POST MODERN IDENTITY: HISTORY, LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL *DIFFÉRENCE* OR: THE TRUE COLOURS OF THE RAINBOW NATION

Tom Gouws

(Department of Afrikaans, University of the North-West)

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POSTMODERNISM AND THE GLOBAL ECUMENE

T wo of the most coercive forces shaping modern life are postmodernism, and what Comaroff calls "global ecumene". For many, the two terms are barely compatible, even contradictory, especially if the commercialised side of global ecumene is traced back to Smuts's holism. Furthermore, one has much difficulty in confidently using the term postmodernism without explicitly delineating some of its contaminated and overused connotations. But both terms clearly have the aim of unifying difference, that pastiche of partitions, and both can be used as umbrella concepts.

Having said that, it would be very difficult for any critical scholar to discount the dominating paradigms which these two -isms have created, despite the fact that these are inherently meta-theories and therefore continually question themselves. Thus, all assumptions and conclusions within these paradigms should be relentlessly tested, for as we know, and as Tarnis wrote in his essay on *The postmodern mind*, within such systems of thought, "the quest for knowledge must be endlessly self-revising",³

Mike van Graan, in an open letter to the ANC's Department of Art and Culture (1993), quoted by Johan Degenaar, "Kultuur in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika," in Hans Ester & Arjan van Leuvensteijn, (reds.) *Afrikaans in een veranderende context: Taalkundige en letterkundige aspecten.* (1995), p.30.

John L. Comaroff, "Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of difference in an age of revolution," in John L. Comaroff and Paul C. Stern, (eds.), *Perspectives on nationalism and war.* (1995), p. 257.

Richard Tarnis, "The postmodern mind" in *The passion of the Western mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view,* (1993), p. 396.

Postmodernism and global *ecumene* are no longer applicable merely to highly developed intellectual communities, as Lyotard ⁴ argued in 1984. These concepts have now manifested themselves on all levels of cultural existence. We are so deeply immersed in postmodern hyperspace and soaked in commercialised holism, that it has become nothing less than "a monolithic cultural paradigm"⁵.

Despite the widely accepted notion that in this penultimate decade of the twentieth century we have unprecedented intellectual flexibility, as reflected in the widespread calls for and practice of open conversation between the different disciplines, different vocabularies and different cultural paradigms, we have been tricked into a prison house of consensus. (Which, incidentally, implies much, much more than the overused *Catch 22* of *the prison house of language*.)

Though postmodernism and holism are based upon the desire to unify conflicting views, it is also true that any open-ended, indeterminate system that is based upon the belief that "no single *a priori* thought system should govern belief or investigation" ⁷ is, in essence, completely totalitarian. It is little wonder then that critical scholars are increasingly asking questions about the state of our *beingness*, where we are, where we stand in our intellectual, cultural and even social life. All these -isms thus evolve into a certain self-consciousness about a culture's historical relativity ⁸.

Why is it then, in practice, (and is practice reality?) that two of the most colonizing, monolithic, totalitarian systems of politics and governance, apartheid and communism, almost simultaneously collapsed in the late twentieth century, at the time of the high bloom of postmodernism and global ecumene? Theory **and** practice have shattered certainty and canon. We are left in a vacuum, grappling with the indeterminate predominance of relativity.

Jameson speaks about this as the conflict between "global cognitive mapping" and the "loss of our ability to position ourselves within this space and cognitively map it". Such a view is then projected

J. Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*, (1984), p. xxiii Tarnis, "The postmodern mind", p. 409.

Ibid., p. 402.

Ibid., p. 395.

back on the emergence of a global multinational culture which is decentred and cannot be visualized, a culture in which one cannot position oneself."9

We may well ask: "if decolonization did not decompose ethnic attachments, why postmodernity has not (yet) done so?" ¹⁰ The article by Norman Etherington published in this edition of *New Contree:* "Postmodernism and South African history", emphasises the same *deja vu* experience with the impasse in contemporary cultural theory, but argues that postmodernism heightened our consciousness of *différence* and differences. Etherington contrasts postmodernism with Neo-Marxism, the previously dominant ideology, and remarks:

Neo-Marxist history was not very good at difference. Even as it proliferated classes, underclasses and fractions of classes, it remained resolutely indifferent to distinctions of race and culture. Where previous scholars had seen tribesmen, the Marxists saw peasants. Van der Merwe lost his red neck, Calvinist blinkers, and holy covenants and was reconstituted in different guises depending on class position. Zulu ethnic identity was treated as a prime example of the invention of tradition.

