

Crossing Over: Stories of the transition, or “history from the inside”

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Abstract

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*The collection of stories entitled **Crossing Over: New Stories for a New South Africa** (1995) commemorates a remarkable turning point in this country's history, the election of South Africa's first-ever democratic government. By inviting contributions from writers from a variety of backgrounds, and in any of the eleven official languages, the compilers hoped to provide “a rounded picture of our times” and to contribute to the making of a new South African culture of inclusivity. Contributors were asked for stories dealing with “some kind of crossing over,” and exploring the response of young people to the transition. In spite of limitations as regards representativeness, the collection does bring together an unusually varied group of writers. This article explores the extent to which, by promoting a renewed awareness of “self” in relation to “others”, the anthology goes some way towards uncovering and undoing the racism and stereotyping that have been endemic to our society. In doing so, it provides us with a kind of “history from the inside”. However, the collection also demonstrates the continuing presence of the past, and suggests the extent to which the lives of many ordinary people have not changed significantly.*

1. Introduction

The collection of stories entitled *Crossing Over: Stories for a New South Africa* (1995) is designed to commemorate a remarkable turning point in our history, the election of South Africa's first-ever democratic government. Jakes Gerwel, co-compiler of the collection, and author of the Foreword, remarks as follows:

The inspiring coming together of a divided nation during and immediately after the April elections, signalled the crossing of a divide which had liberating effects far beyond the obviously political: the awakening of an awareness of others, a loosening of the paralysing bonds of fear and suspicion, the dawning sense of self, the possibility of remembering and speaking about pain without unleashing destruction, the emancipation of the personal from the overbearing domination of the political.

The compilers hoped to attract contributions from writers whose backgrounds reflected the diversity of South African society; in this way their stories would provide “a rounded picture of our times” and “a window on the world of others.” This effort was, however, only partly successful. Gerwel notes that although contributions were encouraged in any of South Africa’s eleven official languages, all the stories submitted were in either English or Afrikaans. The compilers of the anthology have succeeded in attracting a number of new, previously unknown young writers, for some of whom this is their first published story. This gives the collection a freshness and interest often lacking in other anthologies of South African short stories. A salient characteristic of this collection is that it mixes writers who normally write for a “young adult” readership with those who usually write for an adult audience. There is, of course, no clear dividing line between the two, but examples of the former would be Diane Case, Lesley Beake, Michael Williams and Marguerite Poland, and of the latter Marita van der Vyver, Miriam Tlali, Kaiser Nyatumba and Elsa Joubert. Contributors were asked for stories dealing with “some kind of crossing over,” and specifically for stories which “give insight into the world of young people entering adulthood amidst the wide-ranging changes in South Africa today” (Gerwel in the Foreword). By cutting across the old apartheid divides, the collection represents a conscious attempt to contribute to the making of a new South African culture of inclusivity. It is those young people whose coming of age coincides with the transition to democracy who will help to shape our collective future. Given that the culture from which we are emerging was experienced by many as “a culture of inequality, silence and coercion”, this collection is an attempt to contribute to the shaping of a culture that “permits, indeed celebrates, a multiplicity of voices” (Sole, 1994:2, 4). By exploring the responses of, in particular, the new generation of young adults to the seismic changes occurring in their society, these stories provide us with a kind of “history from the inside”.¹

¹ I have borrowed this phrase from the subtitle of Stephen Clingman’s book on the novels of Nadine Gordimer. The phrase reflects his own interest in “history as it has been lived and experienced by people” (Clingman, 1986:ix).

2. The legacy of the past

Two stories – by Jenny Hobbs and Jimmy Matyu – may be taken as representative of the two main traditions of South African writing in English: that of white writing, where writers work from a condition of relative privilege, and where forms and styles are often strongly influenced by literary trends in the First World, and that of black writing, which reflects the very different perspectives of those confined by law to the ghettos of apartheid.² These two stories give one some idea of where South African writing is coming from, and some measure against which to judge other stories in the anthology.

