



Postcolonial travel accounts and ethnic subjectivity: travelling through Southern Africa

L. Nas
Department of English
University of the Western Cape
BELLVILLE
E-mail: lnas@uwc.ac.za

Abstract

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This article deals with three recent South African travelogues, to wit Sihle Khumalo's "Dark continent: my black arse" (2007) and "Heart of Africa: centre of my gravity" (2009), and Steven Otter's "Khayelitsha: umlungu in a township" (2007). It argues that the authors are engaged in a postcolonial quest to find out what makes them African: the one, a black corporate employee, by following the footsteps of white nineteenth century explorers; the other, a white journalism student, by living in one of South Africa's largest black townships.

Opsomming

Postkoloniale reisvertellings en etniese subjektiwiteit: reistogte deur Suider-Afrika

Hierdie artikel handel oor drie onlangse Suid-Afrikaanse reisbeskrywings, naamlik Sihle Khumalo se "Dark continent: my black arse" (2007) en "Heart of Africa: centre of my gravity" (2009), asook Steven Otter se "Khayelitsha: umlungu in a township" (2007). Die basiese stelling van die artikel is dat die outeurs besig is met 'n postkoloniale soektog om uit te vind wat van hulle Afrikane maak: die een, 'n swart korporatiewe werknemer, deur in die voetspore te volg van blanke negentiende-eeuse ontdekkingsreisigers; die ander, 'n wit joernalistiekstudent, deur

in een van Suid-Afrika se grootste swart townships te gaan woon.

1. Increased interest in travel, travel writing and travel theory

In the past few decades we have witnessed a growing interest in travel and travel writing. Not only does DStv offer a very popular travel channel with travelogues by Michael Palin and Louis Theroux but as people have become more and more global and adventurous, travel magazines and travel guides published by *Lonely Planet*, *Bradt*, *Getaway* and so on, showed a significant increase in sales. We have also seen an increase in the publication of travel narratives (whether or not intended for the coffee table), and concurrently with this, an increase in the theoretical aspects of travel writing. My focus in this article will be on the latter category. When studying travel narratives, one of the first issues that come to mind is that of narrative authority. Is the narrator trustworthy or only dishing up a good story? Is the author aware of and playing with the traditions of the genre? Does the traveller move beyond the traditional binaries of superior/inferior culture so characteristic of colonial travel writing? As Wimal Dissanayake points out in an undated internet article called *Exploring post-colonial travel writing*, the narrative voice in travel literature among other things raises issues related to “textuality, representation, sign, desire, power, cultural intervention and modes of sense-making”. To these I would like to add issues of identity raised in the narratives under discussion, in this case (South) African identity. How do Sihle Khumalo and Steve Otter, as postcolonial travellers, construct themselves in the text, what is it that they are looking for in their travels, what role does reflection on their own role as travellers play in this process? Are they, as travellers, looking for otherness, or for confirmation? Do they, as *observers*, occupy a privileged space, or is it the *observed* that occupy a desired privileged space? And what role does colonial mimicry play in this process?

Mimicry, Homi Bhabha (1994:86) writes, “emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge”. It could be defined as a colonised person’s search for identity through adoption of the coloniser’s language, imitation of his material culture and way of life, his literature and arts, values, beliefs and attitudes. In this sense mimicry could be seen as a masquerade imparting feelings of inferiority on the colonial subject. Bhabha (1994:89) takes this notion of colonial mimicry further by stressing

mimicry's double vision, "which in disclosing the ambivalence of the colonial discourse also disrupts its authority". In other words, by stressing its subversive aspects, he turns colonial mimicry into a form of native empowerment, thus erasing the notion of the *other* as a silenced, passive victim of Western domination. When a post-colonial subject like Sihle Khumalo travels in the footsteps of colonial travellers, his travels could be read as colonial mimicry, a form of desire or doubling. Bhabha (1994:88) writes that colonial mimicry,

through the repetition of partial presence, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. (...) It is a desire that reverses 'in part' the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence; a gaze of otherness, that shares the acuity of the genealogical gaze which, as Foucault describes it, liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man's being through which he extends his sovereignty.

It will be argued herein that Khumalo's travel narratives can be read as a rediscovery of the colonial gesture, but this time *sans* gaze. In the processes of self-making, self-unmaking, self-remaking Khumalo the narrator self-consciously constructs himself as a colonial imitator, appropriating and undermining the discursive authority of his predecessors, thus perhaps creating a new genre of black travel writing.

