

The Language of Ordinary People : Echoes from Haiti

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The Language of Ordinary People: Echoes from Haiti

More than a decade ago, Njabulo Ndebele literally set the cat among the pigeons by striking an a-politically correct pose in the field of relevance and commitment in South African literature.

Convincingly enough, his call for the *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991)[1] tried to trod a middle way between the necessary protest and the even more necessary search for new directions in literature by black writers. His social critical view on the issue expressed his ambition for them to take part as conscious citizens in the building of a new road, now that control has also been handed over to the Blacks in a democratic perspective.

What can be said of his suggested method to "Rediscover the Ordinary" and its impact more than ten years after its exposition is yet difficult to determine. However, one can argue that the definition of the Ordinary as exposed by Ndebele both in his work of theory and of fiction echoes the quest to ease one's community's troubled waters by relocating one's self in a new hegemony-free world.

Such a quest can be called a quest for *literary peace*, that is to say literature which stems the tide of overtly exposed protest and sensitizes the reader to viewing his/her environment in a peaceful light. In doing so, it contributes to the opening of South Africa to new topics and genres.

This expression came to my mind as I was writing a paper on Njabulo Ndebele and we exchanged views on its seeming complexity. Indeed, *literary peace* could be theoretically defined,

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[1] Njabulo Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Manchester University Press, 1994.

but had I come with ready examples, this concept would have been more enlightening and our discussion would have taken even more tantalizing paths. The one feature that could not be ignored was that *literary peace* seemed to be voiced by a new generation of writers, new voices which had been emerging for nearly a decade or so, the voices of the "in-betweens": between turmoil/protest and search for peace.

Surprisingly and pleasantly enough, a few months after this conversation, Ndebele himself came with an example while in the United States. He had indulged himself in the reading of Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat's collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!*[2], published in 1996, and told me: "This writer seems to epitomize the concept of *literary peace*. I really enjoyed the reading. She seems to have explored the paths of peace in a literary fashion."

Today, his comment is all the better-advised as we are invited to "focus on the new perspectives for writers expressing themselves through novels, poetry, drama, etc.," as worded in the G.R.A.S. invitation paper.

Our aim is to shed some light on the characteristics of the works of this young female writer who not only is a highly acclaimed representative of this new generation of writers concerned with the articulation between painful past and promising future, but has also positively impressed our honorable guest, Njabulo Ndebele, one of South Africa's major literary critics, who has shared the same concern over the past few years.

Thus, we are invited to reflect on the following issues: to what extent can the reading of Danticat's works provide South African authorship and readership with ready examples of new and open perspectives for literature? And why?

Danticat and the Haitian Ordinary

It might first seem queer to choose Haiti as grounds for our discussion, as the connection between this French and Creole-

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[2] Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* New York: Vintage Books, 1996 (first published 1995, Soho Press, New York).

speaking Caribbean island and South Africa is rather dim. Yet, parallels can be drawn between the foundations of literary incentive in both countries. Indeed, identity, exile, separation, power, violence, resistance, heritage, tradition, transformation, suffering, silence, loss, brutality and self-determination, to mention a few, are common themes which stem from the shared experience of struggle against an oppressive regime: Apartheid in South Africa, the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti (1957-1986). Both systems lasted long enough to mark and steer the literary fields of these countries towards the politics of protest, thus resulting in a hegemony-bound form of writing, which prompted writers to manifest their plight through their artistic skill.

The development, articulacies and limitations of such a tendency have been widely explored by Ndebele with regards to his own country. Comparatively, the same tendency was to be expressed to some extent in a tormented Haiti, almost at the same time as Haitian literary critic Max Dominique points out:

> Le moment d'écriture, à l'orée des années 60, s'inscrit dans une époque de notre histoire où la dictature duvaliériste se durcit et bascule dans l'horreur. L'écriture poétique témoigne d'une tentative de résistance et de survie [...] La mise sur papier des rêves vécus dit, dans l'éructation du cri ou le silence troué de larmes, une espérance tremblée, sombrant parfois dans l'arraché et dans le vide. Il faut lire l'ensemble de l'œuvre à partir de ce trauma initial ou de cette surrection.[3]

Not surprisingly, when giving the example of Haitian poet Davertige, Dominique writes: "[*Son œuvre*] *porte témoignage de la violence inouïe de l'époque*[4]."

