



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

**Kunapipi**

---

Volume 28 | Issue 1

Article 14

---

2006

# Re-Writing Modernity

Margaret Lenta

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

---

## Recommended Citation

Lenta, Margaret, Re-Writing Modernity, *Kunapipi*, 28(1), 2006.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol28/iss1/14>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:  
[research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Re-Writing Modernity

### **Abstract**

The spread of modernity — that is to say, of the ideas and practices which evolved in Europe from the mid-seventeenth century onwards — has, paradoxically, been both advanced and retarded within the colonising process as it has taken place in most of the countries which have been studied within the discipline of postcoloniality. In the course of the establishment of a state, the colonist has been compelled to allow to the indigene a degree of education and limited exposure to the technology which has been imported from Europe or the United States. Typically, however, and for reasons which will be made clearer in this essay, in the context of South Africa, the colonist has wished to limit or altogether refuse to the indigenous peoples the body of ideas which he brought with him, or later imported, for the most part associated with the Enlightenment. To a lesser extent he has wished to limit the spread of technology into indigenous societies. This has been partly for simple economic reasons: the indigene, to the extent that his or her services are required in the modern sector, must feel the need to offer them as a temporary labourer in the modern sector. No viable modern society, in fact, must develop separately from that of the colonist. A second, and no doubt equally cogent, reason why modernity has been refused or grudgingly allowed to the indigene has been that literacy, the cornerstone of entry into the modern world (as is amply demonstrated in *Rewriting Modernity*), has the potential to offer access to the body of ideas which Attwell enumerates:

MARGARET LENTA

## Re-Writing Modernity

Review of David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*, U of KwaZulu-Natal P, Pietermaritzburg, 2005.

The spread of modernity — that is to say, of the ideas and practices which evolved in Europe from the mid-seventeenth century onwards — has, paradoxically, been both advanced and retarded within the colonising process as it has taken place in most of the countries which have been studied within the discipline of postcoloniality. In the course of the establishment of a state, the colonist has been compelled to allow to the indigene a degree of education and limited exposure to the technology which has been imported from Europe or the United States. Typically, however, and for reasons which will be made clearer in this essay, in the context of South Africa, the colonist has wished to limit or altogether refuse to the indigenous peoples the body of ideas which he brought with him, or later imported, for the most part associated with the Enlightenment. To a lesser extent he has wished to limit the spread of technology into indigenous societies. This has been partly for simple economic reasons: the indigene, to the extent that his or her services are required in the modern sector, must feel the need to offer them as a temporary labourer in the modern sector. No viable modern society, in fact, must develop separately from that of the colonist. A second, and no doubt equally cogent, reason why modernity has been refused or grudgingly allowed to the indigene has been that literacy, the cornerstone of entry into the modern world (as is amply demonstrated in *Rewriting Modernity*), has the potential to offer access to the body of ideas which Attwell enumerates:

[modernity] refers not only to technology and the emergence of an administered and industrialized society, but also to that fluid and powerful system of ideas that we inherit from the bourgeois revolutions of Europe in the late eighteenth century — ideas such as personhood, rights and citizenship. (4)

The last phrase in this definition helps us to understand why colonisers strove at times to emphasise how unsuited the indigene was to be allowed participation in the modern world: that entry would inevitably lead to demands for a full, and — given the numbers of blacks in South Africa — a frighteningly influential share in the polity. At the same time, the definition suggests the changes in world view that are experienced by the pre-modern subject who moves into the modern.

The term ‘pre-modern’ may require definition: Attwell is using it to refer to societies that are illiterate and which have no, or almost no, access to technology other than that of the simplest kind. It is of course difficult, if not impossible, for

a pre-modern society to coexist with a modern society: the advantages of modern medicines will become apparent and be sought by pre-modern peoples, as will the devices and conveniences which such people have encountered in visits, or temporary residence in the modern sector of their countries. Access to a high degree of literacy, especially in the language or languages in which modern ideas are transmitted, is usually the hardest-fought issue in the passage of modernity from colonist to colonised, and so it has been in the South Africa of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into which Attwell offers us windows.

