Race, Post-Race, Shakespeare, and South Africa

Adele Seeff, University of Maryland

Abstract

In a newly democratic South Africa, the South African Broadcasting Company commissioned updated re-tellings of Shakespeares plays using local settings, vernacular languages, and black actors. They sought local programming that could be projected into a global entertainment market. These stories would help heal a nation's trauma and provide a broader representation of black South African scriptwriters, directors, and actors speaking African vernacular. I focus largely on two re-versionings of *Macbeth* (a *King Lear* and a *Romeo and Juliet* were also produced) to argue that these made-for-television appropriations are reclamation projects. Each employs different filmic and rhetorical strategies to represent a utopian post-racial world using the once imperial icon, Shakespeare, as a point of access to global audiences. Thoroughly exploiting Shakespeare's cultural capital, these programs show us that "African" indigeneity and identity are shifting and fluid, and infused with desire; that discourse(s) can be democratized but that hierarchies persist; and that strategies of identity formation remain hostage to apartheid's continuing afterlife. These Africanized re-versionings surrogate Shakespeare's text to dramatize and experiment with linguistic, national, and gender identities.

Ideas about race as a "socio-legal construct rather than as a scientifically measurable essence" (Posel 2001, 88) and ethnicity have defined South Africa since the Dutch established a colony at the Cape in 1652. South Africa remains today, in the words of Leon de Kock, a land "sundered at its heart by the politics of race" (2001, 266). Ideas about Shakespeare performance were exported to the Cape Colony in 1801, with an inaugural performance of *Henry IV* at the newly constructed African Theatre.[1] From the mid-nineteenth century on, in this polyglot world, Shakespeare was used as a tool to advance the formation of national identity, first as an Anglicizing project, then Afrikanerized, and, in the twentieth century, Africanized. It is this "Africanization," in the context of a democratic South Africa, that I want to address in what follows.

In 2008, for a largely black audience, the South African Broadcasting Corporation commissioned a made-for-television drama series, *Shakespeare in Mzansi* (a Zulu word meaning south): updated retellings of three of Shakespeares plays, using local settings and African vernacular languages (with English subtitles) and performed primarily by black actors.[2] These

productions provide a window onto how Shakespeare is harnessed in the twenty-first century in what has been described as a "miraculous new nation."

I focus on two re-versionings of *Macbeth* to argue that these appropriations are reclamation projects. Each version attempts to repossess a cultural identity destroyed by historical events. This is not a nostalgic search for lost origins. The strategies they deploy to represent this recuperation differ markedly. One version — *Entabeni* — addresses South Africa's experiences of the socio-political stratification and economic exploitation of apartheid *and* apartheid's undoing. Its goal: to construct a raceless story-world in a restored South Africa. The result: a reproduction of Western dilemmas. In *Entabeni*, filmmakers use linguistic practice, adopt the conventions of *film noir*, and embed the supernatural in quotidian life in ways that are thoroughly consonant with the inherent ambiguity of the spirit world.[3] In the second, *Death of a Queen*, conversations with many cultural pasts, including the cultural pasts explored in Shakespeare's text, facilitate a depiction of a nation's radical self-definition. *Death of a Queen* re-casts legend and myth to facilitate both a representation of a leadership/succession crisis that is gendered female and a resolution of that crisis in relation to the power of the ancestors, deceased fathers and mothers who guard one in death as they did in life.

Each re-versioning fuses local and international art forms to articulate a newly branded South African identity. Each uses different filmic and rhetorical strategies to project a utopian post-racial world into a global entertainment market. What is new and interesting is how these Africanized re-versionings surrogate Shakespeare's texts to dramatize and indigenize a contemporary black South African subjectivity and to represent a nation's trauma, now healed. In both productions, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the instrument for fashioning a new African leadership.

