

## **The Accidental Activist: Reading Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* as a parody of the disappointed African intellectual<sup>1</sup>**

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In his study of resistance in postcolonial African fiction, Neil Lazarus describes a figure that has become a pervasive trope in African literary fiction and to an extent in African intellectual criticism – that of the disappointed, disillusioned and disempowered radical intellectual<sup>2</sup>. Lazarus analyses this figure in the context of a version of the history of independence in Africa that understands the many different movements across the continent from colonial occupation to national independence and beyond as following much the same trajectory – a seemingly inevitable degeneration from promising beginnings to what Lazarus has described as “stagnation, elitism, and class domination, and...the intensifying structural dependence – economic, political, cultural, and ideological – of Africa upon the imperial Western powers”<sup>3</sup>. It is both the pervasive hold on the South African intellectual imaginary of the idea of the inevitability of this decline, as well as specifically the figure of the disappointed and disaffected intellectual, I would argue, that is parodied and critiqued in Zakes Mda's novel *The Heart of Redness*. Let me point out at the outset that neither Lazarus nor Mda, nor I for that matter, set out to deny the poverty and the political and social marginalisation that so many millions of people face on the continent, or that poverty in Africa is related in complex ways to global economic and political exchanges. What is at issue is how this marginalisation and exploitation is to be analysed, thus what forces have brought it about and shape it now, and how, if at all, it might be alleviated or even eradicated. In both Lazarus' analysis and Mda's text, the role of intellectuals in both shaping an understanding of social conditions and formulating a way to intervene in them appropriately is moved centre stage. Both texts, I would argue, suggest not only that intellectuals' analysis of social and political circumstances was, and still is, often mistaken, but that that mistake also contributed to increasing social and political inequalities in the newly independent nations.

Despite the relative familiarity of Lazarus' argument, let me re-trace those features that are most pertinent here, before progressing to a reading of Mda's text. Lazarus focuses his argument on radical intellectuals, thus intellectuals who understand social transformation along more or less Marxist lines as the decisive revolution of society to bring about an end to capitalist exploitation, a redistribution of wealth and land, and the political empowerment of the poor and marginalised through the establishment of properly democratic institutions of government. These intellectuals, he argues, fell victim to two related mistakes of analysis. First, the struggle for freedom of anti-colonial activists was, as Lazarus puts it, “a negative one: a struggle *against* colonialism, not a struggle *for* anything specific.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, no coherent vision was developed for what shape post-independence society should take, or how this transformation was to be brought about. Due to this lack of a coherent vision, the move for independence in many African countries was soon dominated by nationalists who wanted, in Franz Fanon's words quoted by Lazarus, simply to “transfer into native hands...those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period,”<sup>5</sup> a change merely of the people in power which continued the exploitation and domination of the poor in those countries. Second,

Lazarus argues, this error was compounded by a mistaken analysis of the historical processes at work in and through the independence struggles. Many radical intellectuals fell victim to what Lazarus calls an inappropriate “messianism” inherited from Fanon. This messianism equally was characterised by an “unwarranted conflation,” this time “of independence with *revolution*”<sup>6</sup> – revolution to be understood here in the specifically Marxist terms sketched above. As Lazarus argues:

[This] conflation of independence with revolution is the product of a utopian conceptualization of the national liberation struggle...in terms of which decolonization was interpreted as a *revolutionary* process and the independence ceremony was taken to signal that the revolution had been won, rather than merely begun.<sup>7</sup>

Radical intellectuals saw themselves then as “representing the voice of the revolution”, a revolution which “they interpreted as having been waged and won with the acquisition of independence.”<sup>8</sup> While many radical intellectuals, often drawn from the ranks of the newly empowered middle classes, took some time to realise that independence did not mean freedom for the poor and the marginalised in their countries, many never faced up to this fact. Once they did accept that national freedom did not mean freedom for all, they found themselves in a quandary. As Lazarus points out, they were trapped by the double irony of being “writers in communities in which the overwhelming majority of their fellows were illiterate” as well as being “comfortable, even rich, in the midst of squalor and abject poverty.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, not only did these intellectuals not share the fate of the majority of their fellow citizens, their ability to intervene on the behalf of those less fortunate than them was decisively hampered by the kind of intervention they were capable of. As a result, they “felt themselves crippled by their isolation and lack of social utility”<sup>10</sup> and their response often was to become disillusioned, even cynical.

