

Editorial

## **Counter-cultures in contemporary Africa**

*Emma O'Shaughnessy and Reinier Vriend*

---

This edition was aimed at drawing out better ways of understanding the forms and countenances of counter-cultures in contemporary Africa. In keeping the call for papers broad, we encouraged postgraduate scholars to focus on a variety of sites within this often-shifting area of thought, study and practice. The broad range of topics is fittingly aligned with how the editorial collective understands counter-cultures. We see counter-cultures as zones of emergent response, constituting a range of practices, representations and performances, produced by varying narratives and realities. We see counter-cultures as movements that may begin in the fringes of normative society and politics, but that gather momentum and begin to rival the status quo in visible and powerful ways. We think of counter-cultures as the catalysts for social, political and cultural action and change.

Each article, photographic essay or review in this edition creates a lens through which one can understand these dynamics better, within the current African context. Some of these submissions challenge the very format of academic discourse by drawing methodologies of intellectual thought together with poetic language and expression, thereby offering alternative modes of engagement. For example, **Emma Arogundade's** review essay on the Pan African Space Station (PASS), an experimental musical and poetic collective operating in South Africa, is thought provoking in its playful challenge to form. Interspersed with her own poems and images, Arogundade presents the reader with a window into this exciting movement of writers, singers, poets and musicians occupying an actively rebellious space in local cultural production.

This idea that music can act as a vehicle for the creation of counter-cultures, because it evolves through alternate influences and players, is discussed further by **Lukas Ligeti** in his reflective essay, 'Questioning Tradition through Experiments between African and Western music'. Pinpointing West Africa as a site of his own musical experimentation, Ligeti traces the formation of his ensemble, Beta Foly (meaning 'the Music in all of us' in Malinké) – a group comprised of German and African musicians. Without romanticising the energies of Africa's many musical traditions, Ligeti's essay gestures towards the potential of alternative models of sound and rhythm through the merging of different cultural and aesthetic musical practices. To compliment his written submission, Ligeti provides images and sound files of Beta Foly's music, allowing the reader to submit to the experience of the performances. You can find the links to the sound files embedded in his article.

Indeed, to experiment, to collaborate in unforeseen ways, to be pliable so that new forms and forces can change and destabilise dominant positions and ideas: this, *postamble* imagines, is the recipe for alternation. Even if this view is an

idealised one, idealism is not misplaced in the quest for countering dominant forces within the social, political and cultural order. Even in African countries where the socio-economic and political situation is suffocating the expression of alterity, there exist windows where counter-cultures can percolate.

Zimbabwe is a case in point. She is presented as a particularly contested and complex zone in this edition. Three carefully argued essays examine the ties between the socio-political sphere and its representation through creative form and discourse, inviting the reader to consider how the status quo is being undermined or altered on an everyday level through literary representation and dramatic performance.

**Oliver Nyambi's** essay, "Debunking the post-2000 masculinisation of political power in Zimbabwe: an approach to John Eppel's novel *Absent: The English Teacher*" focuses on the gendered political terrain of postcolonial Zimbabwe. Nyambi suggests that the liberation movement has sustained a type of cultural misogyny through its veneration of liberatory guerilla violence and heroic patriarchal roles. Nyambi explores Eppel's contestation of the state's masculinisation of political power in post-2000 Zimbabwe through his novel and stories as counter imaginative forces to the prevailing political dispensation.

With a corresponding literary concern in mind, **Corwin Mhlalo** tackles post-independence Zimbabwe in his study of Yvonne Vera's novels in, "A culture of resistance: Vera's *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning*". Mhlalo reads both novels via the 'optic of existentialism' in the context of the postcolonial and presents the novels' protagonists as enactors of alternative acts of resistance to colonial rule. Using Vera as a lens, he suggests how resistance to colonialism was not always enacted through armed or objective, violent struggle, and thus challenges dominant ideas about the mechanisms of the liberation movement in Zimbabwe.

**Muwonwa Ngonidzashe's**, "Performing Subversion': Youth and Active Citizenship in Zimbabwean Protest Theatre" discusses the 'precarious and diverging contributions of young people to the democratic processes of Zimbabwean politics'. Focusing on a range of dramatic texts and performances in the post-2000 period, Ngonidzashe observes the potential of theatre to create patterns of change through its social, cultural and symbolic capital and how certain performances have been able to shift or 'fracture' existing master narratives about the country's democratic evolution.

While moving away from Zimbabwe in their essay, "Sexuality and madness: versions and subversions in Calixthe Beyala's *Femme nue Femme noire* and Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia*" **Margret Chipara** and **Gibson Ncube** argue for the same potential of literature. The authors discuss ways in which prevailing pejorative stereotypes about the female persona in Cameroon and Mozambique can be actively challenged through women's fiction. Drawing on Maria Pia Lara's feminist readings, Chipara and Gibson argue that in their selected fictions, 'sexuality and madness create an

“illocutionary force” that empowers the female protagonists to escape the “signifying social frame” that has constrained and marginalised them’.

Approaching African letters as a key vehicle through which counter-cultural issues are addressed raises the perennial debate about the role of the African author within society. In her book review of Jamala Safari’s *The Great Agony and Pure Laughter of the Gods*, *postamble* editor **Ruth Brown** impresses upon us the importance of the dual role of social responsibility and story telling – especially when recounting and representing the agony of child soldiering in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For Brown, Safari’s book documents the extended psychological traumas that envelop a child’s life after being forced into a guerrilla army. In so doing, he brings to light the vast impact of warfare on young human lives whilst creating a compelling and well-written narrative text. The text thus symbolises a key objective of a many African writers: to bring about awareness of painful realities within the postcolonial space.