“Two Fishermen,” by Jenny Hobbs, is reminiscent of what has loosely been called the ‘liberal realist’ tradition of South African writing,³ and in particular of the writing of the early Nadine Gordimer. The protagonist in Hobbs’s story is Helen, an adolescent girl on holiday with her parents on the Natal south coast. The story explores the tension between her need to explore beyond the limits defined for her by parents and society, and her fear of venturing beyond these limits. Her encounter with a young black fisherman on the beach first prompts an escapist reverie in which he features as the exotic descendent of an Arab slave trader. This is replaced by confusion and awkwardness as he stops and looks directly at her:

She was staring at the fisherman as he neared her rock, rapt in her fantasy, when he slowed down to get a better grip on his rod and lifting his head, looked directly at her.

Unable to look away quickly enough, Helen blushed and reacted with a tentative smile. The fisherman stumbled and stopped.

There was a lull in the wind. She felt the intensified heat of the sun burning her arms, and the roughness of the granite rock thrusting up under her feet.

After a moment he nodded curtly and dropped his eyes to resume his trudging walk before the smile could die on her face (p. 11).

2 Coetzee’s collection of essays is entitled *White Writing* (1988). He defines this as writing which is “generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African” (Coetzee, 1988:11). It is clear that the concerns and perspectives of black writers in South Africa are very different. Gordimer has noted the extent to which “any writer’s attempt to present in South Africa a totality of human experience within his own country is subverted before he sets down a word”. The black writer, she says, “writes from the ‘inside’ about the experiences of the black masses”, whereas the white writer is “cut off by enforced privilege from the greater part of the society in which he lives” (Gordimer, 1976:118).

3 For a discussion of this rather problematic category in the context of South African literature, see Antje Hagena (1990).

Her confusion here stems from his failure to act out the role of the submissive black man: his direct, measured look implies equality rather than subservience. Back home, she says nothing about the incident, knowing what her parents' reaction would be: "no more solitary walks". Ironically, after a second encounter on the beach, she ends up by imposing this restriction on herself. She feels alarm when he seems to quicken his pace as he approaches her: "Vague pictures of being dragged behind a lonely dune and raped flickered like a silent movie through her mind. What shall I do? She thought, and stood hesitating with her hair whipping across her eyes" (p. 12)⁴. Her response is to run for the safety of the cottage. The fisherman makes no move to follow her.

Helen's actual sexual encounter with Kenny Harper (they had been childhood friends) is an obvious counterpoint to this scene of imagined rape. As they climb a sand dune together, her propensity for fantasy, this time of a stereotypically romantic kind, takes over, leaving her unprepared for the suddenness of his assault – "not this hard crushing of lips" – as he pinions her under him. She manages to break free and runs down the sand dune with his taunt in her ears: "Go on, run away home to Mummy" (p. 15). She finds the "dark motionless figure" of the other fisherman waiting for her on the beach. He holds out his hand – and returns the watch which she had left on the rocks some days previously: "Your watch. I tried to give it back before, but you ran away," he explains (p. 16).

In this story the confusions attendant upon an adolescent girl's coming of age are compounded by her socialisation in a racist society, which leaves her unprepared for and unable to respond appropriately to what could have been a quite ordinary meeting with a young (black) man. Ignorance and fear in fact prevent her from "seeing" this young man at all, or responding to his quite normal behaviour: he becomes a figure onto which she projects her fantasies of Otherness. In apartheid society, in which racial stereotyping substitutes for knowledge, ordinary human encounters across the racial divide are impossible. Helen is unable to reach out of the prison-house which society has constructed for her: her plight thus mirrors in microcosm that of almost any white child growing up in apartheid South Africa. The story is thus a salutary reminder of the distance to be travelled, both personally and politically, before ordinary human contact across the colour line becomes possible. It is significant that an earlier version of Hobbs's story was in fact published in *Contrast* in 1975; the story thus clearly predates the present era of transition.

4 Page numbers without an indication of a source, refer to Rode, Linda and Gerwel, Jakes (compilers). 1996. *Crossing over: New Writing for a New South Africa*. Cape Town : Kwela Books.