However, these disillusioned intellectuals, in Lazarus’ argument, did not accept that their analysis of the forces at work in their countries’ move towards independence might have been mistaken. Instead, in their need to account for the failure of the revolution they had seen as already in full flow, radical intellectuals began to argue that the revolutionary thrust of the masses before independence must have been thwarted somehow by pernicious forces inside or outside their respective countries, after independence was achieved. They soon found a number of persuasive villains ready to hand. In one line of argument, the people were betrayed by their leaders, who were bent only on establishing a new “kleptocracy”<sup>11</sup> rather than to institute an independent government for the benefit of all. Another line of argument pointed out that where the leaders had not betrayed the masses, the revolution had failed because of imperialism’s sly utilisation of independence as a ruse to ensure an even more complete enslavement of the ex-colonies to the imperial centres, an argument that, as Lazarus points out, found world-wide circulation in the shape of “dependency theory.”<sup>12</sup> Either way, there remained nothing for radical intellectuals to do other than to describe the terrible state of their countries or to witness to the disaster that had befallen their countrymen. African society would, and could, never be reformed. In this narrative, Africa became the paradigmatic victim, either of its corrupt and incompetent leaders, its insufficiently revolutionary people, or, most

seductive of all these possibilities, of international conspiracies by its former colonial masters to keep it in bondage and abjection. Even though this narrative was first developed in the 1960s (as Lazarus points out repeatedly), it still forms the basis of many contemporary explanations of social, political and economic inequality and stagnation in Africa circulated in the public consciousness and the media of Europe and America, as well as in African countries.

It is against this background that *The Heart of Redness* can be read productively. The text juxtaposes two narrative strands, one of which is set in the mid 1850s during amaXhosa resistance to British occupation and the events of the so-called Cattle Killing Movement, the other taking place four years after the first fully democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. The text therefore overtly concerns what David Attwell has called “two moments of seminal importance in the relationships that black humanity in South Africa has forged with modernity at various points in its history.”<sup>13</sup> Attwell attempts to render the term “modernity” more precise by defining it as “the currently governing concept of what it means to be a subject of history”<sup>14</sup> which refers,

[...] not only to technology and the emergence of an administered and industrialised society, but also to that fluid but powerful system of ideas that we inherit from the bourgeois revolutions of Europe in the late eighteenth century – ideas such as autonomy, personhood, rights, and citizenship.<sup>15</sup>

Useful as Attwell’s observation is, it is marred by the vagueness of this definition– a vagueness admitted freely by Attwell himself– since it does not address the extent to which any definition of modernity in the western, developed world is contested, nor does it address how any concept of modernity is affected by the specific cultural and social context in which it operates.<sup>16</sup> A more productive way of expressing the two conflicts that the narrative addresses seems to be to characterize them as the confrontation of the amaXhosa nation with two stages of the capitalist mode of production. The first stage is marked by nation-state colonial Imperialism in the form of the British conquests of amaXhosa territory. The second, which is subtly different from though it grows out of the first stage, is marked by processes of economic and political globalisation, what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have provocatively and productively called “Empire.” Understood by them as an analytical concept rather than as a form of territorial domination, Empire marks the current process of:

[...] an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule – in short, a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.<sup>17</sup>

This new global structure of rule, they argue, can no longer be seen as an international conspiracy, even if its effects are to continue the social, economic and political exploitation first instituted by territorial colonialism. The process of globalisation, they argue, has long since surpassed the ability of any one country to control and to guide. As

they point out, “Empire can not be located in any single nation state, not even America.”<sup>18</sup> The processes of globalisation therefore cannot be analysed by recourse to any form of dependency theory or other global conspiracy theory. Empire, as a concept to describe the processes of globalisation, can be brought together with Lazarus’ analysis of the dual mistakes that underlie the disillusionment of many radical African intellectuals through attention to how these issues emerge in Mda’s text. In the 1998 novel, Mda focuses specifically on an example of the African intellectual identified by Lazarus– in the character of the returned exile, Camagu. Camagu leaves South Africa as a young man and goes into exile in America to obtain an education, culminating in a doctoral degree and work “in the communications department of an international development agency in New York.”<sup>19</sup> From there he progresses to an international career as an expert “in the area of development communication”, consulting for organisations like UNESCO and for the Food and Agricultural Organisation.<sup>20</sup> He thus follows the path of many African intellectuals who left their homes to gain an education and build a career abroad, predominantly in the heartlands of the imperial nations that dominated their home societies.

