Think Piece

**Whose History is it Anyway? Dog eat Dog and Mumbo Jumbo**

*Emma O’Shaughnessy*

What does it mean to (re) write history? This is a question that was at the centre of a comparative literature seminar I taught recently, called *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. With my students, I explored three postapartheid city novels all set in Johannesburg, from black South African authors, and compared them to three postmodern North American novels, all set in New York City, written by African American authors—two from the last ten years and one from the 1970’s. The principle aim of our explorations was to understand how contemporary black subjects from Africa and America negotiate identity, the collective and individualised self, the body, culture, politics and the technology of writing. By deploying two modes of writing and critical thought—the ‘postmodern’ and the ‘postapartheid’, to which the New York and Johannesburg novels could be read against respectively—the group untangled the efforts of these writers to reconfigure the roles of black Africans, both on the continent and within the diaspora.

More specifically, this comparative theoretical and literary endeavour offered the students the chance to understand South Africa’s contemporary story better. By studying these different literary representations of black experience of these two cities, the South African students were able to draw lines of similarities between both archives to reflect more deeply on their own postapartheid social condition. Although we explored many aspects of both postmodern and postapartheid modes of writing, ‘time’ provided one of the key sites of our exploration— for a number of reasons.

Formally, the passage of time is a key component of the novel form. Its construction in the sets of novels revealed interesting ideas about the possibilities of reformulating ‘real’ social environments. As a concept too, time provides a
framework for some of the bigger questions we were asking about politics, self and space. Time is as Johannes Fabian has pointed out in *Time and the Emerging Other*, a central part of ideology and political discourse—conceptualisations of time are inseparable from power. In that all of these texts interrogate traditional power structures, racial and so on, then the representation of time presents a key to their unlocking. Time is also key to understanding how subjects position themselves in their environments. We exist, as Paul Ricoeur has stated, in our own ‘within-time-ness’: i.e. our sense of self emerges through our sense of time, facilitated through memory. As these novelists are preoccupied with the concept of rewriting the position of the black subject—in relation to a globalised (read westernised) world, and themselves—studying time is useful to the course. Lastly, time is a concept that encapsulates both postmodern and postapartheid concerns. A typical postmodern and postapartheid trend, for instance, is the grappling with history and the attempt to displace linear, teleological views of development and change, and embrace more diffused perspectives of the world’s multiple histories and times. As this course was embedded in postmodern/postapartheid conversation, time seemed to me to be at the heart of our concerns.

Two texts in particular confront the issue of time in nuanced and fascinating ways, and I shall discuss them here. The purpose of this short paper is to reflect on some of the thoughts that emerged from the seminar, which have affected my doctoral research on South African literatures. I found that studying the representation and narrative manipulation of ‘real’ time offered some key insights into how a South African novel like *Dog eat Dog* can be read as a cultural and political product, and how it can be better understood as marker of issues that bear quite major importance in the post-1994 environment.

Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* is set in Harlem, NYC and Niq Mhlongo’s *Dog eat Dog* is set in the inner city of Joburg and in Soweto. The former was written in the 1970’s and the latter, in 2006. Although the overall agendas of the authors are similar—to ‘write’ the ordinary Black subject into time and history, there are distinct and telling differences between the novels and their approaches to time.
In my discussions with my class, I encouraged them to ponder the fact that the narrative techniques used by Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* create a playful and flexible sense of History and Time, unlike the more linear and reified temporal landscape of *Dog eat Dog*. Through this, one can trace what the writer, Mhlongo, finds dysfunctional about the South African situation: the fact that the majority of contemporary Black South Africans seem to be temporally stagnating.

*Mumbo Jumbo* is a madcap novel set in 1970’s Harlem. Loosely, it’s about the rise of the Jazz age in The United States and in New York in the 1920’s, a time synonymous with the Harlem renaissance. The novel is a pastiche of imagined story and historical fact. Events that happened in real life are documented in footnotes on each page, but the reader is unsure of their validity since Reed ambiguates the boundaries between fact and fiction by combining fantastical, speculative storytelling with the historical archive. The reader is forced to assemble meaning from the page, both fiction and ‘fact’ and in doing so, is asked to playfully (and sometimes disturbingly) suspend her disbelief of the events told in the novel.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the novel is that Reed leaps backwards and forwards in time, yoking together elements of the past with the future. He parodies and satirises sanctified imagery, symbols and people from western history—such as the crusades, Sigmund Freud and the Enlightenment—displacing the temporal maps upon which the west has historically based its supremacist world views and claims to dominance. Moreover, the novel reads backwards. Strange and obscure information encountered at the start of the story is slowly explained as the story unfolds in its many directions. At the heart of the novel is a book, an ancient tome that if found could unleash a raw, African power into the world— a power which could create ripples through American society. Besides a distinct metatextual motif, the book represents an alternative version of history.