In any case, the dictatorial regime cast its oppressive veil on literature and the works of authors could be read as strenuous attempts to take off the unbearable mask of bondage... or to seek new forms of escape, new directions which mark a distance from that veil.

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[3] Max Dominique, "Haïti littéraire: positions et propositions," in *Notre Librairie - Littérature haïtienne de 1960 à nos jours*, n°133, janv-avril 1998, p. 12.

[4] *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

It must be acknowledged that the scraping off of hegemonic marks was an earlier approach in Haitian literature, the reasons of which we shall expose further down. Also, publications from the 1980s onwards have kept on providing this artistic field with new patterns, as Haitian critic Yanick Lahens points out in her essay on modern writings by female novelists:

> Au moment où il reste sur le plan politique bien peu de choses à propos desquelles se faire encore des illusions, au moment où nous nous heurtons au niveau mondial à une sorte d'impasse historique qui n'est ni la première ni la dernière et qu'il nous faudra de toute façon surmonter, ces textes des romancières me paraissent plus que salutaires. En effet, sans escamoter avec désinvolture une impasse historique par un discours sur le pouvoir transcendant de l'imagination, ils indiquent des pistes de réflexion. Ces textes ressentent moins les ondes de choc de l'ébranlement des assises idéologiques dans la mesure où ces romancières avaient déjà posé parallèlement leurs fondations ailleurs. Elles sont donc moins traversées dans leurs récits par ces doutes qui ont saisi les écrivains engagés dans les tunnels de la politique et qui s'y sont subitement retrouvés à l'étroit. Et du même coup, leurs textes semblent être moins datés et devoir mieux résister au temps.[5]

Edwidge Danticat is one of these authors pointing to new directions, and as such, it is not surprising. Indeed, since the publication of her debut work, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*[6] in 1994, Edwidge Danticat has won praise as one of America's brightest, most graceful and vibrant young writers. *Krik? Krak!*, her collection of nine short stories was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1995 and her well-received latest novel, *The Farming of Bones*[7] was published two years ago.

Danticat is quite representative of the strategic focus shift modern writers opted for, prompted by the distance from the Haitian homeland which exile created. She was born in Port-au-Prince in 1969, under the dictatorship of Duvalier. Like Sophie Caco, the protagonist of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, at twelve, she

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[5] Yannick Lahens, "L'apport de quatre romancières au roman moderne haïtien," *op. cit.*, p. 35.

[6] Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes and Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

[7] Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

moved to America to reunite with her parents who had left her to the care of her aunt in Haiti. She began writing as a teenager, and her essays and stories have appeared in many periodicals. She earned a degree in French Literature and finished her master's degree in writing. She often contributes to African American publications such as *Essence*, or online periodicals like *Caribbean Writer Online*.

In spite of her writing from abroad, the Creole culture of Haiti is at the heart of Edwidge Danticat's fiction; so is the African-American experience, inevitably. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* evokes the wonder, terror, and heartache of her native Haiti—and the enduring strength of Haiti's women—with a vibrant imagery and narrative that bear witness to her people's suffering and courage. Set in the island's impoverished villages and in New York's Haitian community, this is the story of Sophie Caco, who was conceived in an act of violence, abandoned by her mother and then summoned to America. In New York, she discovers that Haiti imposes harsh rules on its own. The nine short stories of *Krik? Krak!* describe life under the dictatorship in Haiti and the experiences of families who fled to the United States to begin new lives. *The Farming of Bones* is a passionate and profound novel of two lovers struggling against political violence, not under the Duvalier rule, but rather earlier, in the 1930's during the painful days of Dominican dictator Trujillo's massacre of Haitians.

