustment of factual truth through personal and dialogue truths, Ndebele portrays Winnie Mandela as a figure whose ethical make-up has been distorted by torture in an apartheid prison, and who has become a perpetrator of violence herself.

The form of the novel is its theme. Ndebele places Winnie Mandela in the context of a group of four waiting women – women who, like her, have had to wait for their husbands’ return, although they have been able to do so in private rather than under the intense
public scrutiny to which she herself was subjected. These women are transformed through their encounter with Winnie Mandela, as she is transformed by them. The author-function devolves onto these women who are first presented from the outside and then given their own narrative power, narrating their personal stories from the safety of the group but also beckoning to Winnie Mandela as the other, the monstrous woman, to enter and change their group, and be changed within it. After the four waiting women evoke her as a character in their own interconnected stories, Winnie Mandela in turn becomes the narrator of her own story and of herself as a character. The foregrounded split between her “I” and its “you” or “she” manifests as a restorative act of self-interrogation and self-reconstruction facilitated by her feeling cared for by the original four waiting women. All the while then, characters are explicitly represented as acting on and being acted upon by others, changed by one another in what the novel foregrounds as processes of mutual self-construction. Ndebele’s women gain new subjectivities through interaction with one another in female-to-female relationships, and it is on this bedrock (rather than the oppositional basis of male-female relations) that a new female identity is forged. At the same time, this new female identity is the new bedrock for a new male subjectivity. Embedded in this story, then, is the reconstruction of men and of male attitudes towards women, and it is in such a moment that I find a particularly compelling sign of the new in contemporary South African writing, or of what Ndebele in his novel calls “the beginning”.

I have often observed that white South African literature has always been far more obsessed with black South Africans than black South African literature has been with whites. Writing against the major focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but attending to one of its submerged messages about the disturbing level of violence against women from men across the political spectrum, Ndebele names not racial reconciliation but a reconciliation between women and men as “an essential ingredient in the definition of human freedom”. He does nonetheless develop a sophisticated re-appraisal of African modernity and its incorporation of European practices that it makes thoroughly its own. Ndebele also calls on women’s intimate spaces as a site not only for new forms of intimacy between women and men but a new language as well, whose source is that other meaning of “intimate” – the verb rather than the adjective: to let something be said between the lines. In these post-apartheid times, writes Ndebele in his novel, we have “opted for complexity, ambiguity, nuance, and emergent order. We [have] opted for the uncertainties of experiencing one another.” For Ndebele, in this novel the “rediscovery of the ordinary” is the rediscovery of the capacity to feel at home.

In one of the most powerful scenes of the book, one of Ndebele’s characters speaks about experiencing the country while it was still controlled by the “agents of oppression”. Pleasurable travel was an impossibility. “I remember not the pleasure of movement and anticipation; the pleasure of reflecting at the end of the journey, why the journey was undertaken. What I do remember is that the intervening physical space between A and B was something to endure because of the fear of being stopped and having my existence questioned […] I experienced the journey not as distance to be traversed but a prolonged anxiety to be endured […] The distance in my world was not filled with trees and mountains, and rivers. It was psychological time without space.”

From certain angles, South Africa cannot be said to be under a new dispensation, or not new enough in the sense that it is altogether freed from the horrors of the past.
Nonetheless, space has been liberated, and with it motion. If we listen to Ndebele, a new journey has started, and its story is about to be told.

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