Camagu returns to South Africa in 1994, after an absence of almost 30 years, in order to vote in those first properly democratic elections. In his mid-forties, “a stranger in his own country”, he finds that “[h]e was swept up by the euphoria of the time, and decided that he would not return to New York. He would stay and contribute to the development of his country.”<sup>21</sup> His decision to stay, it seems to me, is inspired by much the same conflation that Lazarus has analysed – Camagu interprets the elections of 1994 as the culmination of a process of social transformation and as a marker for the achievement of freedom, rather than as the beginning of such a process. He can therefore conceive his responsibility to be merely to contribute to a development already under way, rather than to participate in the struggle over what kind of development should be envisaged, a struggle precisely over the manner of South African society’s entry into a globalised world. At the same time, the organisations he has worked for, particularly the FAO and UNESCO, place his expertise in a specific narrative of development within globalisation. Arif Dirlik, amongst others, has pointed out that these organisations are the products of a development discourse which,

[...] assuming universality for its own particular definitions of poverty and wealth, stagnation and progress, and ultimately what constitutes a good life, has led to an invasion of the world by EuroAmerican capitalism (now joined by others), which ultimately has had destructive consequences for societies and natures.<sup>22</sup>

This development discourse is localised, he argues, following Stacy Piggs’ suggestion, “through the complicity of the state, and native leaders who have internalized the culture of developmentalism.”<sup>23</sup> Camagu, therefore, not only does not acknowledge that a struggle around what development might mean in post-Apartheid South Africa still needs to take place, but his background and his experience seem to place him in a very specific camp within that struggle. Camagu’s euphoria is quickly confronted with the reality that in South Africa, too, “constitutional democracy has not produced economic and social emancipation for the majority of the country’s people.”<sup>24</sup> Much like the radical

intellectuals discussed by Lazarus, Camagu quickly becomes disillusioned with the whole process of democratic transformation. His disillusionment, however, seems spurred as much by the narrative of inevitable social decline caused by the corruption and nepotism of African ruling elites identified by Lazarus as being the actual social relations in the newly democratic South Africa.

Camagu finds evidence for the corruption of the ruling elite in the fact that he cannot find a job in governmental organisations despite his vast learning and experience. He does not question whether his skills or experience would in fact prove useful in the South African context. Instead, he blames his failure on the nepotism of the ruling elite, the Aristocrats of the Revolution, who wish to reserve for themselves the material benefits of economic and social transformation in post-Apartheid South Africa, and who do not recognise him as a legitimate member of their group. Nepotism and corruption in government, he claims, will not work in his favour. He finds proof of this corruption in the private sector as well. He claims that he can not find employment with corporations since he would be efficient at his job, and would thus deprive the old guard of white executives and senior managers of the huge earnings they make as consultants who help the inexperienced and incompetent “paragons of empowerment”<sup>25</sup> to do their job. In consequence, the beginning of his narrative finds him on the eve of his departure for a second exile in America at a seedy bar called Giggles, a place frequented by “disaffected exiles and sundry learned rejects of this new society”<sup>26</sup> reflecting bitterly on the irony of being called an exile in his own country. His trajectory, sketched briefly at the beginning of the novel, would conform entirely to the trajectory of the disempowered intellectuals that emerge in the work of Armah and others, as identified by Lazarus. Unwilling to participate in the corruption of the ruling elite, Camagu’s only alternative is to leave the country, to flee African nepotism and to return to the order of America where his merit will be recognised and rewarded appropriately.

However, Camagu’s bitterness and disillusionment is undercut by deep irony, and not only when Camagu muses that “[w]hining and whingeing is the pastime of this new democratic society...not recognising the fact that he was doing exactly the same thing.”<sup>27</sup> Camagu coerces his cleaning woman, whom he describes as “a frumpy country woman who has come to the city of gold to pick up a few pennies by cleaning up after disenchanting bachelors”<sup>28</sup> into sleeping with him. As the narrative voice of the text points out, rather laconically,

There is something about servitude that seems to set the crotches of men of Camagu’s ilk on fire. It must have been the same urge that drove the slave-master, normally a level-headed, loving family man...from his mansion to a night of wild passion with the slave girl in the slave quarters or in the fields.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, as the narrative points out, “it was wild passion only on his side. To the slave girl...[i]t was rape.”<sup>30</sup> Camagu comforts himself that in his case it is not rape since the servant encouraged him. Camagu seems unwilling to consider that the servant might have preferred other ways of making more money, if they had been available. Thus it becomes clear that Camagu is no less willing to exploit the poor for his own pleasure than the

Aristocrats of the Revolution are prepared to exploit the country for their gain. Shortly afterwards, Camagu is way-laid and diverted from his intended exile by a beautiful young woman mourner who sings at the funeral of a nameless young artist on the rooftop of Camagu's building in the centre of Johannesburg's Hillbrow district<sup>31</sup>. This location is of course not accidental. Hillbrow has long figured transgressively in the, particularly white, South African imaginary as a space that remained anarchically, and sometimes defiantly, multi-racial and multi-cultural even in the hey-day of Apartheid's attempted spacial purification. Its rooftops were often referred to as the 'location in the sky' due to the large number of servants' quarters built on top of its high-rise buildings, occupied by the black servants of Hillbrow's white residents. The suburb also gained a reputation as a haven for drug-addicts, prostitutes and gangsters, and became the home of a small contingent of white hippy students and non-conformist artist types during the 1980's, when briefly the area flirted with gaining Struggle credibility of the kind held by Orlando East in Soweto or District Six in Cape Town. Post-1994 the area was soon taken over by immigrants and refugees from other African countries and was perceived as degenerating again into a slum world of Nigerian Mafiosi and car hi-jackers where "every morning a number of dead bodies adorn the streets."<sup>32</sup> In its, quasi-mythological, trajectory the whole area thus seems to figure the failure of the dream of peace, freedom and prosperity in South Africa in particular but also in Africa as a whole, a failure that encourages Camagu's disillusionment.