Entabeni: Macbeth in the Boardroom

Entabeni recasts *Macbeth* in a contemporary corporate setting, where issues of monarchy are transposed to dominance of business empires — a dark alleyway between skyscrapers, a homeless woman pushing her signature shopping cart towards a blind man singing tonelessly. The woman (whom the audience later discovers is the witch) picks up a newspaper and reads the headline, "A Scramble for Africa's Biggest Contract." We are being prepared for the boardroom scene which follows. In that scene, the Macbeth surrogate, Kumkani, a skilled warrior in the corporate wars with "balls of steel," makes the case for Entabeni's entry into the bidding war for the 2010 World Cup Communications Contract. Entabeni, the only 100% black-owned business in South Africa, is the company he has built single-handedly for his uncle, the Duncan surrogate. "Your attention, please, ladies and gents," says Kumkani to the assembled board, code-switching seamlessly between English and Xhosa as he performs business-speak. (Xhosa is one of the eleven

official languages in South Africa.) The single white actor on the board is the Macduff surrogate. Are we to assume that he can understand Xhosa, the language of the second largest cultural group in South Africa? Kumkani performs here a democratizing, egalitarian, raceless interlingualism, effacing first Dutch, then British colonialism. His speech to the board ignores his own role in building the company. Instead, Kumkani references apartheid restrictions on job opportunities and loss of identity, in what the Comaroffs term apartheid's "grammar of distinctions" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, 25), as legislated in fine minutiae. Margo Hendricks has argued that in an American Shakespeare performance, you cannot "tell a black [*sic*] person by voice and speech because you cannot assume a singularity in voice for all blacks [*sic*]" (2006, 190). Yet, distinctions in speech patterns exist, as they do within any group. But, in South Africa, it is only since the 1990s, with the collapse of institutional apartheid, the opening of "whites-only" schools to *all* students, and the repeal of the Group Areas Act, that one cannot "tell" "race" as marked by accent and intonation. Behind Kumkani's virtuoso linguistic performance in the boardroom lie the deep inequities of apartheid Bantu education (which produced "township" English) and township living, and the current "tyrannical preoccupation with the unchecked accumulation of wealth and power" by business elites (Mattera 2008). The scene also alludes to such efforts as Black Empowerment business initiatives, awash in rumors of cronyism and corruption. But this is *Macbeth*, so of course the witchs' amphibology and the Duncan figure's nomination of his son as CEO over Kumkani are the spur to Kumkani's complicity in his own downfall.

Macduff as Outsider

To return to the boardroom scene's single white actor, the Macduff surrogate: He is, by definition and historically, a member of the "settler colonial" or "*non*-indigene" group (Boehmer 2011, 257, emphasis in original). Jan van Riebeeck's landing at the Cape in 1652 to establish a refueling station for Dutch East India Company ships on their way to India was not, strictly speaking, an invasion, and so one could argue that an invasion did not initiate the imperial clasp. However, informal apartheid, successive frontier wars, and legislative apartheid wrought violence on the indigenous majority population through representational erasure, land re-distribution, and displacements/forcible removals. And this violence was born of the desire to achieve economic, cultural, and linguistic supremacy, and, not least, "whiteness," *particularly* in such a creolized context (Johnston and Lawson 2000, 362). According to this configuration, then, a question hovers over the figure of Macduff — as, indeed, it does in Shakespeare's play. Is his whiteness figured as default whiteness? Whiteness as a naturalized state (Royster 2006, 221)? Or, does he serve to remind us of centuries of privilege and oppression? He is certainly not "unmarked," "raceless," or

colorless. Much later, a twist in the plot allows the murderer to tell Lady Macbeth that "the white man" knows who killed the Banquo character, a reminder that "white" is raced and that "white" Macduff is racially marked.

South Africa, it has been argued, is the "first successful accommodation of a minority settler colonialism to a majority indigenous nationalism" (Boehmer 2011, 257-58). This was achieved through a process of negotiation between competing nationalisms: African and Afrikaner. Indigenes occupied the land long before the settlers arrived; therefore, settlers cannot claim ancestral belonging. If the settler-invader can be made to belong conditionally, then essential indigeneity can be calibrated, and "African" identity emerges as constructed and contingent. However, in order to include the settler, the indigene must reciprocally claim the settler as belonging, and must suspend his or her own claim to ancestral priority of the land. *Entabeni*, in the imaginative representation invoked by the boardroom scene, offers this utopian fictive racelessness. The end of apartheid restrictions signaled the inclusion of black South Africans into a political/economic civic society on an equal opportunity basis. But, it also meant that black South Africans would reciprocally have to accept white South Africans. The boardroom scene dramatizes this "interdependence of cultural terrains" (Said 1993, xxii-xxiii). *Entabeni* promotes this vision throughout the production. Its director deftly exploits the play's anxieties surrounding England's absorption of Scotland in the period leading up to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Noir as Critique of Capitalism