Marxism and apartheid, as ideologies, could not support their claim to being an inclusive otherness. Postmodernism, initially, seemed to offer a methodology that could accommodate difference, but has since proved to be under the sway of the 'melting pot' syndrome. Postmodernism, in a sense, has merely highlighted the need for a new realization of and respect for difference, not the "opacity of otherness", but rather an acknowledgement of the cultural space of identity, the right to an individual voice, the right to individuality.

It is understandable that Etherington, like so many democrats, is afraid to associate himself with any form of "cultivating difference", thus losing sight of the identitylessness of a common culture denying or disguising ethnicity and race. Etherington, and others, are fearful that in highlighting difference, they might encourage "the intellectual ghost of apartheid" to walk again, and therefore fail, to

put forward a viable alternative to the existing sterile cultural paradigm.

A dominant and all-inclusive multiculturalism is the buzz word of contemporary politics in the New South Africa. This 'mythical' concept is being propagated on all the information channels and is perhaps best described by the almost continuous jingle on SABC-TV: "Simunye — We are one." We, and for that matter the world, have been jargonized into calling this new South African nation (á la Archbishop Desmond Tutu) — "the rainbow nation". The predominance multiculturalism as an ideology has been accepted not only by politicians, but also by those very groups who existed as a result of their otherness in the past, eg. the Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns¹¹, the Afrikaner Broederbond and various Afrikaans cultural societies.¹²

Concurrently, however, many liberal thinkers are voicing their growing anxiety with the tendency to mythologize a new broad consensus culture through a false sense of nation building. In Degenaar's essay *The myth of a South African nation*¹³, for example, he argues against nationalism in all its forms. One of the arguments he puts forward, is that the concept of nation as a congruency of culture and power *ipso facto* implies cultural imperialism. He therefore pleads for the demythologizing of the myth of a South African nation.

One of the aspects that Giliomee believes should receive serious attention in the current debate is: "the issue of the right to culture and the danger of the nation-building project aimed at a single hegemonic culture". A new nation, Giliomee has argued else-

Arndt, in his capacity as chairperson of the SA Academy, in a conversation with Krüger, said the following: "Daar is roeringe, in spontane, natuurlike neiging, in die rigting van in meer omvattende kultuur", in: E. Kruger, "Onder vier oë. In gesprek met Jaap Marais", Beeld, 11 July 1987.

Hermien Dommisse in Z. Ergas, "Op soek na metafore vir Onrus", Die Suid-Afrikaan, (Oktober/November, 1992), p. 40: "My gevoel is dat ons deur 'n periode van geweldige kulturele verandering in Suid-Afrika gaan. Verandering is miskien nie 'n goeie woord nie; revolusie is miskien 'n beter woord, want ons gaan deur 'n ontwikkeling waar daar 'n nuwe kultuur gebore word."

Johan Degenaar, "The myth of a South African nation", IDASA Occasional Papers, no. 40, (1991).

Hermann Giliomee, Liberal and populist democracy in South Africa: Challenges, new threats to liberalism, (1996), p. 32.

where, is in a sense always confined, and usually language and/or descent determine the lines of demarcation. People seldom identify themselves with an universal community.¹⁵

The question Giliomee specifically poses on "Afrikaanses" is the central concern of this article. It is also a question that could be put to all the other cultural groups in the country, be it Zulu, Xhosa, Batswana, etc.: Is it possible that Afrikaans speakers of all colours can be actively part of a new subnationalism that will defend cultural interests with dedication, and at the same time be loyal to the broader South African nation?¹⁶