The young singer is called NomaRussia, so named in honour of the Russian soldiers in the Crimean war who killed Sir George Cathcart, Governor of the Cape Colony between 1852 and 1854, largely responsible for the defeat of the amaXhosa in the War of Mlanjeni. She comes from the small seaside village of Qolorha-by-Sea. Camagu finds that at the wake, "only the image of the makoti lingers in [his] mind. He becomes breathless when he thinks of her."<sup>33</sup> Yet unlike the attraction he has felt for his cleaner, Camagu decides that his fascination with NomaRussia is not lust. Instead, "[s]he is more like a spirit that can comfort him and heal his pain. A mothering spirit. And this alarms him, for he has never thought of any woman like that before."<sup>34</sup> Next morning he finds himself pursuing her to Qolorha instead of driving to the airport, a change of destination that surprises him only because he does not openly admit to himself that far from being "a pedlar of dreams...[who] could make things happen", as he used to think of himself, he has become in need of "a pedlar of dreams himself, with a bagful of dreams waiting to be dreamt. A whole storage full of dreams."<sup>35</sup>

As a result of his encounter with NomaRussia, Camagu is confronted with the struggle of a particular poor and marginalised village that has been at the heart of the amaXhosa's struggle with territorial colonialism and is now occupied by members of the poor and downtrodden masses whose abandonment by the corrupt and nepotistic Aristocrats of the Revolution is cause for Camagu's disillusionment. It is here that Camagu will come to realise, though he does not set out to do so, that economic and political decline is not the only possible trajectory for South Africa as a whole, and that the poor whose condition he deplores can resist, even if such resistance needs to be conceived differently from the developmentalist approach that has shaped his thinking so far. Qolorha-by-Sea is the birthplace of Nongqawuse, the girl prophetess who did more, perhaps, than any other

individual to bring the amaXhosa nation to its knees. Nongqawuse prophesied that the world would be made new and the ancestors would rise from the sea to destroy the invading British settlers if the amaXhosa killed all their cattle and destroyed all their crops. Her prophecies sparked off the massive cattle killings in amaXhosa territories in 1857 and thus inaugurated what Attwell has called one of the “high water marks in the definition of agency in black historical and cultural identity”<sup>36</sup> as the amaXhosa attempted to repulse the invasion of their lands and their culture by British settlers through recourse to traditional structures of knowledge and belief.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time Nongqawuse’s prophecies inaugurated a struggle over what Attwell calls “the efficacy of local knowledge-systems as [the amaXhosa] try to come to terms with settler-colonialism,”<sup>38</sup> since they almost immediately split the nation into two camps, as suggested by Mda’s narrative and acknowledged by almost every historical study of the cattle killings<sup>39</sup>. Believers in the prophecy killed their cattle and waited on the shores of the ocean for the ancestors to rise, trusting in the ability of traditional belief systems to render the new world order intelligible and to suggest appropriate interventions in it. Unbelievers could not imagine the ancestors literally rising from the dead and thus preferred to seek alternative ways of resisting the British or to find a form of accommodation with them. This attempt was soon hi-jacked by sections of the amaXhosa nation who saw the British simply as superior and thus could imagine a future for themselves only through the complete abandonment of amaXhosa tradition and the pursuit of British culture, and particularly, British learning. As Attwell points out, neither position brought success.<sup>40</sup> The Believers starved when the ancestors failed to rise and lost their lands and control of their political destiny, the Unbelievers lost their identity. Further, the division of the amaXhosa nation into two camps effectively rendered impossible any resistance to colonial occupation.