I turn now to narrative strategies. *Entabeni*'s entry point to global currency (besides Shakespeare, of course) is the visual rhetoric of *film noir*, but it is *noir* with a difference, *noir* as critique of capitalism that promotes homelessness. Lady Macbeth is represented as the demonized *femme fatale*, a fully participating partner in the couple's destruction. Solitary, she walks through the deserted city streets at night in search of the poison she will need to engineer Duncan's death. These "dark, mean, and empty streets resound with . . . fear and hatred" (Murphet 1998, 29). The only other sign of life in this eerie, wasteland cityscape is a homeless musician, from whom she purchases the poison. Wheelchair bound, drumming on his bongo drum, his homelessness and exclusion from the social and "symbolic order" (MacCannell 1993, 286) in a democratic society serves as a painful reminder that, in South Africa, despite apartheid's formal demise, millions still live in apartheid-era shanty townships. Macbeth's hired gun is another visual trope out of Humphrey Bogart *film noir*. The murderer is a study in existential gravity, misogyny, and cynicism. The production anchors itself both to an African cultural past of the Moiriba tribe and to a Western cultural present in a high cultural register. The viewer will recognize the background music, the

"Drinking Song" from *La Traviata* in a scene in which the doomed lovers recognize each other through the mechanism of a shared classical allusion.[4] *Noir* serves here as a visual grammar to make legible to the world of international business, of which South Africa is a part, the ills of liberal capitalism: a cautionary tale for captains of industry across the globe.

Death of a Queen and Nation-building

I turn now to *Death of a Queen*, whose directors make very different interpretive choices as they offer their perspective on a power shift in the nature of leadership in twenty-first century South Africa. The contrast helps demonstrate aspects of the complexities at stake in both of these productions. *Death of a Queen* is set in Limpopo province, South Africa, among the Balobedu nation. In contrast to *Entabeni*, where there are different domains of language, cultures, and political-religious histories, the world of the Rain Queen is more homogeneous, more "traditional," and agrarian and has remained so even with the coming of Europeans and Christianity. *Death of a Queen* re-colonizes Shakespeare by using *Macbeth* as a cultural lens on the myth of the immortal queen and on present-day Balobedu national politics. *Macbeth*'s ongoing debate about paths to kingship maps neatly onto a struggle between matrilineal and patrilineal sovereign power. The program series captures very real conflicts between a matriarchal and patriarchal contemporary South African society. *Death of a Queen* outdoes *Entabeni* with a sonorous blend of four languages: se-Pedi, vha-Venda, se-Tswana, and se-Sotho, the language in which scriptwriter Bekker is fluent.

Macbeth, and its imbrication in the transition from Elizabeth I to "our cousin James of Scotland," are both a cover and a scaffolding for the legend of the Rain Queen and the legend's legacy in contemporary politics. According to both scriptwriter Marina Bekker and director/producer Pieter Grobbelaar, the Tribal Elders and the ancestors were appeased by the use of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the choice of another nation — the Bapedi — as covers for the Balobedu crisis (Bekker and Grobbelaar 2010). The succession crisis is gendered because queens had ruled Limpopo province for four-hundred years until the mysterious death of Queen Makobo Constance Modjadji VI in 2005, leaving her kingdom stunned with grief. Her brother now rules as regent, and the controversy about succession continues.

An early modern debate about the ontology of witches and their power maps equally neatly onto a belief system that mixes magic, witchcraft, ancestor worship, ritual, and the divine right of queens. Unlike *Entabeni*, *Death of a Queen* does not demand the meshing of the clashing modalities of an industrialized Western culture with a belief in ancestor worship. Throughout, the male witches, "paltering . . . in a double sense" (5.8.20),[5] and the ancestors control the action. As with many adaptations, this rendition allows the Lady Macbeth figure a pregnancy. The pregnancy

miscarries as she keens over the dead Rain Queen's grave. In a chilling invocation to the ancestors, Grace/Lady Macbeth calls on them, "You killed my baby! Dry the milk in my breast." The lines from Shakespeares play in 1.5.43-44, "Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers," echo in the viewer's head. The bloody miscarriage signals Grace's descent into madness and death. She commits suicide onscreen, smearing the same poison on her lips that her husband had used to kill the Rain Queen.