The potential of the text and the act of reading to raise uncomfortable truths about African society reminds *postamble* of the entangled links between everyday acts, public representation and discourse. **Kate Joseph’s** essay, ‘Mixing soccer and sexually ‘subversive’ identities: issuing a form of representational counter-culture able to challenge hegemonic gender relations in contemporary South Africa?’ uses the social practice of sport as lens to examine the representations and address of lesbian gender politics within contemporary South Africa. Joseph asks whether integrationist strategies in women’s soccer can change the position that lesbian women occupy within the country’s hetero-normative and sexist cultural frameworks.

The theme of integration comes up again in this edition. Considering the impact of the migrant figure in Mauritian history, in her article, ‘The Coolitude of Coolitude: The (re)negotiation of the Indian Identity in Mauritius’, **Teena Dewoo** uses her own family lineage to point out ways in which generations of migrant workers coming to the island in around the late 1800’s were able to create a fluid and merged sense of self – despite the cultural and social displacements that accompanied their migration. Drawing on an archive of pictures and story, Dewoo carefully suggests how individuals and communities are able to select and maintain meaningful ties to former Indian identities. In so doing, she suggests migrants are able to form their own counter-culture to the everyday and imagined norms of this diasporic community.

Lastly, in this issue, we have also included a short essay by **Justin Dixon**, titled, *Beyond Dualist Ontology: A Note of Caution on the use of the Concept of “Agency”*. His focus, although it does not explicitly deal with Africa, is on the problematic of affixing agency to inanimate objects. Dixon cautions us about our tendency to ascribe emotions to material things while critiquing the Cartesian tradition. Dixon’s article impresses upon us the changing landscape of humanist and humanising thought and thus asks us to be conscious of how conceptions of agency and power are perceived in different times. The essay

bears implications for those scholars who may be trying to come to terms with contemporary humanist principles and questions of agency and action in Africa.

In concluding this editorial, we raise a last note about this edition's theme and how we feel young scholars responded to it. Although Kate Joseph's article examines media in society to a degree, we were surprised by the lack of submissions around the role of media in creating cultures and counter-cultures in Africa today. We felt that this gap within the field should be responded to, especially if one considers that *postamble* itself is a medium of dissemination, a web-based platform and a 'new media' of sorts.

Below, *postamble* editor, Reinier Vriend, offers some insights into why media is a key player in cultural and counter-cultural movements. We have included his observations here as a precursor to a larger conversation we are hoping to have in future editions of the journal.

### **The countercultural in media**

Locating the counter-cultural in media reiterates the necessity for context specific enquiry. In traditional Western media discourses, specific media are attributed affordances regarding their ability to challenge the dominant mode. However, scarce heed is paid to dissimilar mediascapes. Locating ourselves on the African continent, we have the opportunity to revisit these medium specific assertions. Television culture is regularly conflated with low-brow culture, which situates the counter-cultural in labels like 'American quality drama'. But in the African context we might instead, for instance, value original national programming as counter-cultural television, opposing it to the dominance of Anglo-American media products. Digital media and the Web have been widely treasured as a democratising and counter-cultural media. African statistics are nevertheless clear in showing that here particularly the traditional economic elites, sentries of mainstream culture, have the best access to web skill and access. Specific mediascapes discriminate between uses and interpretations. Critical enquiry has to follow suit.

### **Television advertising: a counter-cultural case in point?**

In correspondence with the above call for contextualisation, I would like to address the counter-cultural potential of the original South African television advert. The following exemplifies just how slippery the idea of the counter-cultural is. On a macro level, it will be very hard to spot any counter-cultural characteristics in television advertising. In the current post-apartheid neo-liberal democracy, the television commercial is a media product that can be pictured as the backbone of the medium's hegemonic practices. Caught in a free-market logic that has been in denial about the social responsibilities of current and prior governments, the material presence of the TV commercial form is in itself a reification of the system it symbolises. From this point of view, television is nothing more than audiences presented to advertisers.

However, when we consider the level of 'content', it seems that there is ample room in the advertising structure for examples of the counter-cultural. This

counter-culture might not be one that challenges the economic environment in which it exists, but contains appeals to other cultural currents. Commercials like Nando's "Diversity" and "Responsible Spending" ads succeed in drawing attention to larger societal themes (respectively 'xenophobia' and 'political corruption'). In their cultural referencing, they are counter-cultural: as opposed to the 'rainbow nation' discourse dominant in mainstream advertising (think about the manic united diversity in Castle's 2010 "Home Bru" ad) as well as mainstream media, they portray a social reality that requires a change of the status quo. The recent decision of SABC to ban an ad featuring a character with the likeness to President Jacob Zuma shows that political forces themselves believe that adverts have the ability to represent and/or ignite certain tensions in society.

A link with politics and the struggle over fixed meaning is thus readily available, but we can visualise a third way of productively using the term in this case study. If we depart from the 24-hour cycle of national television programming and look at the origin of television programming, (public, commercial and cable) it is clear that compared to original national programming, a sizeable portion of the daily television schedule is of Anglo-American making. TV advertising, on the other hand, has a high percentage of local programming: ads broadcasted without local adaptations are an exception. As a genre of television programs, the commercial might be only a little behind a proudly South African category like 'the news'. And given its ubiquity, more time a day is filled by Vodacom's "Daddy Cool" than by Derek van Dam's weather reports.

And here it seems that the counter-cultural snake bites his own tail. As a result of the global free-market environment in which television has to be effective and profitable, it cannot afford to refrain from telling a story that is locally applicable and relevant. The counter-cultural potential of television advertising is thus both marginal and large at the same time: it has to swear allegiance to the commercial environment from which it springs, but as a prime source for original South African television it offers stories to which people can relate their everyday experiences. And these experiences are, and always have been, the very matter of politics.

With these fine points in mind, we hope you enjoy the edition.