

Happy 20th, South Africa!

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A class-divided society goes on parallel lines. There is no meeting-point.
Language too is class-divided.

~ *Imaginary Maps*, Mahasweta Devi

As soon as the camera started rolling, she sat to attention and switched from fluent Sesotho to fluent English. Like most people, I had never heard of her before but she would soon vivify something I had only read of in books when she suddenly shape-shifted from an amiable granny into a hyena woman. I didn't at first understand but by the end of the morning I would carry away a seed.

When Nokuthula called me at seven that chilly morning - just days before South Africa's democracy would turn eleven years old on 27 April, 2005 - and said, "Do you want to come and interview Miriam Tlali with me?," I said, "Who?" and she said, "Exactly, that's the point."

So instead of being good postgrad students and going to Wits University in downtown Jo'burg, we picked up two other crew members and took the highway to Soweto. When we arrived at Miriam Tlali's house, we hooted at the gate and waited a long time until someone came marching up the long drive to open it for us. As we bustled around setting up the equipment in the lounge, Mama Tlali sent the gate-opener to buy provisions to prepare tea for us. She was dressed like a typical gogo with a doeku on her head and perhaps because of her seventy-plus years, she made me think of warm muffins but as soon as Nokuthula started the interview, she became very professional.

Miriam Tlali is the first black woman to publish a novel in South Africa. *Muriel in the Metropolitan* came out in 1975 (Wikipedia is wrong) but even though the novel was republished as *Between Two Worlds* in 2004, the story of a working woman navigating racist, segregated 1970s Jo'burg is still not well-known. Perhaps this interview for a series on South African writers will bring her more publicity but just five minutes into filming, a long insistent bleepppppp rent the air. The cameraman looked out the window. "Mama, there's someone at the gate."

“Oh, it must be AA,” she said, “my car is not working properly.” The gate-opener had not returned from the shops so I took the keys and walked down the sun-drenched drive to open the gate for the white pick-up truck. As the mechanic parked behind our vehicle, Mama Tlali came out of the house and greeted him in Zulu. He replied somewhat reticently as he walked into the garage. She handed him the car keys and started to tell him what was wrong with the car, the Zulu words slithering off her tongue in a symphony of z’s and s’s and extended vowels. He mumbled and nodded, nodded and mumbled but he didn’t quite seem to understand the problem. Suddenly, she stopped mid-sentence and glared at him for a long moment. Then she slowly said in English, enunciating each word clearly, “You don’t speak isiZulu?”

The man’s eyelids slid down over his embarrassment, “No, Mama, I speak Sesotho. I am Mosotho.”

Her head seemed to swell, her eyes narrowed and her voice dipped an octave, “And how long have you been living in Soweto?”

“Eleven years now, Mama.”

There was a long silence, more head swelling, thinning lips. And then she began to shout, “For eleven years...eleven years! You live in Soweto for eleven years and you can’t speak isiZulu? So you don’t talk to your neighbors, you just come here and remain isolated, not talking to your neighbors. Ai wena, you should be ashamed of yourself! Ashamed. You must learn Zulu! It’s one of our languages.”

She switched back to Zulu and insisted on conducting the rest of the interaction in a language in which the man was clearly floundering.

I stood to the side wondering why she didn’t just speak to him in Sotho. After all, before we began recording she had been speaking exclusively in Sotho so why couldn’t she just humor this poor mechanic who seemed to shrink and shrivel until he was nothing but an empty pair of grease-stained blue overalls.

IsiZulu is a melodious language, capacious and voluptuous, full of mellifluous poetry and music. If someone says I love you in Zulu, you will feel loved. But if someone scolds you in Zulu, you will know that you have been severely tukwa-ed!

I felt so sorry for the man as he wearily climbed back into his vehicle. Why had such a nice granny suddenly become so vicious? As I closed the gate behind him, I wondered if old age made people bi-polar and prone to violent mood swings.

When I returned to the lounge, Mama Tlali was newly resettled on the couch, her head had returned to a normal size, her doeku was readjusted, and the bright lights brought a sheen of perspiration to her round face. She was back to that rolling R English. “I grew up in Sophiatown in the 1940s. Before the apartheid government destroyed it. And every year they would come and say ‘What tribe are you? What language do you speak?’ and they would try and separate us by tribe, by language. It was their way of trying to divide and conquer so we would refuse to answer. I didn’t know my neighbors’ surnames, I didn’t know their tribes, I did not care, I did not want to know. In Sophiatown, we would say, we are all the tribes, we speak all the languages. I am southern Sotho myself but I never told them that. In this New South Africa, we have eleven official languages and I want to learn all of them, all of them. Every South African should speak all the languages because we must talk to everyone. We are all South Africans!”