This idea, of there being alternative archives of culture, race, society (within the west) occupies the main characters. The various narrative strands depict the
various attempts to undermine America’s ‘stability’ with the revelation or exposure of these archives. If there is any doubt as to Reed’s intentions with this text, at the end of the novel, the narrator’s allusions to the circularity of time undermine History with a capital H, and to render any stable sense of time unstable. The end of the novel also suggests beginnings.

One can trace elements of Afrofuturist techniques in this novel. While Afrofuturism has many manifestations and can mean many different things, the Afrofuturist project in general deploys images and themes such as technology (whether spaceships or writing) to dismantle preconceived assumptions about time and events. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, by inverting and rupturing linear time, by merging past, present and future, Reed suggests that the only way to reposition the black subject in history is to reposition history itself. In disordering linearity, Reed disorders the hierarchy of history and therefore the hierarchy of power. If one can change the future, as so many Afrofuturists do with their science fiction and fantasy projects, then one can change the past. *Mumbo Jumbo* is not science fiction, but it is fantastical in its audacious reworking of time: a reworking that reminds us that history is not off-limits and that there could still come a time where the black subject is able to claim a different kind of position. Time becomes a gateway tool through which alternate portrayals of what *could be* or *should be* are investigated. It becomes clear that Reed sees this project as a continuous struggle, an unfinished battle, as we know it is. Thus the social and political realities of the United States, where the black subject is still marginalised to many extents, has produced Reed’s confrontation with History and his evocation of an alternative and chaotic version of the dominant historical archive.

Where *Mumbo Jumbo* depicts the ongoing struggle for a repositioning of the black subject *into* western, American history, *Dog eat Dog* depicts the struggle of the black subject to develop an engagement with the present time. Through Dingz and his communities—both in Soweto and in central Johannesburg, the reader senses an absence—one that seems to emerge where the struggle for right
and meaningful relationships with one’s environment is obscured by the very thing that makes the postapartheid possible: a distancing of the past and a smoothing over of visible and invisible forms of suffering.

The past is present in the text, embedded in the realist depictions of the city Johannesburg and within the lives of the novels’ characters. But overt engagements with the pre-1994 are absent. The novel seems like a glimpse into a present fragment, where even the story of Dingz seems to all happen in just one day. It is the absence of an engaged dialogue with the pre-post apartheid years that seems to drive the young character, Dingz and his friends, to act and move with a sense of ferocious impunity. This could be seen as ironic, since Dingz uses his status as a historically disadvantaged youth to manipulate his way through university and through daily activities. And yet, although he wields this status to justify his callous behaviour, his lack of compassion and empathy extends to the older Soweto generation too. In this, he appears to have very little regard for the struggles of the past. The child of a new generation, his behaviour seems to reflect a loss of place and identity. He is portrayed, effectively, as going nowhere, unable to secure a strong position for himself in the ‘new’ South Africa. Suspended in the ‘nowness’ of the postapartheid moment, he seems to exist without reference to what has come before.

Dingz is an angry young man whose lack of a social and political contract is worrying. However, one realises that he is in fact acutely aware of his own sense of displacement and suspension in an unknown and unpredictable present moment. The entire novel acts a testimony to an awareness of his internal and external struggle to make meaning from his immediate world. The self-reflectiveness of the Dingz’ narratorial voice indicates that this lack of fluid engagement with past is not his own doing, but comes from an inability to locate the past in his everyday landscape. This amnesic state seems to be produced by his surroundings.
Dingz indicates in the novel that this repression and amnesia does not necessarily come from the people themselves, but is layered onto the fabric of Johannesburg and South Africa from public narratives about the end of the struggle, part and parcel of the end of Apartheid. In the novel there is also the indication that these narratives have become destructive: sanctioned by the state and wholly misleading. Pattered throughout the novel, for instance, is Dingz’ admissions that he lies and cheats because he has been lied and cheated to, ostensibly by the ANC government and the post-1994 dispensation.

This brings to mind comments by a number of South African scholars and writers who feel that this state of suspension in South African society needs careful attention. Jeremy Cronin, prize-winning South African poet and SACP deputy secretary general, sees it as a manifestation of the national psyche being locked in a state of amnesia, produced via a collective repression of what still layers our landscape: the presences of a traumatic past and new forms of disorder and oppression. Cronin depicts this repression as a pathological type of forgetting, solicited by the state, perpetuated by a burning desire to move into a new era. The challenge of life in city Johannesburg for the majority of South now Africans is worsened by this enforced lack of engagement with the past. The result, as we see in the novel, is a generation of people lost in ambiguity—cognitive, temporal and physical— inhibited in their knowledge of how to proceed in a meaningful way into the ‘after’ apartheid moment.