The violent backdrop *per se* may sound familiar, just as familiar as that of the stories in Ndebele's *Fools*[8] may sound to any apartheid-sensitized reader of South African fiction. And yet, though this sense of familiarity is tangible, it also reads as a pattern of minor importance in the works of both writers, as other thematic outlooks come to the fore. Lahens points this out in her study when she deals with the distanciation from indigenism and marxism, two traits of Haitian literature, in modern female Haitian writings:

> [...] jamais dans ces quatre romans ne sont présentés un paysan ou une paysanne idéale, dépositaire d'une authenticité culturelle immuable [...] ou un paysan ou un prolétaire idéal, conscient de la

[8] Njabulo Ndebele, *Fools and Other Stories*. London: Readers International, 1993 (1st published Ravan press, Johannesburg, 1983).

> lutte des classes et étant lui-même un modèle de vertu politique [...]. Pourtant, dans chacun des quatre romans qui nous intéressent, les rapports entre les classes, quand ce n'est pas la réalité paysanne ou celle des défavorisés de la ville, sont présentés à des degrés divers, toujours marqués à l'encre forte mais sans jamais pour autant peser au point d'encombrer l'espace du roman.[9]

Such a device, which we have signalled out as *strategy of subversion* in another essay[10] enables the writer to strike out towards the exploration of silenced features in literature, by focusing his/her attention on the neglected facets of popular ordinary life. This is what Ndebele not only preached when he called for the *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, but also what he practised in *Fools*. Concurrently, Danticat's gospels to the Ordinary echo Ndebele's concern about the relevance of a writer's commitment to his people's demands.

Indeed, Danticat seems to draw her inspirational matter from the insightful observation of her people, not as a homogeneous epitomizing group, but as clusters of fertile networks.

A direct result of this is the strong focus on individuals and the contradictions which come to surface. They can stem from ordinary situations or even ordeals triggered off in her books by parent-children issues, love-related issues, gender and sexual issues, etc. The point is in showing how such contradictions are dealt with, in a realistic fashion and how great an impact these depictions can have on the reader. Not only is this a newly-explored feature, but it is also regarded as a prior condition to the relevant grasping of people's Ordinary, as Lahens stresses:

> Parce que les différentes voix du texte s'inscrivent dans une perspective intimiste sous le mode de l'introspection, de l'auto-analyse, nous n'avons plus les personnages types, d'un seul tenant, à la psychologie rigoureusement structurée, du roman réaliste de la génération de la Ronde, du roman dit paysan et du roman engagé. Ce qui ressort, à première vue, c'est que les lignes de structure

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[9] Yannick Lahens, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

[10] Béatrice Manigat, *Njabulo Ndebele ou la Recherche d'une Paix Littéraire en Afrique du Sud.* Mémoire de D.E.A. en Lettres et Sciences Sociales, Option Etudes Anglophones, Alain Geoffroy (dir.). Université de la Réunion, août 2000.

> (familiales, sociales) sont aussi des lignes de fêlure, ouvrant souvent sur des agencements individuels autres que ceux proposés par la société. Or, dans la littérature romanesque qui a précédé, il s'agissait au contraire d'arriver à une psychologie des personnages structurée, répondant à la cohérence admise. D'autant plus que ces écrivains parlaient avant tout au nom d'une collectivité dont ils voulaient être les porte-parole et dont les personnages de roman devaient servir de modèles. Ici, les personnages sont saisis avec leurs incohérences, leurs révoltes et leurs pulsions, non point pour servir de modèle, mais pour amener tout simplement à une meilleure compréhension humaine.[11]