It is instructive to place “Two Fishermen” alongside Barry Hough’s “The Journey,” where the distance that separates the apartheid past from the hoped-for future has been (apparently painlessly) traversed (we are not shown how). The story opens with Thembi sitting next to Johan on a bench in a school playground. Her braids brush his lips as she turns her head. “I refuse to kiss a boy who stutters,” she says. “And do we really want to spoil a lovely friendship by complicating it?” (p. 64). A “lovely friendship”, or indeed a relationship of any kind across racial lines, would have been almost unthinkable (and even illegal) in the “old” South Africa. In the world of this story, there seem to be no obstacles – other than Johan’s stutter – and the story charmingly narrates how this is surmounted. Thembi devises a simple form of therapy, and Johan is eventually able to claim the kiss which is his reward! The background to this situation is barely sketched in: Johan, we are told, has been “warm and friendly” to Thembi ever since she arrived at the school. His parents are happy to invite her to Sunday lunch. Thembi and his mother “hit it off well” and she becomes a regular visitor. The ease with which this transformation has been achieved strains the (adult) reader’s credulity, but perhaps, by projecting these possibilities in fictional terms, one brings their realisation a step closer. Or perhaps (some) young people are in fact far less burdened by the past than one imagines?

A story that may be taken as representing the tradition of black South African writing (often referred to, rather misleadingly, under the rubric “protest writing”) is Jimmy Matyu’s “Pay-Day Murder”. While still at school (in 1957) Matyu apparently freelanced for *Golden City Post* and *Drum*, and his story resembles in various ways the fiction produced by the *Drum* writers of the fifties. His subject (like theirs) is township life, depicted in all its vitality, squalor and ugliness:

Litha Felemntwini was struggling to put on his tattered trousers in the backyard shack rented by his mother in the run-down settlement outside Port Elizabeth, nicknamed Soweto by the Sea. ... ‘Shit’, he swore as he caught a whiff of the stench coming from the garbage which had collected behind the shack that had been his home for the full eighteen years of his life (p. 86).

The prose is enlivened by the author’s use of the idiom of the townships, and by frequent recourse to the vernacular. Its immediacy and vitality are qualities one associates with *Drum* and the writing of the fifties. Life for ordinary people clutching their Friday pay-packets is a struggle for survival. They have to contend with *tsotsis* like Felemntwini, with the ruthless *skoppers* (moneylenders) in their “big shiny cars” (with their kerrie-wielding bodyguards as back-up), and with the claims of shebeen queens, rural wives and township *amadikazi* (concubines). All of this is observed dispassionately by the authorial narrator. Felemntwini himself is a product of his circumstances, and his sudden end is in

keeping with his life. The world of the township is self-enclosed, a ghetto, and there is little prospect of escape or relief for such as him. The talk in the buses on the way home is of his sudden death: the killers, it is speculated, may have used an *intshuntsha* – a sharpened bicycle spoke – “a weapon in fashion during the forties before every other person carried a gun, someone said” (p. 92). The older people curse “the children of today,” the more politicised blame “apartheid and its violence,” while the “bible-thumpers” pray to Jesus “to help the world fear God”. There seems little prospect of deliverance, either human or divine. The story is a salutary reminder of the conditions which still prevail in the townships and shanty towns which surround the urban centres of power. It seems to have been written during the eighties, but it could equally well have been written post-1990. It represents in graphic terms the (continuing) reality of a deeply divided society.

The emphasis in Miriam Tlali’s “A Second Look” falls on the continuity of culture and tradition that acts as an anchor for a child growing up in an urban environment. The narrator looks back to a day when – at the age of twelve – she was first initiated into “the world of profound perplexities” (p. 136). The child’s rootedness in her own culture is conveyed through the frequent recourse to Sesotho, by the explanations of family names, and by the foregrounding of the extended family. The story traces the special bond which links grandmother, mother and daughter:

My mother, being the only other female around, became Nkhono’s [the grandmother’s] soul companion, one of her kind. ‘E ne e le ba *moloko* o le mong’ – they were of the same *species* – for my mother understood what it was like to be a woman. She grew up to understand and feel the pain of being taken for granted ... (p. 133).