The battle between Believers and Unbelievers is revived in 1998, when the people of Qolorha-by-Sea are confronted with the proposal by a black-empowerment consortium to build a casino and hotel complex on the site of the village. The choice the villagers are asked to make in deciding for or against the proposed casino development is one about the kind of change and development they want to pursue, politically and economically. In stark terms, the proposed development will either offer them economic opportunities not dreamed of before, or else will force them even further into poverty and exploitation. The battle-lines between the Believers, led by Zim, and the Unbelievers, led by Bhonco, are drawn over the same territory as in 1857 as a battle for the preservation of tradition or its complete abandonment in favour of a truncated version of westernisation. Bhonco boasts about his daughter Xoliswa’s education, since she has been made principal at the local school. Following Xoliswa’s prescription that he and his wife must change from ubuqaba – “backwardness and heathenism” – to becoming amagqobhoka – “enlightened ones”, Bhonco orders his wife to abandon traditional isiXhosa dress and begins to wear only suits and ties. To his mind, the village and its customs are backward and therefore “red”, due to the red ochre used to stain traditional isiXhosa garments. Xoliswa herself dreams of abandoning the rural backwater of the village for America—in her mind, the epitome of everything that is cultured and sophisticated. It is not the geographical location America that matters to her, since the actual America is as marked by poverty and backwardness

as Qolorha-by-Sea. What matters is the ephemeral promise of progress, and thus of luxury, ease, peace and order, offered by access to the kind of development made possible by Empire in Hardt and Negri's sense, and of which Xoliswa's imaginary America is the figurative manifestation. Bhonco embraces the development project since, he argues, it will bring progress and modernisation to the village in the form of electricity, running water and jobs for the people. Zim on the other hand bemoans the loss of amaXhosa customs and traditions. He often visits Nongqawuse's valley to remember her prophecies and those who believed in them. He resurrects the dress and other adornments of the Believers. For him, the future happiness of the village depends on a return to the pure and unadulterated amaXhosa culture and traditions that existed before the arrival of European settlers. Zim opposes the project since, he argues, the complex will be built in Nongqawuse's valley and will further erode traditional amaXhosa culture.

Despite its reactionary nature, Zim's conviction comes close to a trend identified by Hardt and Negri in much Leftist critical thinking that while seeking to "recompose sites of resistance that are founded on the identities of social subjects or national and regional groups, often grounding political analysis on the *localization of struggles*" relies:

[...] on a false dichotomy between the global and the local, assuming that the global entails homogenization and undifferentiated identity whereas the local preserves heterogeneity and difference. Often implicit in such arguments is the assumption that the differences of the local are in some sense natural, or at least that their origin remains beyond question. This view can easily devolve into a kind of primordialism that fixes and romanticizes social relations and identities.<sup>41</sup>

Zim's harking back to a vanished African tradition as a form of resistance against the villagers' present exploitation is in danger of ossifying and thus falsifying amaXhosa culture and therefore rendering it completely useless in the struggle for economic and political emancipation by the villagers. The battle between the two old men threatens to sidetrack the village from the real choice at stake. As becomes apparent in the narrative, neither preservation nor abandonment of tradition will help the villagers decide on a path through the choice facing them, since that is not the choice that needs to be made. The choice to be made is whether the casino project will economically and politically empower the community or not. amaXhosa cultural values and modes of understanding matter, I would argue, but only in as far as they empower the community to make that choice. Again, the conflict between the two camps threatens to undermine the village's ability to resist being further marginalised.

Camagu stumbles unknowingly into the middle of this struggle for survival of members of the disempowered masses whose plight was about to drive him into exile. His growing involvement with the village and its people is however not produced by his realisation of the villagers' plight, but comes about in an almost accidental fashion. Unable to track down NomaRussia, Camagu is charmed instead by the natural beauty of the place to which he has come. Soon, his admiration for the village's natural surroundings is inextricably intertwined with his attraction to Zim's daughter Qukezwa, an infatuation that he finds both highly embarrassing, even inappropriate, considering she is only half

his age, and also impossible to escape. In the face of her, even his insatiable lust is quietly extinguished. Camagu is at first seen as an outsider in the village, even as faintly ridiculous due to his apparent determination to make a fool of himself over a girl barely out of high school. The community's perception of Camagu changes when he demonstrates his understanding of and belief in his clan's traditions. When the cleaner of the hotel he stays at finds a brown mole snake in his bed, Camagu prevents the onrushing gardeners and handy-men from killing it since it is the totem snake of his clan and will bring him luck.<sup>42</sup> The men leave his room pointing out that, "[t]hey did not expect a man with such great education, a man who has lived in the lands of the white people for thirty years, to have such respect for the customs of his people,"<sup>43</sup> a surprise produced by the same conceptual conflation of development and westernisation espoused by Bhonco. As a result of his observance of traditional knowledge the villagers decide "[h]e is indeed a man worthy of their respect."<sup>44</sup> It is really at this point that Camagu ceases to be a tolerated stranger and begins to become an accepted member of the village community.