The precondition that Ndebele convincingly argues for is laid down here, in a 1998-Haitian perspective, which mirrors his belief in the positive impact of such writings on both black South African authorship and readership. Indeed, this is what he declared in 1984:

> The need for radical change [...] must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals. The specific subjectivity of character is universalised through the reader's recognition of familiar emotions generated in a given event. Thus, a reader, confronted with a dramatisation of process in character development, grows with the story.[12]

Recognition is an important trait of the writings both Ndebele and Lahens deem relevant, as "the significance of the story is that the writer has given us an honest rendering of the subjective experience of his character. There is no unearned heroism [...]; instead, there is the unproclaimed heroism of the ordinary person."[13]

In the same light, our Haitian critic concludes about the writings she presents:

> L'originalité de leurs voix tient au fait qu'en affichant des personnages avec leurs contradictions, [...] elles nous incitent à nous défaire de ce réflexe si cher dans notre milieu qui consiste à rechercher pour nos maux, des boucs émissaires. Or, précisément, ce

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[11] Yannick Lahens, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

[12] Njabulo Ndebele, "Turkish Tales," in *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 36.

[13] Njabulo Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary," *op. cit.*, p. 55.

> que nous dit en premier lieu la contradiction, c'est que nous sommes à la fois l'un et l'autre, et que l'autre est en nous-mêmes. Toute avancée doit commencer par un travail de négation de nous-mêmes.[14]

As a direct result to the fact that Danticat's writings exemplify this trait, Ndebele's enthusiastic comments after reading her did not come as a surprise. Nor does the praise for her publications from critics. Famous African American Paule Marshall for instance once stated: "In this collection of spare, luminous stories that read like poems, Edwidge Danticat has taken the travails of the Haitian people and their resiliency of spirit and given them universal meaning and appeal. [...] A silenced Haiti has once again found its literary voice."

Memory, Storytelling and Redemption

As in a Chinese box structure, both Ndebele's and Danticat's stories read from introspection to community or national healing. Introspection in Ndebele's stories mainly lays, as he himself points out, in the "direct concern with the way people actually live[15]," with the "prominent and sensitive treatment of the 'inner life'," that is to say the "intellectual and emotional processes of the protagonist."[16]

It also lays in both authors treatment of the question of memory. Indeed, a better grasping of people's Ordinary provides the writer with more relevant depictions of Haitian life, and resorting to one's own personal memories of the past is a feature to be found in both writings. For instance, Ndebele's short stories are set in environments he himself knew as a child, and some childhood memories have crept into the pictures of township life he presents to his readers. As for Danticat, she explained about *Krik? Krak!* that she "wanted to raise the voice of a lot of people that [she] knew growing up, and this was, for the most part, poor people who had extraordinary dreams but also amazing obstacles."

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[14] Yannick Lahens, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
[15] Njabulo Ndebele, *ibid.*, p. 58.
[16] Micheal Vaughan, "Writer and Community: Theory and Practise in the work of Njabulo Ndebele." University of Natal, Durham, 1988, p. 3.

Thus, though it would be a mistake to call these South African and Haitian stories autobiographical, they embody some of the authors' experiences as a child. That is why they can be regarded as intimate stories about the raw longings of people for some chance at peace and happiness for themselves and their imprisoned societies, and, as for Haiti, about existences contorted by forced separation, and of personal lives shot through with terror.

The route to such an impression of intimacy is mapped out by artistic devices which denote both authors' concern about form, more precisely the art of storytelling. It is worth remembering here their common roots as short story writers; this fact haunts Danticat's novels for instance, which read more like collections of connected stories than seamlessly evolved novels.