This question reveals the essential contradiction inherent in attempts to impose a universal culture. A mega-culture is imposed at the expense of those different cultures composing the whole. This point is made in the paper by Jabu Maphalala. Whilst trying to promote mother tongue education and the cultural space of the Zulu nation, however, Maphalala also falls under the sway of the current demand for multiculturalism and ends up arguing, in essence, *against* mother tongue education. Maphalala instead, asks for a hodgepodge (or potjiekos) of, what he calls "indigenous languages", resulting in a mixture similar to Fanakalo. Fanakalo, in my understanding, is the *lingua franca* on the mines, which only serves a communication purpose, but embodies no identity. Fanakalo is a cultureless capitalist concoction.

Many of the papers in this edition of *New Contree* grapple with this same lack of identity, but unfortunately, because of "feel-good history"¹⁷ and "feel-good ideology" we loose sight of "the complexity and nuance of discourse and identity".¹⁸ We loose sight of the true colours of the rainbow nation.

In her newspaper and radio reporting on the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog listened to "the different voices in the New South Africa" and made this important judgement:

Hermann Giliomee, "Verbeeldingsprong is nodig om 'n nuwe nasie uit te dink", *Die Burger*, 1 Oktober 1996.

Ibid.

Simon Barber, "Feel-good history", Sunday Times, 25 February 1996.

Andries du Toit, "Spectres of Apartheid" in Southern African review of books, 45, (September/October 1996).

For six months the Truth Commission has listened to the voices of victims. The first narrative, focussed and clear, cut into the country. It cut through class, language, persuasion - penetrating even the most frigid earhole of stone ... Yet something was amiss. We pricked up our ears. Waiting for the Other. The Counter. The Perpetrator. More and more we wanted the second narrative. And it had better be good. It had better be powerful. It had better display integrity. And it had better bring acute personal details, tears and bewilderment. There can be no story without the balance of the antagonist. 19

Although the voice of the Other here is specifically the voice of the perpetrator and is therefore necessary for the sake of truth, reconciliation and healing, Anjie Krog's comment clearly emphasises the necessity for the *other* narrative; not only the other account, the other story, but also the other *voice*, the other *cultural space*.

The Afrikaner nation has emerged from this commission as the sole guilty party and has thus become the scapegoat of Apartheid. Ironically enough, the Afrikaner found himself in this predicament because he allowed ideology and politics to take his cultural identity hostage. The Afrikaner, just as much as the other cultures in this country, is in need of cultural healing. In my understanding, democracy promotes just that: one man, one voice. Rod Usher phrases it in another way: "whether on hearing nationalist rhetoric, a citizen feels free - or safe - to reply". In a sense it is this dimension of heteroglossia - the promotion of the individual voice that we envisaged from the outset, as being our contribution to the New Contree and to the new dispensation in this country. We are, as Bakhtin has said, the voices that inhabit us.

THE IMPASSE IN CURRENT THEORETICAL THINKING

An aspect that has a material bearing on the *impasse* in current theoretical thinking is theory for the sake of theory. Comaroff refers to "the dangers of theoreticism and abstraction".²¹ A current debate on H. SAFRICA on the internet also has to do with this specific concern - Prof. Albert Grundlingh asked the question

¹⁹ Antjie Krog, "Truth trickle becomes a flood", Mail & Guardian, 1-7 November 1996.

Rod Usher, "The limpet mine of nationalism" in *Time*, 30 September 1996, p. 80.
 Comaroff, "Ethnicity, nationalism", p. 247.

whether history as a discipline played a significant role in the shaping of the New South Africa. There were numerous replies, but that from Melanie Lazarow (University of Melbourne) sums up the general feeling:

History cannot change anything. History is a method of looking at the world which, in essence, examines how things were and how things change to be what they are now... Historians themselves can never change society, but critical and helpful ways of looking at a society both past and present can give insights to scholars and others who want to help change on its way.²²

If it is true that history as a discipline is not contributing to 'the shaping of the world', that we merely arrive at insights to excite the academic elite in their ivory towers, how can we afford this luxury? Or do I approach this issue from the wrong angle; am I asking totally irrelevant questions?