Sihle Khumalo was born in Nqutu, a rural town in KwaZulu-Natal. In 2005, after having worked for a number of years for the Exploration Division of Anglo American (a South African diamond mining company), he embarked on a Cape to Cairo journey using only public transport to celebrate his 30th birthday. *Dark continent: my black arse* (2007) documents this trip. He was stung by the African travel bug, for in 2008 he travelled again by public transport from Johannesburg to Kigali in Rwanda. *Heart of Africa: centre of my gravity*, the record of this second trip, was published in 2009.

Steven Otter is a white South African journalist who lived in Cape Town's largest township Khayelitsha, during 2002 and 2005. His (white) friends had tried to dissuade him from moving to Khayelitsha, but he persisted. He said he had to, for as a journalism student, he hardly had any money, and could only afford rooming in a township. *Khayelitsha: umlungu in a township* (Otter, 2007), documents his stays there.

2. Postcolonial travel writing

In *English travel writing from pilgrimages to postcolonial explorations* (2000), Barbara Korte wonders whether truly postcolonial travel writing is possible at all. As Korte also acknowledges, the term *postcolonial* is too blurred to be really useful. After all, distinctions made in postcolonial theory between settled and conquered colonies, early or late 20th century independent colonies, postcolonial cultures located in the so-called Third and First World, are in actual fact difficult to make. Therefore, the label *postcolonial* in combination with travel writing needs some refining. Postcolonial travel writing often refers back to imperial travelogues, and tends to extend, expand, subvert and repudiate colonial travel writing. Colonial travelogues are usually perceived as instruments bound up with the history of colonialism. Korte (2000:153), therefore, refers to postcolonial travel writing as “an essentially imperialist mode of representation”, which usually comprises “travelogues by writers originating from former British colonies (apart from the United States) ... predominantly India, Pakistan and the West Indies”. In this limited sense, Khumalo would specifically qualify as a postcolonial writer since he travels in the footsteps of nineteenth century explorers. In this same limited sense, Steven Otter would only qualify as an “ordinary” travel writer, within the meaning of the broader definition of travel writing; that is, if travel writing would be defined only by the interaction of the (travelling) human subject with the World. The world the travel writer reports on will often be foreign, but as Korte (2000:5) writes,

... the traveller's own country may equally be the object of his or her investigation. Accounts of travel let us participate in acts of (inter) cultural perception and cultural construction, in processes of understanding and misunderstanding.

In this sense Otter would not qualify as a postcolonial travel writer. However, it will be argued that Otter, like Khumalo, does qualify as such, not in the least, because he searches for what it means to be an African of European descent in a postcolonial situation.

In the *Encyclopaedia of Post-colonial Literatures in English* David Newmarch (1994:1598) writes in a section on travel literature:

For the majority of South Africans, individual travel for the sake of observation and reflection has scarcely been an option in the face of material deprivation and legislative restriction. Not surprisingly, Western conventions of travelogue have not been adopted by black South African writers.

Newmarch observes that the travel paradigm primarily used by black writers, such as Mtutuzeli Matshoba and Miriam Tlali, was “crossing the land as listener rather than as observer, transmitting stories they had heard of the community of township commuters and labour migrants on the train and bus routes” (Newmarch, 1994:1598). In his introduction to *The literature of travel* issue of *Ariel*, editor I.S. MacLaren (1990:6) already observed that travel literature was still largely a Western genre: “There is not yet, therefore, an extensive body of travel literature by, for example, Black Africans.” In the previous century, travel writing for black South Africans was not an individual experience, as it required leisure and material means. It is, therefore, no wonder that Zakes Mda, one of South Africa’s most well-known contemporary black authors, writes on the cover of *Dark continent: my black arse* that “this is just the book we have been thirsting for: travel writing by an African adventurer who explores and tries to explain his own continent”. There is another endorsement on the back flap by Paul Theroux, the author of *Dark star safari*, documenting his overland trip from Cairo to Cape Town. Being one of the most famous travel writers of the present moment, Theroux writes: “*My black arse* is uniquely an African travel story: the story of an African travelling on his own money and motivation, from one end of Africa to the other.” Khumalo clearly fills a perceived gap in (black) African travel writing.