Thus, significantly enough, both writers seem to fund their fiction by drawing on their inclination to storytelling, and this explicitly reads in Danticat's works. *Krik? Krak!*, for instance, speaks for itself; the collection's title comes from a Haitian storytelling tradition in which the "young ones will know what come before them. They ask Krik? We say Krak! Our stories are kept in our hearts."[17] As a result, her writing echoes the call and response of after-supper storytelling, and her stories draw on the oral tradition in Haitian society. Though only *Krik? Krak!* takes an overt telling-a-story stance, both *Breath, Eyes and Memory* and *The Farming of Bones* abide by the law of lyric narrative grace that bears witness to the traditions, suffering and wisdom of an entire people. Danticat limns a vibrant depiction of life in Haiti "from the cups of ginger tea and baskets of cassava bread served at community potlucks to the folk tales of a people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads [18]." The effect created is that of a strong evocation of atmosphere, which is at times painful, but which most of the time enhances the idea of treasured customs. That is why, though tragic and at times horrifying, the stories are so beautifully told that the readers are easily drawn in their midst. This provides us with an easy access to the Ordinary of people's

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[17] Sal Scalora, in "Haiti: Feeding the Spirit," quoted by Danticat, in *Krik? Krak! op. cit.*, foreword.

[18] *Oprah Winfrey Book Club Selection Online*, may 1998.

lives, as if we had been invited to take seat near the hearth next to which the story teller has gathered his/her audience. There is little doubt here that Danticat's art is rooted in a well-established Haitian tradition which enables her to entertain and involve the reader at the same time. This is what Ndebele called for in his 1984 essay "Turkish Tales ans some thoughts on South African fiction" when he wrote:

> [...] a story [should be] allowed to unfold by itself with a minimum of authorial intervention through which a storyteller might directly suggest how readers or listeners should understand his story.[...] the reader's emotional involvement does not necessarily lead to a lulling of [his] critical consciousness, [but] triggers off an imaginative participation in which [he] recreates the story in his or her own mind, and is thus led to draw conclusions about the meaning of the story from the engaging logic of events as they are acted out in the story.[19]

The mastering of the art of storytelling is thus regarded as the starting point to a healing rediscovery of one's people ordinary which empowers the reader. We better understand Anthony O'Brien's definition of the Ordinary as a "displacement of the question of power toward the private sphere."[20]

Hence, in line with his plea, Ndebele may well find that Danticat "gives [her readership] the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture [and that] in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are not seen to be explicitly oriented to resistance are valid."[21] To him, relevance lies in the writer's commitment to the demands of his art, not only to politics.

Accordingly, not only does Danticat tell tales, but she has also woven stories of memories, and even legends to be passed on from one generation to the next, especially from mother to daughter as pictured in *Breath, Eyes and Memory*. This forges a

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[19] Njabulo Ndebele, "Turkish Tales and some thoughts on South African fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[20] Anthony O'brien, "Literature in another South Africa: Njabulo Ndebele's theory of emergent culture," in *Diacritics*, n°22, I, quoted by Pechey, Graham: *Introduction to Njabulo Ndebele's South African Literature and Culture: The Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[21] Njabulo Ndebele, "Turkish Tales and some thoughts on South African fiction," *op. cit.*, p. 38.

life-sustaining chain across the painful abyss of Haitian brutality, as if it were the only legacy one could hold on to. The stories reveal the linkage of generations of Haitians through the magical tradition of storytelling, but also evoke the powerful imagination and rich narrative tradition of her native Haiti. In so doing, Danticat restores the people's lost voice, "silenced voice," as Paule Marshall put it.

However, though both authors explore the questions of introspection and memory as important steps of the healing process, these traits seem to be more pronounced in Danticat's writings.

Indeed, while both readerships are provided with evocations of silenced experiences, Danticat's three major works lay stronger emphasis on sensitive themes which lend weight to the notion of common history, common painful experiences. Whereas Ndebele tends to argue for a greater distanciation from the grammar of protest which stems from the description of pain, and a stronger connection with indigenised literary art forms which validate people's each and every concerns.

As such, this difference may suggest that greater, or at least different strides have been made in the domain of literature in Haiti compared to South Africa.