This emphasis on the struggle of women to survive and determine their own lives is very much in keeping with Tlali’s collection of stories published in this country as *Footprints in the Quag* (1989). The presence of both her story and Matyu’s story in a collection subtitled “New writing for a new South Africa” suggests the continuity of black writing and the continuing influence of themes and styles deriving from the past.

3. “A window on the worlds of others”

Given that the stories in the collection are almost all concerned with urban experience, they do go some way in providing a window onto the variety of cultures and lifestyles that together constitute our plural society. Among the new young voices in the collection is Johnny Masilela, whose “Baba Mfundisi the Clergyman” takes a somewhat satirical look at the head of the Twelfth Apostle Christian Church of Jerusalem, located in the squatter camp of Boekenhout-

fontein. He clearly enjoys his status in the community, and (to judge from the bakkie he drives) is materially better off than most of his flock. His Sunday morning service is interrupted by the arrival of three young men wielding an AK47, who demand the keys to his bakkie (rather, perhaps, than to the kingdom of heaven!). This sharply observed story is a wry comment on life in the informal settlements which surround our cities, where the AK is arguably a more potent presence than the Bible.

Another new voice is that of Sandile Memela, a journalist based in Soweto. "A Life Besieged" offers an insight into the life and times of Sizwe Sakhile, a teacher and one of the new breed of black professionals, who, having survived the turmoil of the seventies and eighties, find themselves caught between the township on the one hand, with all that it represents, and the night life of Johannesburg, to which he now has access. The story is located in the interregnum of the eighties, and within its limited scope it explores the uncertainties and contradictions of the time, as experienced by Sizwe. It concludes with him settling down for the first beer of the day with Thami, a local shebeen owner. It is 09:30, but there is a protracted class boycott. "In the tense morning atmosphere the sun outside continued to shine. Life went on" (p. 27). There seems little chance that his prayers for things to return to normal will be answered.

By way of contrast, "A better life for you, Mums", by another new young writer, Zulfah Otto-Sallies, takes us into the gang and crime-ridden world of Manenberg, a coloured working class district on the Cape Flats. In spite of his matric pass (and his history of student activism) Solly has been looking for a "decent job" for three years. Finally, in frustration, he takes the quick route to the money that will bring relief from poverty and deprivation for him and his family – he becomes a "merchant," a supplier of drugs. When his mother, a devout Muslim woman, confronts him, he explains, "I'm sick and tired of poverty, Mums, *ek kan dit nie mee' vattie*" (p. 82). After his inevitable arrest, he writes to his mother from prison, begging forgiveness, but by the time she reads the letter he has already been stabbed to death. The dialogue between Solly and his mother is completely convincing, largely because it is conveyed in the dialect of the Cape Flats: "*Ek smokkel, ja, Mams, vi' kos innie hys*" (p. 82). In depicting the daily struggle to feed and clothe a family, and the waste of a young life that had potential, the story is another reminder of how little material circumstances have changed in the working-class townships – or in the informal settlements around our cities.

This story succeeds and convinces partly because it employs the dialectical and colloquial forms that characterise the speech of a particular community. This is not, however, true of all the stories in the collection. "Red Sports Car," by Michael Williams, a successful writer of books for children or young adults, is

carefully crafted but fails to employ the diction and idiom which would be appropriate to the narrator, who is a township boy. This could reflect the difficulty (for a white writer) of writing for or about someone whose world is the township (see footnote 2). It could also be a function of the target audience: the story is in fact adapted from a novel, *Crocodile Burning*, published in New York in 1993; for non-South African readers, the narrator's use of standard English might not be a problem. The same difficulty, however, occurs with a story by the well-known journalist and short story writer, Kaiser Nyatsumba, and can hardly be attributed to a lack of familiarity with township talk. "Streets of Hillbrow, Here I Come" examines the hurt, anger and bitterness of a child whose parents have got divorced. Rather than live with one of them, he chooses the life of a stretchchild in Hillbrow. The story fails to convince, partly because of the child narrator's fluent use of an educated English idiom. This results in some odd juxtapositions: "Experience *se moer*, man! I do not care one hoot for their experience. I hate them. God knows I do" (p. 138). Nor does the story adequately convey the exploitation and degradation that is the likely fate of a stretchchild. This child, one feels, would not in fact be able to resist the temptation of his "warm and comfortable bed in [his] room at home" (p. 141)!