However, he still does not become actively engaged in the political struggle of the village. Unable to leave Qolorha-by-Sea, Camagu is forced to seek a way of earning a living, a search that will tie his own future closely to that of the village. He discovers an opportunity by accident while visiting the beach with Qukezwa, where they meet some of the village women who harvest abalone and other seafood to sell to the local hotel and to passing tourists. Camagu convinces Qukezwa to teach him to harvest abalone himself. When the women object to his competition, Camagu helps them to formalise their trade in a co-operative society, which he joins. Through use of his car, the society extends its commercial reach beyond the local hotel and throughout the surrounding area.<sup>45</sup> The society soon branches out into the production of traditional isiXhosa clothing for Camagu's friends and acquaintances back in Johannesburg, where the government's call for an African renaissance has been translated, somewhat incongruously, into the wearing of traditional clothing.<sup>46</sup> This co-operative society brings real wealth into the village for the first time, since it brings in money from outside the village community which then goes directly into the pockets of the women who participate in the society and are its shared owners. The project provides real economic independence for the women and the families that depend on them for their survival.<sup>47</sup>

In this way, and almost in spite of himself since he has set out to Qolorha-by-Sea for completely different reasons, Camagu begins to contribute his knowledge and expertise to the community for its benefit and on its terms. Due to his increased participation in the village's economic activities, Camagu is also drawn more directly into the struggle the village faces over the development project. At first, Camagu is in favour of the project, mainly since he accepts the view that it will provide work for the people of the village. Qukezwa is less convinced of the project's benefits. As she argues, "[t]his whole sea will belong to the tourists and their boats and their water sports...[the women of the co-operative] will no longer harvest the sea for their own food and to sell at the Blue Flamingo."<sup>48</sup> When Camagu points out that the villagers will be compensated for the loss with jobs at the casino, Qukezwa objects:

What do villagers know about working in casinos? What education do they have to do that kind of work? ...Three or four women will get jobs. As for the rest of the workers, the owners of the gambling city will come with their own people who are experienced in that kind of work.<sup>49</sup>

That she is right in her assessment of the project's purpose becomes clear when the developers come to visit the village and present their idea. Two middle-aged white consultants and a young black empowerment employee, Lefa Leballo, represent the company. Opening the proceedings, Lefa Leballo tells the villagers that,

[...] in the same spirit in which the government has respected them by consulting them, they must also show respect to these important visitors, by not voicing the objections that he heard some of the villagers were having about a project of such national importance.<sup>50</sup>

The plans are presented in suitably nefarious fashion. The two consultants have a cartoon-villain like air, enthusing about water-sports and roller-coasters, ending their presentation with a debate about whether their project should include a time-share complex or a retirement village for millionaires, literally turning their backs on the people they supposedly have come to consult. This reading would agree with a certain kind of narrative of the processes of globalisation, where national and supra-national companies enter local communities with the promise of better economic opportunities for all, but instead offer only different forms of exploitation while extracting local wealth for the benefit of powerful business interests in the far-off metropolitan centres, which chimes in well with the narrative of Africa as the paradigmatic victim of international economic exploitation. Equally, it allows the persuasive, and pervasive, conflation amongst many left-leaning intellectuals of all forms of development with this form of exploitative development, to which the only possible responses seem to be either the demand for the wholesale abandonment of global economic exchanges, hardly a realistic option, or else a form of despair<sup>51</sup>.

Against such a reductionist reading of the opposition between local identities as in some way pre-given and a uniformly homogenising globalisation, Hardt and Negri argue that,

The differences of locality are neither preexisting nor natural but rather effects of a regime of production....Globalization, like localization, should be understood...as a *regime* of the production of identity and difference, or really of homogenization and heterogenization... It is false, in any case, to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense *outside* and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, at issue is not a return to a tradition that pre-dates 'Empire', but rather to make possible for local communities to produce their own particular identity, and beyond identity but in an analogous strategy, to empower local communities to produce a form of economic and social development that benefits them within the economic, social and political realities of globalisation.

As a result of Qukezwa's prompting, Camagu does not succumb to the temptation to judge the villagers' struggle against the development consortium as pointless before it has begun. Instead, he seeks a form of development that will benefit the people of Qolorha-by-Sea. As he points out to John Dalton, a local white trader and opponent of the development project, those opposing the casino complex must offer something in its stead.<sup>53</sup> As a result of this search he becomes an effective catalyst for change in the community. At the meeting with the developers, Camagu offers the impromptu suggestion to turn the site of Nongqawuse's valley into an eco-tourism centre owned and run co-operatively by all the people of the community interested in participating in it. This offers an opportunity for real economic change for the community as a whole. John Dalton, who applies to have Nongqawuse's valley declared as a National Heritage site, thwarts the development, though only temporarily.<sup>54</sup> At the end of the narrative, the community is in the process of constructing the eco-tourism site that Camagu had first suggested, though Camagu himself is not involved in that construction. The narrative therefore not only mocks Camagu for his initial self-delusion, but also explores how he becomes, in spite of himself, an effective agent for the upliftment of the poor and the marginalised, even in a context of increasing globalisation with its attendant inequalities. Camagu, seeking a position of national prominence and wishing to influence national strategies of development, finds instead his own survival intimately tied up with the survival of a marginalised, poor community into which he has come mostly by accident. Instead of setting himself up as a leader or initiator of revolution in this community, Camagu becomes, again almost accidentally, a catalyst for change in the community by introducing different ideas into the debate between traditionalists and westernisers.