Perhaps. I have always believed Foucault who argued that the historian's task is to re-read the discursive practices which make them meaningful and which change radically from one period to another. But is this hindsight relevant today if history does not have a utility value? Is theory not a servant to the master of immediate reality?

I can certainly support the approach of Neil Parsons in the introduction to his article (published in this edition of *New Contree*). Parsons argues that much historical work is speculative and builds upon what I call *the narrative possibility* or the *open text approach*, and what Parsons calls the investigative 'what if'.

This approach underwrites the postmodern emphasis on meta-fiction and endless play. It is fun, but gives rise to immense fragmentation. I tend to agree with Jameson that history's "explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole". 23 Is postmodernism as a theoretical construct then, merely the result of a social mode of thinking, the inevitable outcome of a relativist paradigm? This is what Derrida argued in his influential essay

Melanie Lazarow, UniLib@muwaye.unimelb.edu.au, 20 November 1996.

F. Jameson, "Postmodernism and consumer society", in H. Vorster, (ed.) The antiaesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture, (1982), p. 114.

'Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences': "When the center disappears so does the self: A decentred universe means a decentered self, a self whose integrity is a myth since its definition depends upon ever-changing factors in its environment"²⁴

In his *The end of history and the last man* Fukuyama broadly argued that there were two forces involved in the historical process.²⁵ The first force he called rational desire, through which humans sought to satisfy their needs by the accumulation of material things. The second force is, to use a phrase by Hegel, the "struggle for recognition". That is, the desire of all human beings to have their essence as free, moral beings recognised by others, to have a voice and to voice it, and to have a cultural space, and to defend it.

In his latest book, entitled *Trust*, Fukuyama returns to the basic dichotomy he outlined in his earlier book. He clearly shows that even the desire for material possessions is intricately linked with the second force of cultural identity. "If we understand, then, that economic life is pursued not simply for the sake of accumulating the greatest number of material goods but also for the sake of recognition, then the critical independence of capitalism and liberal democracy becomes clearer." ²⁶ Economic life, as Adam Smith²⁷ has put it, is embedded in social life, and cannot be understood apart from the community's shared customs, morals and habits - it cannot be divorced from culture.

Fukuyama's thought links up with that paradigm that Derrida claimed was the ruling global paradigm at present. This paradigm is based upon a decentered self, a self whose very integrity is a myth since its definition depends upon ever-changing factors in its environment.

Fukuyama's argumentation clearly posits the opposite. And more than that: Fukuyama moves towards a paradigm where *trust* is restored to a community, because the individual has been given

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, in R. Macksey & E. Donato (eds.), *The structuralist controversy. The languages of criticism and the sciences of man,* (1977), p. 257.

²⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*, (1992).

²⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*, (1995), p. 359.

²⁷ Jerry Z. Muller, Adam Smith and his time and ours, (1992).

back his voice and his cultural space, his **respect**, as it were. This cultural approach will inevitably lead to a new vision of governance, ideology and politics, of power and practice.

Comaroff²⁸, like myself, being concerned with the materialities of power and practice - and especially the practical power some are granted to silence others - feels very attracted to this vision because it makes the practice of theory a realistic endeavour, and not merely a theoretical abstraction.

This vision moves towards a critical new paradigm that has the power to change the world. It also has implications far beyond mere academic utility. Fukuyama puts it as follows: "A thriving civil society depends on a people's habits, customs, and ethics - attributes that can be shaped only indirectly through conscious political action and must otherwise be nourished through an increased awareness and respect for culture."²⁹

IMPLICATIONS OF THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

Allow me to reflect for a moment on the implications of the postmodern condition. I will use a quote from Wilde, in his book: Horizons of assent: modernism, postmodernism and the ironic imagination:

"Chary of comprehensive solutions, doubtful of the self's integrity, it confronts a world more chaotic ... than imagined by its predecessors and ... interrogating both distance and depth, opens itself to the randomness and contingency of unmediated experience." ³⁰

The crisis of Western civilization is depicted as a complete decline of human pronality and culture, as the rise of the mass person.³¹ In the light of this attitude, it is clear why the two coercive forces, postmodernism and global ecumene, shape all aspects of modern life today. The subject - the individual, is dead. It is the "the end of individualism as such".³² As long as the rights, the voices and

²⁸ Comaroff, "Ethnicity, nationalism", p. 247.