Khumalo’s travels in the present explore an imagined connection to the colonial past, whereas Otter is looking for a sense of “at-homeness” in Africa. All three texts could in this way be linked to the “roots and routes”-complex that, as several critics have pointed out, so often colours contemporary travel writing (Edwards & Graulund, 2011:110). The works under discussion do not deal with the classical trope (recurring theme) of the journey as transformation, as in traditional travel writing, nor do they fall under the rubric of what Steve Clark in *Travel writing and empire* refers to as “one-way traffic” (Clark, 1999:3), where colonial travellers mapped the world rather than the world mapping them. Rather, we see a reconceptualisation of notions of home and belonging, which together with notions of displacement and diaspora, are articulated by Edwards and Graulund as the pre-eminent tropes of postcolonial travel writing. In their *Postcolonial travel writing: critical explorations* they, therefore, refer to writers such as the ones under discussion as “countertravellers – travellers who resist the tendency to indulge in exoticism or demarcate clear borders in order to differentiate or separate national and cultural identities” (Edwards & Graulund, 2011: 3). These travel writers, they argue, offer frames of reference that

exist “outside the boundaries of European knowledge production” (Edwards & Graulund, 2011:3).

3. Cape to Cairo

Following in the colonial footsteps of Cecil John Rhodes, Khumalo challenges the idea of the travel genre being primarily a Western concept. With his 30th birthday approaching, he decides to give up his well-paid corporate job with Anglo American, leaving wife and child behind, and travel from Cape to Cairo by public transport, crossing the continent from south to north, to observe the state of Africa for himself. He sets out to do Theroux’s *Dark star safari* in reverse: travel overland from Cape Town to Cairo, using public transport and surviving on a limited budget – which includes rattling taxis and flea-ridden guest houses. Spurred on by his “burning desire to see with [his] own eyes the present state of Africa” (Khumalo, 2007:13), he leaves his comfort zone. En route we see Khumalo covering the distance, meeting people, eating the local food, jumping in and out of buses, trains and taxis, making all kinds of resolutions and business plans, getting frustrated and coming up with playful thoughts and associations, and trying to chat up girls, especially white backpackers he meets on the way: “like the majority of black South African men who grew up under apartheid, I grew up thinking it was a privilege, blessing and honour to sleep with a white woman” (Khumalo, 2007:71).

His attitude towards women, both black and white, is rather troubling if taken literally: he even confesses in *Heart of Africa* that when he could not get a permit to visit the gorillas in Rwanda and the source of the Nile in Nyungwe forest – two of the goals he set out to achieve – he feels he is entitled to “punish” the woman in the Rwandan Tourism Office (ORTF) who is just doing her job by telling him he cannot get a permit, since he failed to book in advance:

I know they say you should not shoot the messenger, but the more the woman spoke and the more my dreams were being shattered the more I felt like tipping her over before lying on top of her with my heavyweight body. (Khumalo, 2009a:188.)

Does he mean he wants his weight to bear upon her? If not ironic and self-mocking, this attitude would confirm the reader’s worst prejudice about African patriarchy: assertive young women who challenge patriarchal gender norms are likely to be subjected to sexual humiliation.

In his review of *Dark continent: my black arse*, Fred de Vries (2008) argues that Khumalo gets away with this attitude “essentially because he’s self-deprecating, vulnerable and almost naïve”. However, there is nothing vulnerable or naïve about using sexual humiliation as a discourse of punishment. If read in the light of colonial mimicry on the other hand, this gesture reminds the reader of what Bhabha (1994:87) refers to as “the sign of the inappropriate (...), a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power” and takes on a completely different meaning. In that same review De Vries also observes that Khumalo “has taken on the persona of a 100 percent Zulu boy”, referring to the expression that gained notoriety during Jacob Zuma’s trial¹ in 2006, when the latter was accused of raping a 31-year old family friend. Zuma’s supporters outside the court house wore T-shirts with exactly that text (“100% Zulu boy”) to express their support,² thus underlining the allegedly macho nature of Zulu culture.³ One has to question whether this persona should be condoned, whether this is intended as an ironical gesture or whether it is, in fact, harmful to South African gender politics. It is here that, in Bhabha’s phrase “the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*)” becomes obvious, as the Khumalo persona seems to appropriate a colonial (or patriarchal, if you will) strategy here. Bhabha (1994:87) writes: “the very emergence of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace”. The attempts to subjugate unwilling female backpackers along the road and a female tourism officer in Kigali, could therefore be read in the light of colonial mimicry.

Apart from his failed attempts to subjugate females on the way, he makes, as De Vries briefly summarises, friends with locals and tourists, is ripped-off once or twice, craves a good beer in a luxury hotel and discusses world politics (Mandela), women (bums) and football (Bafana Bafana) with those he meets on the way – quickly realising that this is the lingua franca on the road. He is not a black-con-

1 Jacob Zuma became the third African president of the Republic of South Africa in 2008, one year after publication of Khumalo’s first book.