4. "The new beginning"

The stories which most clearly seek to fulfil the mandate of the compilers are those which explore individual responses to the momentous changes taking place in our society. White writing of the eighties has been characterised as "somewhat fearfully and apocalyptically entering the unknown" (Clingman, 1990:54). Not long ago the future seemed imaginable to these writers only in apocalyptic terms – one thinks of Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) or Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). Several of the stories in this collection provide, on a modest scale, and often with a young adult audience in mind, an imaginative record of what it actually meant to be part of or witness to this transition. What happens when the future becomes the present, when the prisoners are released, when the Movement is unbanned, when negotiation replaces armed struggle, and when Nelson Mandela is finally inaugurated as state President and appears on the balcony of the Cape Town city hall to speak to the assembled thousands – with F.W. de Klerk at his side? This is the reality which these stories register and explore, and two of them in fact focus on this particular moment on the Parade in Cape Town.

The narrator in Lesley Beake's "The New Beginning" is, we soon infer, an adolescent coloured girl. Her mother works as a char for "old Mrs Donald", a Black Sash stalwart who is too old to go to the Parade to see the new President. "Ma" expresses the fears of many people in her particular community: "People were scared to be happy at first. Was it really over? Was the fighting finished?"

Ma said seeing was believing and *she* wasn't going to start celebrating too soon" (p. 54). The aunt, however, is eager to embrace the new order: she wants to dress up in ANC colours and wear a big hat for the Parade: "Ma said people wouldn't be able to see past the hat, and she thought Aunty had always been a DP supporter. Aunty said the New South Africa was all about change, so she was as well ..." (p. 55).

Clearly there is a new fluidity: people have the opportunity to reposition themselves, even reinvent themselves, in a situation where the boundaries have all shifted. Another minor index of change is to be found in the narrator's uncertain response to the police who line the streets on the way to the Parade. "At first I thought they looked angry, but then I thought that maybe they were scared. If there was trouble, they were going to be in it" (p. 55). She notices one of the younger policemen sharing a packet of fruit drops – a small gesture which humanises him – and she smiles at him. The police are no longer simply *die boere*. Similarly, Ma offers a sandwich to an old Xhosa man in the crowd at the Parade who just stands there, "quiet and glad", looking towards the balcony and waiting for the moment when Nelson Mandela will appear. The narrator notices significant numbers of white people in the crowd, and wonders "if they had also [like Aunty] changed for the New South Africa, or if we just hadn't known about them before" (p. 55).

Hendrik, the white boy who lives next door is, however, absent. Earlier, he had joined the family in celebrating the success of the elections. "Nobody notices that Hendrik is white any more," the narrator explains. "We've all got used to having him around" (p. 54). The seemingly casual remark is another sign of a society normalising itself. His acceptance by the narrator's family is part of his liberation from the straightjacket imposed by apartheid – but he is prevented from going to the Parade by his mother, who fears possible right-wing violence. As the story builds to its climax, Aunty remarks, "A pity Hendrik's not here," and the narrator hopes that he (and old Mrs Donald) are watching it all on television. The climax is reached when Mandela appears on the balcony:

When Mr Mandela spoke, every ear listened. He told us in that careful way he has that it was true. The New South Africa had really come. We could really believe it. We were free!

After that, when we sang, I cried. Lots of people were crying and everybody was holding their hands high in the Peace Sign. All around me was warmth and smiling and happiness. In that moment we were one voice, and one heart (p. 56).