Attwell begins his project with a claim that South African modernities are entitled to special attention because of the nature of South Africa's colonial experience, which was long in duration and involved two major waves of colonisation, Dutch and English, as well as other minor but important waves of immigrants. The decolonising process was complex: in 1910 the Act of Union officially brought to an end the power of the British parliament (though not of the Crown) in South Africa and, as Attwell says, 'brought about a coalition of Boer and Briton in a white colonial state' (2). In 1960, in a referendum in which only whites could vote, it was decided that the country should become a republic and in 1961 it left the Commonwealth. Throughout the twentieth century, until 1994, although the government and the enormous majority of the electorate were white, the majority of the inhabitants were, as they are now, black. The segregationist policies applied throughout the history of the country had the purpose and effect of maintaining the power of the white minority. The denial of the franchise to almost all black people continued throughout the twentieth century, and segregation was intensified from 1948 under the Nationalist government, until the collapse of the regime in 1990 and the first democratic elections in 1994.

Attwell points out that the 'aggressive modernisation' (2) of South Africa began early: by the 1880s the mining industry had begun to mechanise, and the gold and diamonds which were to support the economy for the next century were extracted by means which involved the importation of modernity. It was at the same time policy to refuse modern conditions of life to indigenous South Africans and people of neighbouring states — Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana,<sup>1</sup> and Mozambique — who were required to migrate temporarily and labour for low wages in the mines, before returning to a pre-modern way of life.

Attwell is aware that apartheid, the process of separation and policed inequality between racial groups, attempted to confine blacks to the pre-modern even more strictly than had been the case in the past. Prior to 1948 it had been understood, at least by the more liberal section of the white population, that black people might in some future period qualify for full citizenship in a modern South Africa. The proponents of apartheid denied that an indigenous population could ever be included in an imported modernity. Attwell writes nevertheless of a process, already underway prior to apartheid, of 'social confluence' (3) in which industrialisation, with its accompaniment, urbanisation, was slowly breaking

down the differences between black and white lifestyles. It was this process that apartheid sought to reverse.

The point from which Attwell looks back is that of the post-apartheid era, and he replies to objectors who might claim that too little has changed in this era that 'the basic script ... has fundamentally changed' (6), a claim which cannot be denied. He claims that the African National Congress (ANC) 'was always in possession of a code of modernity that would eventually be triumphant. It always held the right cards' (3). At this point the South African reader tends to reflect on the pleasures of hindsight and to fear that too many of the shaping factors of black modernity in this country will be obscured. The story that Attwell tells us is as much conditioned by the will of white colonisers to refuse entry into modernity to indigenous peoples as it is by the will of indigenes to embrace it. Knowledge that the determination to exclude black writers from modernity would culminate in a master plan of complete and permanent exclusion, which will endure for forty years, must influence our understanding of their achievements.

The concept of 'transculturation' — a term coined by Fernando Ortiz, in the 1940s, though translated much later into English to describe the process of cultural exchange that necessarily takes place between colonists and colonised within a colonial or postcolonial state — is crucial in this work. Attwell claims that transculturation has occurred in South Africa from the beginning of the colonising process. He concedes that Ortiz, writing about Cuba, was dealing with a population from which the purely indigenous culture had almost disappeared, whereas in South Africa this is far from being the case; but the term is essential, because the exchange which it implies between cultural groups need not be equal, and includes the possibility that the exchanges that occur may be violent.

For most foreign readers of South African literature the names of Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee overshadow all others, especially those of black writers, who have tended to be preoccupied with the struggle to gain the access which was denied them. As Attwell says, theirs has been 'a literature *in extremis*' (13). Although the black writers on whom he focuses in his first five chapters have encountered barriers between them and entry into the modern world, they have been equally preoccupied with the production of what Attwell calls, after Charles Taylor, 'alternative modernities' (22); that is to say, the fusion, necessarily selective, of their African heritage with the influences that were reaching them from Europe.