²⁹ Fukuyama, *Trust*, p. 5.

³⁰ A. Wilde, Horizons of assent: Modernism, postmodernism and the ironic imagination, (1981), p. 129.

Hendrik Dooyeweerd, In the twilight of Western thought: Studies in the pretended autonomy of philosophical thought, (1975), p. 175.

Jameson, "Postmodernism", p. 114.

cultural space of individuals are not recognised and restored, we will, both in theory and practice, be subject to the predominating idea that we are prone to continuous *différence*. This, fortunately, is not true.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Human experience is linguistically prestructured, Tarnas argues. Following many critical thinkers of our age, Tarnas shows that language shapes the perception of reality as much as reality shapes language. To illustrate the argument presented thus far, the role and status of Afrikaans in the New South Africa has been selected as the testing ground for the politics of inclusive difference in South Africa, that contestation for a cultural space for all cultural voices. And perhaps this scenario should motivate all cultures in South Africa towards what Van Graan said in the intro to this article: "The space to create can never be assumed; it must continually be fought for." Following the Latin stem of the word *culture*, it means to actively *till* and *cultivate* (own) ground, even *exploit* (own) ground, even *defend* and *protect* (own) ground. Your own space must be fought for.

Afrikaans, ultimately, is an obstacle to the ANC version of nation-building. To break down deep racial and ethnic divisions, the ANC wants to elevate English to the national medium of communication. In this way a culturally homogeneous nation will be built in which, as President Mandela on one occasion remarked, individuals will no longer be Xhosa, Coloureds, Zulus or Afrikaners, but only South Africans."³³

It is appropriate then, to take Afrikaans because it is a culture, or what Giliomee calls "language as the model of culture"³⁴ as the point of argument. Language plays a formative role in the lives of a community and thus acts as a marker in defining the identity of that community.³⁵ In a sense all culture is 'political'; that is to say, has to do with the ways in which people live and with the structures of power which they impose on themselves."³⁶ In this light it is interesting to hear what Ken Owen observed at a meeting of a group of

Degenaar, "Kultuur", pp.17-18.

Hermann Giliomee, "SA can founder over culture", The Star, 9 April 1996.

³⁴ Giliomee, Liberal and populist democracy, p. 91.

D. Punter, "Introduction: Culture and change", in D. Punter (ed.), Introduction to contemporary cultural studies, (1986), p. 9.

enlightened Afrikaners and liberals who wanted to form an umbrella organisation to advance and protect the culture of Afrikaansspeaking people. He indicated that most of the people who attended had played an active role in fighting against the previous regime. They had done much in their various fields to refute apartheid and pave the way for De Klerk's noble deed of capitulation. "Maar nou is hulle vasgevang in die somberheid, en die somberheid was gefokus - of het voorgegee om te fokus - op die taal."³⁷

This sombreness, I presume, is because of the growing impression that they have lost cultural ground and stand a great chance of losing their language and thus their cultural identity. What is important here is that these people were liberals, free thinkers and critical analysts, **not** people intent upon perpetuating the old apartheid regime, as premier Mattews Phosa claimed of Giliomee whom he saw as standing "four feet in the trenches of apartheid".³⁸

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: THE CREATION OF CULTURAL SPACE

Identity can best be described as being the product of conflicting cultural forces, and must be viewed as being relational, composed of systems of difference. It follows that identity will be marked by conflict, and be plural, diverse and volatile. One could argue that now is absolutely the right time for a more credible notion of identity, one that considers the systems by which relations of difference work, including those means by which differences are composed into unities, however conditional these unities may sometimes be."³⁹

An apposite analogy, is Laurens van der Post's argument about the people of the Great Trek and their longing for a space of their own: "it didn't express a desire for conquest, but a desire to find a new world in Africa, a physical new world where they could freely be themselves" People in the New South Africa are seeking, consciously or unconsciously, the faint borderlines of their lost

³⁷ Ken Owen, "Afrikaner-angst: Die kinders van 'n oop grens voel immer onveilig." Beeld, 6 Desember 1996.