His intervention, if it can be called that, does not produce a national revolution. The Aristocrats of the Revolution remain firmly ensconced in positions of national power, and their threat remains more than visible at the end of the narrative. However, Camagu does help one particular marginalised community to utilise its specific circumstances and possibilities to fight off an attempt to exploit and marginalise it further, and to gain hold of a small measure of political and economic power in the process. The measure of the success of this resistance is the fact that Qolorha-by-Sea survives. As such, the narrative can be read as offering an alternative vision of social action in the context of economic and political globalisation and "Empire", and a way to break past the disillusionment produced by the false messianism identified by Lazarus in his study of radical intellectuals. Camagu might be read as a figure akin to the organic intellectual activist pursued by Gramsci – an activist who does not set out to impose his vision on the marginalised and poor but who lives and works amongst these people as one of their number and through whom they can seek ways to transform their circumstances. Further, this form of activism reflects Arif Dirlik's contention that,

If any kind of resistance to [globalisation] is possible, it seems to me that the assertion of places against globalization is a crucial starting point. It is necessary, to begin with, to 'place' globalism so as to counteract its mystification of its own location.<sup>55</sup>

While Dirlik acknowledges that such an activism must guard against a nostalgic and counterproductive turn to the past, he nevertheless contends that,

It is even more necessary, however, to question and transcend...notions which make places into playthings of a globalizing capital [i.e. products than can be commodified and sold], and to reaffirm places in terms of the values implied by the concept of place; not out of a utopian or nostalgic urge to restore to places some irrecoverable (or even unimaginable) pristine purity but in order to differentiate clearly places as projects...This requires, if only as a point of departure, the reassertion of the autonomy of place against the invasion of states and capital; in other words, a recollection that the only way to reappropriate place is to reassert use against exchange value.<sup>56</sup>

As the narrative makes clear, such an activism would effectively address the central issue of “the *production of locality*” identified by Hardt and Negri, since it would be empowered not by the blanket assertion of the local as in some way *ab origine* resistant or revolutionary, but by an emphasis on the modes of production of local identities, and in whose hands and for whose benefit these modes of production are put to work. This form of social action, ad-hoc, local, and which mobilises the relationships built within specific communities and specific contexts, might be called a form of accidental activism. This would be a form of un-co-ordinated activism, not reliant on national frame-works or formal and thus in some way abstract political structures, but tied in with and responsive to the specific contingencies and possibilities of particular places, times and people while at the same time remaining open to more global contexts and possibilities. After all, the eco-tourism site that Camagu suggests depends for its success on the arrival of national and international tourists who are enabled to come there by the forces of economic globalisation. Such a form of activism would acknowledge the impossibility of returning to a form of social relations that preceded Empire, but might serve to put the possibilities inherent in the processes of globalisation at the hands of local communities. The narrative thus invites us to imagine, I would suggest, what might become achievable by more accidental activists.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Sarah Nuttall for pointing me in the direction of this argument.

<sup>2</sup> Lazarus traces this figure in the work of Ayi Kwei Armah, whom he presents as a paradigmatic example of this trend. To the writers and texts mentioned by Lazarus, amongst them Kofi Awoonor with *This Earth, My Brother*, Chinua Achebe with *A Man of the People*, Ngugi wa Th’iongo with *Petals of Blood*, and Wole Soyinka, can be added texts such as Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, whose narrator has been educated in Europe to serve his people but who can do nothing to alleviate their plight once the Sudan has become independent. See T. Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*. Translated by D. Johnson-Davies. (Heinemann: Oxford, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> N. Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. The point has been repeated so many times since that it has almost become a truism.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12 (original emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* (original emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> D. Atwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in black South African literary history* (University of Natal Press: Scottsville, 2005), p. 3. As Atwell points out, this narrative structure also rather neatly sidesteps the prevalent obsession in South African fiction with the particular events of Apartheid by focusing on historical moments on either side of it and thus embedding it in a wider historical framework.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>16</sup> D. P. Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2001). In his introduction to *Alternative Modernities*, Gaonkar identifies at least two parallel and often conflicting strands of modernity growing out of the Enlightenment – a societal/cultural modernity produced by the political, intellectual and economic transformation of western European societies, and a cultural/aesthetic modernity, often at odds with its societal counterpart, produced by a transformation of the way in which art was produced and thought about. p.8. Gaonkar goes on to point out that his account is merely one of many different accounts of modernity in the West, before he goes on to summarise various site-based and culture-specific alternative understandings of modernity in non-Western societies presented in the essays making up the rest of the book. See p. 13

<sup>17</sup> M. Hardt & A. Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2000), xi.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000), p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> A. Dirlik, “Place-based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place,” in *Review Binghamton USA* 22(2) 1999, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> Piggis in Dirlik, “Place-based Imagination,” p.165.