The first chapter, on Tiyo Soga, gives an account of the writings of a mid-nineteenth century Xhosa Protestant clergyman who, in the course of his short life (he died of tuberculosis on a remote mission station at the age of forty-two in 1872), translated the first part of *Pilgrim's Progress* into Xhosa. Soga was educated partly at Lovedale, the famous missionary settlement and school in the Eastern Cape, and partly in Scotland, where he was ordained and married a Scotswoman. He returned with his wife to work as the 'first black missionary' (29) in the Eastern

Cape and on the voyage out began the private journal that he kept from 1857 to 1870. A younger, white clergyman, John Chalmers (who, as his biographer, would take liberties with the story of Soga's life), argued in the Lovedale newspaper, *Indaba*, that the Kaffir<sup>2</sup> race was doomed to extinction because of innate moral and intellectual weaknesses. The effect of this attack was to provoke Soga to write a considered reply consisting of a survey of the history of African and post-African peoples, and an assertion that the black people of southern Africa would survive and uplift themselves, as had black people elsewhere — that, in Attwell's language, they would make the transition into modernity. Chalmers, however, seems to have been a convert to the popular evolutionary thinking of the later nineteenth century, a problematic position for a man committed to missionary activity amongst black people. Attwell's description of Soga's lonely grave with its obliterated inscription, as of the distorted version of his life which descended to posterity through Chalmers's biography, suggests that neither the Xhosa nor whites were ready to value this 'man of two worlds' (46).

The second chapter begins with a hyperbolic claim by Rudyard Kipling in 1904 that South Africa will soon be prosperous: '[a]ll the poor will become rich, and for every poor man planted in South Africa, there will be reaped a crop of millionaires' (51). John L. Dube, founder-editor of the Zulu newspaper, *Ilanga*, was angered by this claim, because it implied inaccurate assumptions about the distribution of wealth and ignorance of the country's economic problems. It seems to me that neither Dube nor Attwell places enough emphasis on the word 'planted'. Kipling is thinking only of the prospects of colonists, and though he is wrong about them too, he is unaware of the important group to which Dube himself belongs — the *amakholwa*, or Christianised blacks, whose entry into modernity was resented by many whites. Attwell discusses the doubts and ambivalences of the *kholwa* group about entry into modernity, since it seems to involve the abandonment of so much of the past, and the hybrid nature of this modernity as it is manifest in the texts that they produced. A famous example cited here is Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* in which the paradisaical picture of pre-colonial (and pre-*mfecane*) life, and the depiction of traditional law and justice are set in a narrative strongly influenced by Shakespeare.

The concerns of two eminent black authors, H.I.E. Dhlomo and B.W. Vilikazi, as they are discussed in chapter three, exemplify the debate about African written literature in English and indigenous languages and the degree to which European literature can be allowed to influence the indigenous. Vilikazi experiments with rhyme; Dhlomo thinks rhythm more suited to poetry in Zulu. The duration and intensity of the debate serves as evidence of educated middle-class Africans' concern with the kind of modernity which that they will evolve and its literary modes. Both men felt the inadequacy of contemporary, 'ethnographic' and condescending criticism of black literature (82) and knew that traditional forms must expand and alter if they were to survive. Eventually Dhlomo accepted that

the need to address a wide audience could best be served by the use of English. Vilakazi did not abandon Zulu, but felt that its evocative capacities could be extended and improved by contact with the European literary world, which would allow black writers to adapt and modernise tradition. As Attwell points out, the debate was made more poignant by the fact that the period (the 1930s) was that of increasing legislated segregation, designed to build insurmountable barriers between black tradition and 'white' modernity.

Es'kia Mphahlele's long career as an author, thinker and teacher gives Attwell the means of considering a modernity evolved in contact with the cultures of late twentieth-century Africa and the African-American diaspora. Attwell says earlier that he does not intend to focus at any stage on the *Drum* group of writers, which has been extensively discussed elsewhere, but they are present in this chapter as the influence which allowed Mphahlele to understand that his form of Africanness was urban and modern, that he was not interested in the narrowly ethnic and was 'opposed to medieval clannishness' (126). Driven out of South Africa by the apartheid government, which could not tolerate the idea of an intellectual and oppositional African, he was eager for the contact with other African and post-African peoples, but did not simply adopt any of the ideologies which he encountered in exile. Attwell's account of Mphahlele's growing sense of his difference from Nigerians and Kenyans and later from black Americans is a fine description of the forces which coalesced to form his own Africanness. This understanding of himself brought him to the great decision and the painful compromises which he made when he returned from exile to South Africa in 1977.