As commonplace as the latter statement may sound, an overlook of the possible reasons may shed some light on perspectives that are likely to emerge for South African writers expressing themselves through different art forms.

The difference may be regarded as obvious given the well-known cultural heritage Haitian writers have benefitted from for centuries. Indeed, from its independence in 1804, Haitian literature has been a privileged vehicle for the building of a national identity. By turns, it has expressed historic and patriotic concerns,[22] from the celebration of Négritude, the shared awareness of black identity, to the upholding of affinity with an African homeland[23] as well as the development of greater attachment to indigenous

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[22] The very first novel Stella (1850's), by Emeric Bergeaud, related a famous episode of the battle for independence.

[23] Haitian author Jean Price Mars (*Ainsi Parla l'Oncle*, 1928) best exemplified this trend.

realities.[24] Or in its time, romantic and Marxist patterns. What is more, the massive exile which resulted from the Duvalier dictatorship led to the birth of a quite active intellectual diaspora. Indeed, exile, mainly to the United States of America which has become a second country for many Haitians, played a major role in the orientation of literary themes.

These parameters have nurtured the growth of a multilingual readership (in French, but also in Creole and English) with various vehicles at hand (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.) as well as that of a multifacetted authorship: poetry and fiction mainly, which have been privileged mediums for the exploration of what Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier called "marvellous realism" and defined as the association of myth and reality, of violent images and virtuoso writing.[25]

As such, Haiti has won its spurs as home to prominent writers, such as Jacques Stephen Alexis, Jacques Roumain, Marie Chauvet, René Dépestre, Antony Phelps, Jean Metellus, to name only a few...

Thus, as far as fiction is concerned, it is not surprising to read stories which draw on a well-established tradition of exploration of form and on the oral tradition in Haitian society, or to read works which speak of loss and assimilation and resistance and that yet entertain and involve the reader... as Edwidge Danticat's writings.

What are the implications of these findings for post-protest South African literature?

It must be acknowledged here that Ndebele's criticism as exposed in *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary* comes to mind as extremely relevant and timing. Indeed, an obvious prerequisite

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[24] Jean Baptiste Cineas (*Le Drame de la Terre*, 1933) initiated the "roman paysan haïtien," an objective depiction of real life in the country which lays emphasis on the subtility of peasant way of life (social habits and customs). Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (1944) stands out as the epitome of this genre though.

[25] The expression was first used by Haitian author Jacques Stephen Alexis who wrote the highly acclaimed *Compère Général Soleil* (1955). See also René Depestre's *Le Mât de Cocagne* (1979) or Jean Metellus's *Jacmel au Crépuscule* (1981).

after comparing the situation of readerships in both countries is the urgent democratisation of the act of reading, through the spreading of devices aiming at helping a majority of people gain access to the written word... and make it their own, as Ndebele urged for when explaining why he put a great emphasis on the written word:

> [...] this is to assert the fact that the relatively greater impact of the written word in the social contest for power is undeniable. To assert the contrary [...] is to deny the mass reader the opportunity to experience the efficacy of self-education through reading. The aim is to enable the ordinary reader to domesticate the written word for his or her own liberation.[26]

Such a prerequisite implies the serious taking into account of culture as major component of the momentum South Africa has been gaining in the political field, as he argued back in 1987:

> The political wing of the struggle, no doubt at the forefront of this struggle, should not make concessions to cultural practice. They should plan for it as a matter of necessity, for it is the only social context in which people are inhibitedly themselves. For this reason, we should not 'include' culture as an after-thought in social planning. On the contrary, we should say, there can be no democratic society without the progressive institutionalisation of cultural practice, *in all its forms.*[27] (author's stress)

Comparatively, from a Haitian perspective, this prerequisite has worked out as catalyst of the growth of popular readership, which has enabled writers to validate the relevance of their works. The impact of an impressive literary background and the use of both official and national languages namely French and Creole, to name only the languages spoken in Haiti, has undoubtedly helped the assertion of this political prerequisite. A similar road is likely to be trod in South Africa if the politics of culture is inclusive of all forms of expression, among which, languages.