It is a transformative, unifying moment – "the best thing that ever happened to me," according to the narrator, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The story closes

with the words of *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*, the new national anthem, preceded by the statement, “We are one people at last.” It would be hard to imagine a more affirmative outcome – but the reader knows that this is the experience of one moment, never to be repeated, and that when the crowd fractures individuals will resume their separate identities, albeit altered in some way by this moment when they stand together for the first time as citizens of a new democratic South Africa and sing the new national anthem. It is, by implication, the realisation of a dream.

In “The New Beginning” the absent Hendrik is almost the covert protagonist. In “Saint Christopher on the Parade” by the well-known Afrikaans writer Marita van der Vyver, the narrator is an eighteen-year-old white girl. She too is one of the crowd gathered on the Parade (one of the whites whose presence had been noted by the narrator of the previous story). In the course of this story, the narrator interrogates her whiteness. It opens with her almost claustrophobic fears as people press in on all sides: “One can easily be trampled today” (p. 50). Then she asks: “Or am I the only one thinking like this? Because I’m white and not accustomed to crowds?” She has always taken her own space for granted – her own bed in her own bedroom. Her whiteness, and the privilege that goes with it, is what sets her apart, makes her feel different. She wishes she could join in the singing of a group of young women near her: “I could understand snatches of their song, odd words that Beauty has taught us over the years while she ironed our clothes, but not enough. I’ve never really understood enough” (p. 50). Ironically, being white here signifies ignorance and exclusion, rather than privilege.

We discover that her fear of crowds is linked to a childhood incident when she had got lost after a rugby match at Newlands – “the day my brother let go of my hand” (p. 50). Four years previously, when Mandela was released, she had wanted to come with her brother to the Parade, but their mother had forbidden it. Now, four years later, she is standing there, but without her brother, who has been killed in a car accident. It is for his sake that she is there. The absent brother figures rather like the absent Hendrik did in the previous story. His sister remembers his excitement at the news of Mandela’s release, and the way his friendship with Siphos (Beauty’s son) had led him into the townships, and led him to “start asking questions” (p. 52). “Four years can make a big difference,” the narrator reflects, “not just in a country, but in a life.” Her experience of coming of age coincides with the transformation to democracy. The experience of voting for the first time links her with those millions of other, previously excluded, voters, and profoundly affects the way in which she sees herself: “For the first time I felt as though I belonged here, on this continent, in this country, right here where I’m standing today” (p. 51). Because her coming of age is linked in this way to a national rite of passage, it is easier for her to cast off or sidestep the legacy of doubt, guilt, alienation and regret that has often been the lot of the white

minority in this country. Her affirmation here should, however, be read alongside her earlier doubts and fears, which realistically represent a continuing awareness of the extent to which her whiteness estranges her.

At one point in the story the narrator lifts a four-year-old Muslim girl onto her shoulders, remembering her own terror of being trapped in a crowd at that age. Her grandmother introduces herself as Rehana, and explains why she is there – so that one day her grandchild can tell her grandchildren that she was there – “that her granny brought her” (p. 53). Realising the narrator’s physical discomfort of the narrator (“it feels as though I’m carrying a backpack full of hot coals”) the grandmother offers her an orange: “‘*Sy’s swaar, nè? Wil jy dalk’n lemoen hê?*’” The narrator feels grateful, not just for the orange, but because the woman speaks to her in Afrikaans: “‘I feel as if I’d passed a test’” (p. 52). She has been accepted, it seems, not just as a white, but as an Afrikaans-speaker. This is our first and only indication in the story that the narrator is in fact Afrikaans-speaking, or that this is important to her, or that we may be reading the story in translation.

Mandela’s arrival brings the story to its symbolic climax: “We cheer. All of us. Me too. Through the tears. Oh, God, I miss my brother. And I hear the high, clear laughter of a child somewhere over my head. And I realize, amazed, that I no longer feel the weight upon my shoulders (p. 53).

A burden – the burden of guilt, the burden of the past, the burden of being white – has been lifted (hence the reference to St. Christopher in the title). Her personal pain and sense of loss is absorbed into the larger experience of acceptance and belonging: “‘We cheer. All of us. Me too.’” What the story enacts is the inclusion of the white outsider into the new nation-in-the-making.