Those compromises are over, but the sense that the identity of a black South African is distinct, that it combines the cultural influences of the African past with those of a prolonged and interactive encounter with the forces of modernity, has been with him for many decades. What is moving in this chapter is that Mphahlele's intellectual journey can now be seen as the original and painful precursor of a process that is underway amongst the leaders of this country: the gradual understanding of the degrees of affinity with and differences from the other nations of Africa. This necessarily involves a definition, unstable though it must be, of what it means to be a South African.

Attwell turns from Mphahlele's journey of discovery to another part of the same time period, in South Africa, where the group later to be called the Soweto poets moved in their poetry from the lyric and personalised form that they had derived from the literary influences of their Europeanised education to an 'epic' strain that was more in keeping with the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s and early 1980s. Attwell summarises the lyric's link to the modern, calling it 'a vehicle for expressing selfhood and autonomy, key features of modern, post-enlightenment thought' (152). In the 1970s and later — the Soweto Uprising and its aftermath, the violent struggle of the 1980s — the purely personal form of expression moved into 'the historical and national'. Mongane Serote, whose

poetry is the main focus here, began from 1975 when he was engaged in the writing of *Behold Mama, Flowers*, to use what Attwell calls the 'heroic and representative subject of epic' (156). His novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), in which the protagonist, or rather the hero, may be said to have been the ANC, showed a variant on the same tendency: persons are weak, or at least vulnerable; the 'Movement' is strong. What Attwell calls '[t]he mixed success' (163) of Serote's later work raises the interesting question of whether great or even good poetry can be written by people deeply involved in revolution. The stirring but ephemeral performances of the oral poets Mbuli and Madingoane may well be the form of expression suited to such circumstances.

In his conclusion Attwell asks whether South African writing, extricating itself from its obligations of solidarity with the Movement (or with any movement) has achieved its own modernity, as distinct from the modernities of Europe and America. The figures on which he focuses are Njabulo S. Ndebele and Zakes Mda: it is a pity that this work was completed too early to allow for consideration of Ndebele's latest work, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), since his volume of short stories, *Fools and Other Stories* (1983) was written under apartheid when there seemed little reason to believe that literature would in the foreseeable future be freer of constraints. Ndebele's critical work, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991), makes the suggestion that the work of black writers is impoverished by the obligation that they feel to what he calls 'the spectacular'; that is to say, the extreme and the horrifying, which was becoming a kind of orthodoxy of subject matter.

Mda, whose novels have appeared in the 1990s and the recent years of this century, has asked in his most remarkable work, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), what the modernity would be that would allow Xhosa people to retain connection with their past to the extent of resolving the painful conflicts that occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. Both he and Ndebele have been accused of a humanism, which, it is alleged, leads to misconstruction of present-day people and conditions. Attwell leaves the verdict on the best of post-apartheid writing in doubt. The 'necessary reinvention' of South African writing which follows the collapse of the old regime, and the obsolescence of older modes of writing, at least as regards the interests of the present, may or may not, he says, lead us towards 'the enactment of human rights in practice' (204).

Useful and indeed inspiring though the work undoubtedly is, it suffers from an omission that has been too general in the revisionist histories of the South African post-apartheid period. Attwell quotes Rosemary Jolly as complaining that *Rewriting Modernity* deals with 'the boys' game', but claims in his own defence that 'the project of defining modernity may well be inherently masculine' (23). Perhaps this is true in the early stages of the movement of black people into print culture, though it is not 'inherently' the case but the result of social conditions and beliefs. His claim that his 'readings of the texts are reasonably gender sensitive'

(23) may be allowed: he recognises, for example, the masculinist bias of Black Consciousness evident in Serote's writing. He claims that 'the relationships between *gender*, race and modernity require a different and distinctive kind of treatment' (23), and instances *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region* (2003), where women's emergence into print culture is documented.