The Afrikaans-language novel, *Triomf*, tells the story of a haunted family of poor whites who live in a house built upon the rubble of the destroyed Sophiatown.

There is a dense mythology around the Sophiatown of the first half of the twentieth century. “House-proud” Sophiatown was a very particular cultural time zone in which artists and tsotsis, shebeen queens and intellectuals, used to live and meet to discuss Pan-Africanism, Ghana’s recent independence, Christianity, the ANC, democracy, and just generally “talk the world to tatters” (51) as Can Themba put it. In his “Requiem for Sophiatown,” Themba mourns the period of forced removals which began in February, 1955 and ended in November, 1959 as he literally goes in search of homes and bars which were there yesterday but today, are reduced to piles of rubble by the apartheid government’s bulldozers, intent on erasing the “swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life of the Sophiatown that was” (51).

Like 1920s Harlem, Sophiatown's soundtrack was jazz but they added the pennywhistle and made it kwela. The urban, chic, cosmopolitan, multilingual residents of Sophiatown who spawned the *Drum* magazine generation were an affront to the apartheid government, intent on separating whites from blacks and blacks from each other by dividing them by tribe/ethnicity/language. The city was reserved for whites and so District Six, a "coloured" area in Cape Town, was also eradicated just as the black Sophiatown residents were "forcibly removed" and relocated to South West Township aka Soweto on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

Atop the remains of Sophiatown, the apartheid government built modest houses for impoverished Afrikaaners and renamed the area, Triomf. They had triumphed over the residents of Sophiatown, "sanitizing" the city of the dangerous multiculturalism that threatened to undermine the segregation on which apartheid depended because black Sophiatown had been adjacent to white Westdene. But in Marlene van Niekerk's take-your-breath-away-tour-de-force *Triomf*, the family is always finding reminders of the Sophiatown homes that had been bulldozed into the ground, the splintered debris of everyday objects now buried in the earth under their house. Thanks to their "white man's luck" (5), they have a roof over their heads but they're forever reminded that Triomf on Sophiatown is a palimpsest.

In the local library, they discover that Sophiatown was also a palimpsest built upon a white-owned farm and so they say in frustration, "For shitting through an icing tube, where will it all end? The whole world is just names and nothing is what it is and everything's what it's not, it's all in the mind! And the mind's a bottomless pit" (327).

But what does that mean exactly? Yes, where and how will it all end if one cannot peel back the layers of name changes to get to the bottom of...it...but what is at the bottom of the pit?

In the New South Africa, Triomf was renamed in 2006 and so now it is called Sophiatown again but before it was multilingual Sophiatown, it was a white man's farm and before that...who lived there? There are those who are invested in finding out/remembering and there are those who are invested in forgetting and those investments bespeak different political futures for a South Africa where name changes are so often

enacted to signify symbolic change even when this symbolic change comes at the expense of real, economic, literal change.

Today, Sophiatown is a multiracial, lower middle-class suburb but that is mere camouflage. Name changes and multilingualism are laudable and a fundamental part of South Africa's postcolonial refashioning as a multicultural nation but they distract us from the fact that the real language of economic change has no vocabulary in a South Africa tethered to neoliberal policies that create economic prosperity for the minority and increasing poverty for the majority.

Media for Justice cites these figures: "8% of the total national income is shared by 50% of the population and the top 20% (10 million people) enjoy 75% of the national income." There are miniscule numbers of poor whites in that bottom 50% and there are increasing numbers of rich blacks in that top 20% but those figures still tell a mostly black and white story that threaten any true liberation for the Rainbow Nation.

Miriam Tlali's generation was so radical, they gave us a seed. They refused to let apartheid divide and conquer along the lines of language. Apartheid was a system of social and economic engineering known to its critics as racial capitalism because it ensured the prosperity of a white minority based on the exploitation of the black majority. Neoliberal capitalism, the dispensation of postapartheid South Africa, functions exactly the same way, structurally ensuring that a minority accrues economic wealth – this time a rainbow coalition of the multiracial elite – at the expense of the black majority. Vast socioeconomic disparities and deepening inequality are the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Capital has divided and conquered even though South Africa now has eleven official languages.

The New South Africa is devolving into two parallel worlds – one is prosperous and talkative and driving the latest model Mercedes. The other can barely afford proper shoes and is still looking for a language to make the deaf government hear its cries of anguish. Service delivery protests and miners' strikes reflect that search but it seems "there is no meeting-point, language too is class-divided." When President Zuma uses state funds to build his luxurious compound in Nkandla and the police shoot striking miners as if they were playing a computer game...

Happy Birthday, South Africa! I wish you a twelfth language.