The postapartheid government and nation-builders’ desire to control the past reveals a dual dynamic of containment: firstly, the struggle story needs to be protected, sanctified, kept at a distance so that its potency cannot be dismantled. And secondly, the horrors of the past must be kept at bay to protect the country from traumatic memories and to ensure that the seemingly smooth transition is not exposed as a fallacy.

This idea that the amnesic state comes from ‘the powers that be’ resonates with another social and cultural critic and writer, Bhekizizizwe Peterse. He argues in a recent paper that in South Africa, society and country are inhabited by the
ghosts of unresolved issues: unresolved in the sense that history and its legacy have been smoothed over in order to maintain the fallacy of restoration and transformation. Bhekiziziwe calls state-sanctioned national imaginaries ‘hollow’ since, in their attempts to map new futures for the country and its peoples, new futures founded on ‘unity’ and ‘forgiveness’, they insist on a suppression of suffering, and the surrender of the individual self into the whole. He terms this endorsed and often coerced collective suppression, ‘strategies of containment’. Peterse’s rejection of the ‘New South Africa’ is thus based on this very premise: that it is a hollow space, a fragile and false Utopia. Peterse’s solution is that citizens of this country must be granted the space and the time to deal with the realities of their present states, to grieve and to acknowledge their sustained suffering, even if the state or larger society asks us to focus on the positive aspects of new nation building.

Dog eat Dog seems to be making the same type of assertions buy tapping directly into this social and political polemic. The reader asks: what sense of time or history is available to Dingz for the construction of a meaningful narrative, of self or of place? How could Dingz create a different kind of life for himself– one that is engaged with the more haunting aspects of South Africa’s history– possessing a sense of self that is politically engaged, with imagination and aspirations that are not stuck in time? How could Dingz start to talk back to a hollow existence? While these questions are the fodder for a prolonged socio-political and cultural debate, potential answers come from Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Reed’s novel depicts an African American society still struggling for recognition. The struggle is depicted as continuous, as seen in the last lines of the text where the protagonist, on leaving a lecture implies that the time for the transformation of history is yet to come, despite the efforts of this particular story. And herein lies a key to understanding the local situation. The state of suspension that Dingz battles with comes from the idea perpetuated through the postapartheid nation space that the struggle for equality is somehow over. For the
masses living in Soweto, in the outskirts of the city, for the many young men, like Dingz who are not given the tools to encounter the challenges of the present– since these tools would need to come also from the past, a past which has been contained and distanced as part of the South African nationalist narrative of reformation– the struggle has merely continued, and taken on new forms. But, the postapartheid story, like many independence narratives, is crafted on the idea that in 1994, oppression and inequality has ‘ended’. Although this may have been a very powerful idea, one that facilitated an era of celebration and growth in the country, its dangers, as we see in Dog eat Dog, lie in the fact that the kinds of everyday struggles that the majority of the nation face, often silently, are not validated, since suffering and trauma, for the postapartheid rainbow nation to succeed, are rejected: relegated to an unknown place, a place of the past, and a past which has no role in the current story. The generations of ordinary young black men and women, in Johannesburg face the oppressive absence of the words that can name their detachment and displacement.

I wonder if the kind of narrative devices that Reed makes use of could offer clues as to how this absence can be addressed. One might ask though: is South Africa not ready for a novel, or any act, that parodies the Apartheid years, both those of the oppressor and the oppressed, and satirises our desire to sanctify our history? At what point can ordinary urban South Africans begin to name their sense of betrayal, a collective betrayal that in many ways is reinforced by the suppression of narratives of suffering in favour of narratives of transformation? The first step would be towards some kind of acknowledgment that in fact, the struggle is never over for the everyday men and women of South Africa. For this acknowledgement to occur, the very idea of a secure and sustainable postapartheid nation would need to be radically challenged.

Notes

1 The South African novels are: Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001), Kgebetli Moele’s Room 207 (2006), Niq Mhlongo’s Dog eat Dog (2004); The New York novels are: Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist (1999), Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo (1972) and Toni Morrison’s Jazz (1992)


5 Peterson, Bhekezizizwe. ‘New Social Imaginaries’. Paper delivered as part of a seminar series at Stellenbosch University (April 2010)