Mungo Soggot, "Phosa slams Giliomee in apartheid battle", Mail & Guardian, 1-7 November 1996.

Patrick Joyce, "The end of social history?", Social History, 20, 1, (1995), p. 82.

Laurens van der Post, Foreword in G. Saayman, (ed.), South Africa in search of a soul: Jungian perspectives on the wilderness within, (1990), p. xii.

identity. Because so many do not know how to go about determining and asserting their identity, they show their true colours.

In his distinction between what he terms "pluralists" and "corporatives", Giliomee points out that because of ideology, economics and for other reasons, corporatives fight for a "global consensus" in order to serve the new group. He says adamantly, they do not know how rightwing they really are. In Giliomee's definition, a Marxist⁴¹like Neville Alexander, who in this edition writes against cultural difference, is ideologically no different from the radical freedom fighter who claims all. Interesting then how an advocate of a Volksstaat for Afrikaners, Carl Boshoff (IV), (specifying his genealogy aptly!), implicitly says that he and Giliomee feel the same heart beating, but Giliomee's approach is granting legitimacy to the ideological position of advocates of a "global consensus". Boshoff tries to argue beyond the dichotomy of *self* and *the other* towards what he calls "a third point". The location of this "third point" lies in cultural identity.

BALANCING VALID DEMANDS AND THE ROLE OF HISTORY

Where does this leave us? Laurens van der Post spells out our predicament:" One of the most difficult points in history is when a culture ... has to balance the valid demands, the claims of the future; 'Look, we accept you, but *stadig oor die klippe*.' This balance is the most difficult one of all to strike; the moment the people in power densy any say to the future, they've denied history."⁴²

This might be the inevitable paradigm shift for historians. Du Toit makes this important remark: "The post-structuralist historian, too, can no longer play the role of 'omniscient observer of history'. Every social account must needs be a *situated* one - still rigorous and disciplined, but nonetheless informed by its own, very particular, discursive horizon." He then points out that both books he was reviewing by O'Meara and Aletta J. Norval's *Deconstructing apart-*

Van der Post, *Jungian perspectives*, p. xviii.
 Du Toit, "Spectres of apartheid", p.6.

⁴¹ Ken Owen (*ibid*.) questioningly calls him "miskien die wêreld se enigste oorblywende ontwyfelbare kommunis?", which reminds of the words of Fredric Jameson: "I have frequently had the feeling that I am one of the few Marxists left," in Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, (eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. (1988), p. 347

heid discourse, show a reluctance to mark the space and perspective they speak from. Fukuyama⁴⁴ spells it out clearly:

But in our age, there can be substantial pressures for cultural differentiation even as the world homogenizes in other respects ... If many of the most important remaining social problems are essentially cultural in nature and if the chief differences among societies are not political, ideological, or even institutional but rather cultural, it stands to reason that societies will hang on to these areas of cultural distinctiveness and that the latter will become more salient and important in the years to come.

I want to bring the argument to a close by quoting Jung in terms of the role and identity of the historian:

"When we look at human history, we see only what happens on the surface, and even this is distorted in the faded mirror of tradition. But what has really been happening eludes the inquiring eye of the historian, for the true historical event lies deeply buried, experienced by all and observed by none. It is the most private and most subjective of psychic experiences. Wars, dynasties, social upheavals, conflicts and religions are but the superficial symptoms of a secret psychic attitude unknown even to the individual himself, and transmitted by no historian."

This secret force is the dissident voice of identity, the voice that fights to attain a cultural space of its own, a space to create and demarcate the vague borderlines of *otherness* and *self*, from where a discourse of identity can resound, a voice of one's own, a room with a view

Fukuyama, *Trust*, pp. 345-346.

⁴⁵ Carl G. Jung, Civilisation in transition. (1934), pp. 148-149.