2 <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2006-04-06-100-zuluboy>

3 The controversy surrounding the “100% Zulu Boy” sobriquet (nickname) had everything to do with Zuma’s (Xhosa) political opponents within the ANC who, it was then believed, set Zuma up.

sciousness snob; he constructs himself just as a macho character, one who visits all the touristy highlights and likes to mingle with those he meets on the road. This, of course, does not differ from the experiences of the average young backpacker. But what sets Khumalo apart, as De Vries also notes, is his sheer irreverence. Being very outspoken, he does not mince words, especially when it comes to male pride and girls. So we see him getting upset when he suspects that someone is gay. We also learn that African men have the biggest penises in the world (the Sudanese apparently stand out) and that the Ethiopian women were the most beautiful on the trip. Additionally, the reader is told that Egyptian women are “unattractive as well as very stuck-up” and that he did not see even one beautiful woman in Sudan. Each chapter ends with these little afterthoughts, as if to counterbalance the serious historical bits at the beginning of each chapter.

4. Black tourism

In *Dark continent* Khumalo follows the route South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. Each chapter starts with a small historical overview highlighting the various fathers of the nations; hence we get Nujoma’s Namibia, Kenyatta’s Kenya, Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia, et cetera. Sudan is Fatherless Sudan. Khumalo shows he has absolutely no respect for African leaders and their political tactics, often commenting on the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. “I simply cannot understand,” he says in his last chapter, “why Africa, the continent with so much abundance, is so abundantly poor” (Khumalo, 2007:220). And further on:

It all boils down to the leadership we have had on this continent (...). We are where we are as a continent – the poorest, least developed, without adequate infrastructure, politically unstable – because of the corrupt bureaucrats who cannot see the big picture and thus make us the laughing stock of the whole world. (Khumalo, 2007:220.)

Much of the blame is put on African leaders for staying in power too long.

... while Mandela spent 27 years in prison, both Kaunda and Banda spent exactly the same number of years in office. Their actions, or lack thereof, are still evident, even today, in Zambia and Malawi. Nyerere was not so bad. He stayed in power for only 24 years. Even better, by African standards, were Nujoma and Mengistu, only 15 and 17 years respectively. God, thank

goodness, now and then does intervene. Kenyatta and Nasser both died while in office, coincidentally after 15 and 17 years, respectively. (Khumalo, 2007:220.)

Capitalism also gets the blame for the state the world is in.

Capitalism has really messed things up. We all have to work so that we can have money to buy material things to keep up with people we do not know. What a waste and distortion of the simple thing called life. (Khumalo, 2007:149.)

Before Khumalo, tourism had largely been a white affair in South Africa. In his essay "Game lodges and leisure colonialists", from the collection entitled *Fine lines from the box*, Njabulo Ndebele, former vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, ponders on reasons why black tourism has not taken off. Tourists coming to Southern Africa often visit game lodges, in his view "a leisure sanctuary where moneyed white South Africans can take refuge from the stresses of living in a black-run country" (Ndebele, 2007:101). Ndebele sees the lodge as remnant of old colonial power, a place where meek blacks still play servant to the white master. For a black visitor this is a disconcerting experience, writes Ndebele.

The black tourist is conditioned to find the political sociology of the game lodge ontologically disturbing. It can be so offensive as to be obscene ... He is expected to engage in conversations around the campfire, about bush stories and lion kills, and hunting jokes that hold no interest for him ... The entire world of contemporary tourism carries no intuitive familiarity for him. (Ndebele, 2007:102.)

The black tourist is forced to take on a double role: on the one hand he has to be knowledgeable about "white things", and at the same time is forced into the role of an informant about "black things". According to Ndebele the black tourist visiting a game lodge does not find peace and can "only experience himself as a caricature of a tourist" (Ndebele, 2007:102). Feeling alienated he finds it difficult to distinguish between being treated "like a pampered guest or like a black guest who is doing 'white things'" (Ndebele, 2007:103). Khumalo does not seem to be worried by any of these sensitive concerns, and behaves like any other backpacking tourist, undeterred by any sensitivity regarding Africa's colonial past, often unaware of how his own thinking was unconsciously informed by colonial attitudes.

5. In search of Africa

After his first exploration of Africa by public transport Khumalo sets out in 2008 on a second trip, again by public transport, to commemorate the “discovery” of the source of the Nile in 1858 and discover what Victorian explorers like John Speke, David Livingstone and the like were after. Khumalo, who grew up under apartheid and received a colonial education, thus pursues the idea of Africa as seen through the eyes of white explorers. Like Stanley, Speke and Baker⁴ he sets out to discover Africa. But unlike them, he discovers that the equator is not an imaginary line dividing north and south as he was taught in school, but just a white line which runs across the road in Uganda. He appears unwilling to understand the significance of this evidence of mapping.