<sup>24</sup> Atwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Mda, *Heart of Redness*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Hillbrow has been the subject of a number of novels and sociological studies. See Alan Morris’ *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg, 1999). He provides a particularly useful account of Hillbrow’s increasingly multi-racial and multi-cultural population even during the height of Apartheid. A rather bleaker view of present-day Hillbrow is presented in Phaswane Mpe’s novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

<sup>32</sup> Mda, *Heart of Redness*, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Atwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> There are a number of historical accounts of the cattle killing movement. While these studies agree for the most part on the basic chronology of events and that the disastrous famine that resulted from the destruction of crops and cattle effectively ended amaXhosa resistance against British occupation, they differ vastly in their understanding of the reasoning behind the cattle killing. The account most sympathetic to the amaXhosa is offered by J.B. Peires in *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856 – 7* (Ravan Press: Johannesburg, 1989). He argues that the cattle killings were essentially a spontaneous response by ordinary amaXhosa to the pressures of colonial invasion and the spread of lung sickness and corn blight throughout their lands. Together with Peires’ articles on the subject, the book is acknowledged by Mda as his source of historical detail on the cattle killings. George McCall Theal, in his multi-volume history of South Africa. See *History of South Africa: From 1795 to 1872*. Vol. III. (George Allen and Unwin: London, 1916). Theale promulgates the view, first held by the colonial authorities at the time of the cattle killings but long a popular explanation of the events amongst

white South Africans, that the movement was the product of a failed plot by King Sarhili of the amaXhosa and King Moshoeshe of the Basotho to “throw the whole Xhosa tribe with its Tembu allies, fully armed and in a famishing state, upon the colony” (p. 202), even though he admits that no preparations for war were taken, and no body of amaXhosa soldiers was assembled during the cattle killings.

<sup>38</sup> Mda, *Heart of Redness*, p. 10.

<sup>39</sup> J.B. Peires offers perhaps the most insightful summary of the differences in motivation between the believers or the amathamba, and the amagogyta or unbelievers. He suggests that the amagogyta were mostly drawn from the ranks of those amaXhosa who had begun to participate in and benefit from colonial economic exchanges, while the amathamba were often excluded from such exchanges and had little hope of entering into them on an equal footing or benefiting from them (p. 174ff).

<sup>40</sup> Atwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 197.

<sup>41</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Mda, *Heart of Redness*, p. 112.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159ff.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146. The wearing of traditional clothing for special social occasions seems a performance of Africanness that relegates African tradition and custom to something akin to a hobby, a weekend and evening pleasure pursuit that has little connection with everyday life. This hobbyfication of African-ness, it seems to me, is empowered by the same mental schizophrenia that allows politicians, businessmen and other people with access to power to talk of the spirit of ubuntu and African communal values while enriching themselves through quasi-legal and corrupt practices at the expense of the impoverished masses.

<sup>47</sup> Arguably, the project reflects more truly the spirit of “ubuntu”, the African sense of community often appealed to in official political rhetoric, where each member of the community is equally as important as any other member. Of course, the co-operative society is somewhat of an anomaly in this sense since it comprises only women. Most traditional communal structures of governance, including the “imbhizos” or public consultations represented in this narrative, were and remain reserved for men, and even in this gathering of men the voices of those who are married often carry more weight than those of men who are unmarried.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118. The narrative offers no suggestion how Qukezwa might have arrived at her insights, rendering her rather one-dimensional and almost an ideological tool. It is possible to suggest that Mda himself falls for a romantic version of the inherent revolutionary potential of the poor, since Qukezwa seems capable of spontaneously developing an acute insight into wider social and economic relations. This weakness in characterisation does not however detract, in my view, from the overall validity of the kind of local activism and social transformation presented by the text.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>51</sup> This conflation appears, for instance, and in a very different context, in Gayatri Spivak’s critique of development projects in India, which, she claims, serve only to insert Indian women into new forms of global economic exploitation. See G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1999), p. 200.

<sup>52</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, pp. 44-45 (original emphasis).

<sup>53</sup> Mda, *Heart of Redness*, p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> I have since discovered through anecdotal evidence that the area of Qolorha-by-Sea and Nonqawuse’s valley have in fact been declared a National Heritage site.

<sup>55</sup> Dirlik, “Place-based Imagination,” p. 171.

<sup>56</sup> Dirlik, “Place-based Imagination,” p. 173.