The truth is that it is because women have either been excluded from modernity or their participation has been effaced that the project of defining modernity remains 'masculine' for much of the period of which Attwell writes. Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, the Xhosa woman poet who published a considerable body of poetry in the Johannesburg newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* between 1920 and 1929, has disappeared so completely from public knowledge that nothing of her life is known. Noni Jabavu, whose book *The Ochre People* (1963) amounts to a fictionalised survey of what it was and what it could be to be Xhosa in the twentieth century, and focuses strongly on the tensions created by the move into modernity, goes unmentioned. The most important omission however from *Rewriting Modernity* is that of the black women of the seventies and eighties, of whom the first was Miriam Tlali, who published in 1975 the fictionalised memoir *Muriel at Metropolitan*, and whose complaint it was that since she was a black woman, writing (and still more, publication) was made very difficult for her.<sup>3</sup> This, as Attwell says, was the period of Black Consciousness, when the obligation of solidarity with the freedom struggle was felt strongly, and the figure of the freedom fighter was unambiguously male. Ellen Kuzwayo, in *Call Me Woman* (1985), and the other black women autobiographers of the 1980s managed with difficulty but without breaching that solidarity to write accounts of their lives which celebrated their 'personhood, rights and citizenship' (4), and achieved recognition in their own community as well as in South Africa as a whole. It is also a pity that the autobiographical works, stories and novel of Sindiwe Magona in the 1990s and 2000s are completely omitted.

The defence will no doubt be advanced that *Rewriting Modernity* is necessarily selective in the figures that it explores, and the most significant have been chosen. No one could claim that Nontsizi Mqgqwetho has received the notice that Serote has attracted. Of course the extent to which a work of this kind can remedy previous neglect is limited; but to confine discussion of women's writing, and especially their role in the movement towards modernity, to gender-specific works like *Women Writing Africa*, the special project of which is to commemorate lives and reproduce voices that might otherwise be forgotten, is to deny women their proper place in the history of the South African nation.

*Rewriting Modernity* does not claim to offer completely satisfying accounts of the literary figures that it features, though references are made to biographies in which such accounts can be found. What it does is to offer an episodic history of black modernity in South Africa, through the literary figures that have been crucial in the shaping of that modernity. As I suggested earlier, it does not attempt

comprehensiveness, nor does it work through representative figures, but prefers the exceptional and memorable. Only in the case of Tiyo Soga (about whom the reader of South African texts will nevertheless be happy to know) is the chosen figure less than crucial to the way in which modernity eventually developed in South Africa, and it is easy to understand Attwell's wish to include such a man, so undeservedly forgotten.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For simplicity's sake I have used the modern names for these states rather than those which were used in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- <sup>2</sup> A term now regarded as pejorative but relatively neutral in the period.
- <sup>3</sup> See Craig Mackenzie & Cherry Clayton, *Between the Lines*.

## WORKS CITED

- Attwell, David 2005, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*, U of KwaZulu-Natal P, Pietermaritzburg.
- Daymond, M J. et al. (eds) 1996, *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, The Feminist Press, New York.
- Jabavu, Noni 1963, *The Ochre People*, John Murray, London.
- Kuzwayo, Ellen 1985, *Call Me Woman*, Ravan, Johannesburg.
- MacKenzie, Craig and Cherry Clayton 1989, *Between the Lines: Interviews with Bessie Head, Sheila Roberts, Ellen Kuzwayo, Miriam Tlali*, NELM, Grahamstown.
- Mda. Zakes 2000, *The Heart of Redness*, Oxford UP, Cape Town.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S. 1983, *Fools and Other Stories*, Ravan, Johannesburg.
- 1991, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, COSAW, Fordsburg.
- 2003, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, David Philip, Claremont.
- Ortiz, Fernando 1995 [1944], *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. H de Onis, Duke UP, Durham.
- Plaatje, Sol T. 1989 [1930], *Mhudi*, Ad. Donker, Johannesburg.
- Serote, Mongane Wally 1978, *Behold, Mama, Flowers*, Ad. Donker, Johannesburg.
- 1981, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Ravan, Johannesburg.
- Tlali, Miriam 1993 [1979], *Muriel at Metropolitan*, Longman African Classics, Harlow.