The Aesthetics of Indigenization in Post-Apartheid Black South African Literature*

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Problematics of Indigenous-Language Literature in South Africa

ANY DISCUSSION OF THE AESTHETICS OF INDIGENIZATION of English in recent South African fiction requires a little background understanding of the status and history of South Africa’s indigenous languages. Furthermore, it begs the question of the urgent need for literature in African languages.¹ Until such literature emerges on a greater scale and with a broader range of genres than hitherto, education for mother-tongue speakers of those languages will continue to be severely compromised, a fact that will be touched upon later in this introduction. Despite these vexed issues, since English retains its hegemonic status and continues to be the majority language of publishing and the language of aspiration of so many South Africans, it is important to see how it evolves as the language of one of South Africa’s literatures and how literature in English handles the imbalance between South African cultures. Indigenization here refers to the ways in which a former colonial language absorbs or reflects writers’ underlying

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¹ Note that Innocentia J. Mhlambi of the University of Witwatersrand claims the opposite in her interesting essay “Basing Aesthetic Issues on African Discourse,” Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir literatuurwetenskap 28.2 (June 2012): 4–19. However, she discusses African-language literature in general, and does not provide specific references.
indigenous mother-tongue languages, including the rising urban creoles, and how it plays a role in the merging and transformation of cultures. Indigenization of language is, then, a crucial element of cultural creolization and transculturation, both integral processes of reconstructing identities in postcolonial communities.

If transculturation is taken to mean the “effects of cultural translations through processes of geographical migrations,” the situation in present-day South Africa is somewhat different from that observed in other cases of migration and border-crossing. Transculturation here involves constructing bridges between indigenous South African cultures existing side by side with the English and Afrikaans-based cultures of the former colonial powers. Inevitably, there has always been a fair amount of borrowing and merging, regardless of colonial efforts to keep communities separate. The segregation policies of the colonial period culminated in the apartheid regime (1948–94) which implemented stringent policies of racial classification, job passes, and forcible mass removals, along with the creation of ethnic reserves (the notorious Tribal Homelands or Bantustans) and urban ghettos (townships) for black Africans.

One of the most pernicious results of these policies was to force a label on all black South Africans, marking them as belonging to one of the nine so-called ‘Bantu tribes’ as designated by the colonizers. The colonial construct of ‘tribe’ was based to a large degree on arbitrary, often erroneous, linguistic distinctions originally made by evangelizing Europeans; suffice it to say that a large number of living member dialects/varieties of a fluid language/culture continuum were reduced to a few, then fossilized by standardization, evangel-

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