Second, as Ndebele argued for, a stronger interest for storytelling and its healing power would be a good incentive to the deeper exploration in a new light of fields such as history,

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[26] Njabulo Ndebele, "Against pamphleteering the Future," *op. cit.*, p. 139.
[27] Njabulo Ndebele, "Towards Progressive Cultural Planning," *op. cit.*, p. 127.

language, orality. This implies the taking of greater risks on part of authors, for the political may still strongly influence a writer's choice of subject matter. Indeed, bearing witness of the post-apartheid age can be a tantalizing temptation. Writers, like Danticat in a Haitian perspective, might want to cast away any form of conventional political rhetoric. Others, like South African critic Karen Press deemed this necessary with regards to the future of South African writing, when in 1990 she argued for:

> [...] a situation in which artists have the right to produce what they believe to be of use to the liberation struggle, and to take their work to the widest possible audience within that struggle for assessment – in other words, a democratisation of the relationship between artists and their audiences.[28]

This worry seems all the more applicable to the South African context as promises of redemption on a political scale have yet not been fulfilled, as could be expected given the major challenges post-apartheid South Africa has to take up. Just as the promises of democracy in post-Duvalier Haiti. Indeed, writers from both countries may find themselves in a deadlock, by trying to articulate strongly political and artistic demands at the same time. To break this deadlock, the telling of stories which grow from intimacy to family, from family to community, from the individual to the universal can be regarded as a salutary pause, for they provide readers at home and abroad with new pictures of a nation which, at last, does not seem far from hearth and home.

Hence the need to explore new fields, to subvert long-lived strategies so as to focus on the ordinary lives of people which, as Ndebele puts it "should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitue the very content of the struggle, for the struggle involves people, not abstractions." He goes on saying: "If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live."[29]

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[28] Karen Press, "Building a national Culture in South Africa," in Martin Trump (ed): *Rendering things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990, p. 37.

[29] Njabulo Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary," *op. cit.*, p. 57.

In doing so, writers may come out with "literarily peaceful" works which echo what critic Ferenc Feher, quoted in Lahens's essay, once wrote about Jewish, African American and South African female writers:

> Elles montrent leur pays et le monde et disent: voici notre monde, il est suffisamment en désordre. Ne vous asseyez pas dans la poussière pour vous lamenter sur ce désordre et ne détruisez pas ce monde par une fureur démesurée. Mettez plutôt de l'ordre dans votre maison et conservez-en l'histoire pour ceux qui viendront habiter après vous.[30]

I would like to end this presentation by dedicating the following lines to Njabulo Ndebele, for him to sit near the hearth of Haitian storytelling:

> Krik? Krak!
> When you write, it's like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity. Your fingers have still not perfected the task. Some of the braids are long, others are short. Some are thick, others are thin. Some are heavy. Others are light. Like the diverse women in your family. Those whose fables and metaphors, whose similes, and soliloquies, whose diction and je ne sais quoi slip into your survival soup, by way of their fingers. [...]
> You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother. Your mother, who looked like your grandmother and her grandmother before her. Your mother, she introduced you to the first echoes of the tongue that you now speak when at the end of the day she would braid your hair while you sat between her legs, scrubbing the kitchen pots. While your fingers worked away at the last shadows of her day's work, she would make your braids Sunday-pretty, even during the week.
> When she was done she would ask you to name each braid after those nine hundred and ninty-nine women who were boiling in your blood, and since you had written them down and memorized them, the names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again.[31]

Béatrice MANIGAT[32]

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[30] Ferenc Feher, "Revenir à la maison," in *Lettre Internationale*, Paris, automne 88, p. 48.

[31] Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p. 224.

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