The program also allows for a land dispute, one of the most vexed issues in South Africa today. It is the Macbeth surrogate's path to glory — earned glory. After calming the angry rioters, however, he encounters the witches, very quickly succumbs to their prophecies, and then, as ruler, refuses to restore the stolen land. This corrupt venality of leadership resonates as the single dystopic note in an otherwise optimistic vision for the Balobedu peoples.

The ideology of nation-building self-consciously drives this re-versioning. Scriptwriter Marina Bekker seizes the opportunity to change the *déjà lu, déjà vu* ending. Reconciliation, not vengeance and retaliation, is the only way forward. Bekker recasts the ending, and provides Puno, the young daughter of the murdered Queen, with both female and male qualities of leadership. We have seen her dead mother, as ancestor, appear in a dream to give her young daughter the legendary white stones — stones that endow the sacred queen with the power to make rain. (In fact, the Rain Queen's ability to make rain is shrouded in mystery.) By swallowing the white stones and the black stones — African symbol of male power found in the belly of a crocodile — Puno reconciles tradition (leadership gendered female) and rupture (leadership gendered male), inventing the way forward and urging Macbeth/Malôrô to live. Puno, successor to the Rain Queen's throne, says at the end, "Malôro does not need to die." For the filmmakers, this was "excruciatingly important" (Bekkler and Grobbelaar 2010). The altered ending represented the filmmakers' sense of responsibility towards the spiritual transformation of the new South African nation. The little girl swallows both the white and the black stones, bringing together the old and the new to invent the way forward. Rain falls in the final moments of the program, heralding the physical and spiritual transformation of a nation through reconciliation, its most urgent need. The production thus becomes a working through that is not idle entertainment (the broadcasters' mandate, like the African story-teller, is to educate and inform), but part of South Africa's social-moral history: a nation's soul searching to heal its recent traumatic past in relation to an ancient past.

Conclusion

Shakespeare is decidedly neither Africa's contemporary nor Africa's kinsman. But, in these renditions, Shakespeare's play is re-fashioned as relevant and accessible to a temporally

and geographically distant location through a process of cultural translation and the adoption of a particular poetics that allows the text, yet again, to speak ideologically. These programs move in several directions at once. They call attention to South Africa's recent past (the advent of democracy guaranteeing equal rights for all), and they advance a utopian vision of equality, the return of sacred matriarchal power to an ancient kingdom, the eradication of race as a category, and the establishment of a "rainbow nation." But they also remind the careful viewer in dystopic ways that old inequities persist. Rather than redistributing wealth, new corporate elites, like the old, are corrupt and committed to "their unbridled excesses," according to black poet Don Mattera (2008). Hierarchies endure. As in *Macbeth*, the nation is not fully healed. The new order, as in all of Shakespeare's tragedies, is far from clear; so, too, in these programs, resolutions are contingent. And both productions raise questions: do these programs concede their indigeneity by using subtitling in order to be marketable in an international entertainment world — even as they fulfill their brief to be "local" in terms of settings, languages, actors? What might it mean to be "South African" in a "new" South Africa in a globalized (once again) world? These Africanized renditions tranmute Shakespeare's depictions of ethnicity in plays such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Henry V*, and the Scottish play to new expressions of nation-building.

Notes

1. See Adele Seeff, "Recovering the history of the African Theatre" (2004).

2. These drama strands, as they are referred to, were produced according to the highly collaborative, time-consuming SEDIBA method, which requires script development in the vernacular language(s), followed by translation into English for subtitling.

3. I have written elsewhere about the contiguous worlds of the female and the witches. See Adele Seeff, "*Shakespeare in Mzansi*" (2013).

4. In the "Drinking Song" ("Libiamo"), Violetta and Alfredo make their first connection through her allusion to Hebe — "I'll be Hebe" — to which he responds, "And I hope just as immortal." Hebe is the gods' cupbearer. The use of the music in *Entabeni* is deeply ironic, and is perhaps an allusion to the fleeting nature of all human connection. I thank Leon Major for his assistance.

5. All references to *Macbeth* are from William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, edited by William C. Carroll (1999).

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