By way of contrast, Lawrence Bransby explores “the morning after” in his story, “A Reflection of Self”. Victor is the son of liberal English-speaking parents, and the events of the story are filtered through his consciousness. His own apparent lack of complicity with apartheid is contrasted with his father’s more complex need to rationalise and justify his principled liberal opposition. “How could his parents have lived through it, accepted it, done so little?”, Victor wonders (p. 60). It is a thought which must have occurred to many young people, particularly in the light of the daily revelations before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Victor finds it difficult to believe “that benches had actually had WHITES ONLY signs attached to them, that blacks had had to sit in the back of buses”. He is convinced that, had he been old enough, “he would have done something about it – some grand gesture, perhaps been arrested, his picture on the front page of the *Sunday Tribune* ...” He even feels cheated that he has been denied the opportunity! That morning (the “morning after”) he goes to the café ready to

view each black person he comes across with “new eyes” as “an equal, a fellow South African, a person” (p. 61) – something that would not have occurred to Helen in Jenny Hobbs’s story. However, he allows himself to be served before the old black woman standing in front of him in the queue: his fantasies of making some “grand gesture” of opposition are belied by this small, petty moment as he acquiesces unthinkingly to the privilege which his white skin confers on him. He is not as untainted by the past as he has imagined. In this way the story cautions against simplistic or naïve assumptions of transformation and acceptance.

Dianne Case, the author of “The Crossing,” is well-known for books such as *Love, David* (1986) which has been widely prescribed in schools. She draws in her writing on her own intimate knowledge of coloured working class life. “The Crossing” is in fact a variant of a sub-genre of South African fiction, the “maids and madams” short story. Here the coming election threatens to destabilise the familiar relationship between maid and madam. The madam (significantly, we never learn her name) is a somewhat stereotypical but all-too-familiar figure: her prejudices have survived the transition to democracy intact, and she expects the worst: “You people can also go and make your cross on the twenty-seventh. But how many understand a thing about politics? I can see the country going to ruin. Look what happened to Rhodesia and even Mocambique. Anyway, everybody is entitled to vote now. So, let’s sit back and watch them mess things up (p. 47).

Katy (the maid) tries to avoid being drawn into conversation, but when asked directly whom she will vote for, she looks her madam in the eye and says, “Mr. Mandela” (p. 48). When she recovers from her shock, her madam tries to reason with her (“Look at what De Klerk has done for the people”) but finally admits, “I guess I should not have asked you that. ... Your vote is your secret.” However, she persists in her efforts to persuade Katy to stockpile in advance of the coming election – and is hurt when her offer of a loan is refused: “I don’t understand you people. ... I offer to help you and you don’t want it. Don’t come crying to me when its too late” (p. 49). The repeated reference to “you people” is, of course, a classic example of “othering”. Here it takes the form of a familiar accusation: “they” (one’s maids or servants, and by extension all black people) are ungrateful for all “we” (the whites, the bearers of civilisation and progress) have done for “them”. Her need to vindicate herself, to prove that she is in the right, masquerades as concern for her maid’s welfare.

As she walks down the road looking for a taxi after work, Katy wonders if she is just being stubborn. Then the slogan on a passing taxi catches her eye: “Your vote is your voice” (an echo of her madam’s “Your vote is your secret”). This is her moment of epiphany: “That said it all. Suddenly she understood. She was a real South African. She never had a voice before. Her mother never had a voice

before. Her father never had a voice. Her vote was her voice. The ‘your’ in the slogan meant *her*, Katy Hendriks” (p. 49).

Here the political, in the form of the slogan, intersects with the personal as Katy realises, perhaps for the first time, what having a vote means: she is a person; she has a voice; she, Katy Hendricks, matters. This small, personal victory assures her that she too has a place in the new democratic dispensation. Her willingness to look her madam in the eye and name Mandela as the person she will vote for enables her to reverse the power-relations that had previously governed their interaction as maid and madam. Things will never be the same again – nationally, personally, or in her workplace. The madam, on the other hand, has chosen to exclude herself from the new dispensation – one of those who remain locked into the racism of the past.

5. Conclusion

The collection of short stories has achieved – as Gerwel concedes – only limited success in terms of representativeness. Almost all the stories are by professional writers or journalists. The only black (African) woman writer in the collection is Miriam Tlali (already an established writer), and black rural dwellers are not represented at all. The possibility of reaching actual or potential African women writers is demonstrated by an anthology like *Women from South Africa* (1988), published by Seriti sa Sechaba, a publishing house run for and by black women.⁵ In addition, the failure to attract contributions in any of the indigenous African languages points to the continuing hegemony of English and Afrikaans as mediums of literary expression. The anthology, *Crossing Over* does, nevertheless, bring together writers from a variety of different regional, class and cultural backgrounds, and the publishers have provided an opportunity for new voices to be heard. The anthology as a whole is geared towards the needs and interests of young adult readers: read in relation to each other, the stories provide a variety of perspectives on the often starkly contrasting communal situations and life experiences that constitute the complex reality of present-day South Africa. Most importantly, by promoting a renewed awareness of self in relation to others,

5 Ellen Kuzwayo declares in her Foreword to *Women from South Africa* that Seriti sa Sechaba has made it possible for “these few women” to write about issues which concern them directly. “It is through such sharing that these writers can find it possible to release pain, frustration and complete helplessness and to replace these with a feeling of achievement, fulfilment and some form of satisfaction” (Tsikang & Lefakane, 1988:2). The birth of Seriti sa Sechaba has, according to her, “wiped out that feeling of defeat and of being left out of the game” (1988:3). It is unfortunate that the potential of writers like these was not tapped by the compilers and publisher of *Crossing Over*. (Seriti sa Sechaba no longer seems to function as a publishing house.)

the anthology goes some way to helping to uncover and undo the racism and stereotyping that have been endemic to our society. But while the 1994 election marks a new beginning and makes possible for the first time the emergence of a sense of a common South African identity, the stories also remind us of the continuing presence (and burden) of the past. In the words of Mzamane (1996:13) “The success of our elections notwithstanding, we are so young, so recent into our new democracy (sic), that we still live in the past”. The difficulty and pain of dealing with this past is attested every day by the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One also needs to take seriously the reservations, expressed by a number of critics, regarding a too facile acceptance of a new discourse of nation-building which has as its aim the legitimisation of the new democratic order.⁶ In most of the stories which deal explicitly with the birth of our new democracy, the celebratory and transformative impulse is understandably uppermost – but clearly issues of race, class, gender, poverty, unemployment, inequality and homelessness have not disappeared with the transfer of power.

Because of their significance for the future, I have focused in particular on those stories which register and explore in personal terms the implications of the transition to democracy. Read three years later, in a South Africa in the grip of a crime-wave of alarming proportions, and with a government struggling to deliver on its pre-election promises, these stories are already tinged with nostalgia. The collection as a whole, then, does make a valuable contribution to the effort to promote a culture of inclusivity, but its gaps and silences also reveal the challenge that remains if transformation is to bring meaningful change for the previously disenfranchised majority.

6 Sole has pointed to the relevance of the critical interventions of Sachs and Ndebele for writing in a society in transformation: “Sachs and Ndebele stand out as the critics whose criticism links most strongly to the present phase of change in this country ... To stress the human, empathetic ties that may come to bond South Africans into a common citizenship is relevant of course to a period of transition where it is hoped a more humane, more democratic society is in the making” (Sole, 1994:13). Sole is himself critical of the tendency which he finds in both writers to “downplay structural social divisions” and to exaggerate the potential of literature to promote “rationality, tolerance and empathy among individuals” (Sole, 1994:15). There is no doubt that Ndebele’s call for a “rediscovery of the ordinary” and for a renewed exploration of subjectivity accords closely with the aims expressed by the compilers of this anthology. The diversity of perspectives represented in the collection helps to mitigate the kind of objection expressed by Sole.

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