The book is full of meetings with ordinary Africans and journeys in search of the exceptional, yet misguided explorers who went in search of an Africa that, like the Ugandan equator, only existed in the European imagination (Mabandu, 2009:13); much like nineteenth century European travellers such as Gustave Flaubert, who went in search of an Orient that only existed in their imagination (De Botton, 2002:70-71). In an interview (Stupart, 2009) Khumalo was asked what motivated him originally to travel from Cape to Cairo.

I had always been fascinated by Mother Africa. As a young boy I knew that one day I will do a massive African trip. In 2005, with my 30th birthday approaching I decided to take the plunge and do the Cape to Cairo because I knew that after turning 30, I was going to ‘settle down’. At school I learnt about Cecil John Rhodes and his Cape to Cairo dream, and I thought why not see what was this big deal about the Cape to Cairo. There was really no other option but the Cape to Cairo.

Heart of Africa (Khumalo, 2009a) describes his six-pronged quest aiming to ride a ferry across Lake Tanganyika; stand on the equator in Uganda; bungee jump at the source of the Nile; see if any mountain gorillas were forthcoming (as seen above, he did not manage to see any); visit the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda; and visit the remote source of the Nile in Nyungwe forest in Rwanda. This time he does not intend to traverse the continent; rather, he is

4 Khumalo (2009a:161):

Baker was the guy who sailed with Speke to Khartoum after Speke had found proof that Lake Victoria was indeed the source of the Nile. Baker is credited with discovering Lake Albert.

spurred on by a fascination with nineteenth-century explorers and their search for the source of the Nile – John Speke was the first European to “discover” the source of the Nile River. For the most part, *Heart of Africa* dwells on the difficulty of achieving these goals when relying solely on public transport, especially when one is severely hampered by time constraints (he only had four weeks to spare). In describing his various travails, Khumalo maintains a balance between humour and frustration. The reader is often treated to a detailed account of his annoyance at the vagaries of public transport in Central Africa, or of his disgust at the state of some of the guesthouses he stays at, but is also entertained with funny anecdotes and bizarre incidents that focus more on kindness and generosity than they do on human failing. In the end he achieves a 66,6% success rate, achieving four out of his six set goals.

However, I agree with Karlien van der Schyff (2010) that what makes Khumalo’s writing, and especially *Heart of Africa*, stand out, is that it also self-consciously explores the genre of black travel writing – especially in the context of a journey that commemorates the discovery of the Nile by a nineteenth-century Western explorer. Is this a new line of travel account established by Khumalo being a so-called Third-World writer writing about the Third World while conscious of the colonial experience? The answer is two-fold: no, he does not set out to write an inverted or inflicted travelogue as a Third-World writer describing his First World experiences would do. In other words, he is not looking for peculiarities in other African countries, and yes, he is looking for similarities binding Africans together. What is it that makes us African, he often wonders. In that sense he is a postcolonial traveller, since he does not “reverse”. He is able to escape the gaze of the other, as on the one hand he is “one of them”, not being visibly foreign, yet on the other hand soon comes to realise that he is different, not because of his skin colour, but because he dresses differently (Khumalo, 2009a:160).

This observation is in line with an earlier observation of Khumalo about Ethiopia in *My black arse*. After having crossed the border with this country, he feels uncomfortable, getting the “what-do-you-want here” look.

The way the Ethiopians stared at me did not make me feel welcome in their country. For the first time on the trip I felt strongly conscious of being different: although an African in Africa, I was sticking out like a sore thumb. (Khumalo, 2007:128.)

In the end it is observations like this that lead to the core issue in *Heart of Africa*: What is it that connects us Africans? Also, What is it that makes us African? The same questions are raised by Otter (2007) in his travelogue, who is concerned with exactly the same question: What is it that makes me African?

One of the most pertinent questions Khumalo poses in *Dark continent* is whether “there [were] any black explorers and, if there were, who were they and where did they go and what did they do?” (Khumalo, 2009a:107). One of the characteristics of postcolonial travel writing, according to Korte (2000:160), is that postcolonial travellers are aware of relics of colonialism. Khumalo is implicated in colonialism as he desires to retrace the footsteps of David Livingstone, thus qualifying him as a postcolonial traveller. This is also convincingly illustrated by his self-conscious posing in true tourism style on the cover of both of his books in front of nineteenth-century colonial images, the one background being an old etching from David and Charles Livingstone’s *Zambezi expedition* (1865) in *Dark continent*, and the other one of the White Nile and the Ugandan white equator line in *Heart of Africa*. Here we see Khumalo in control of the narrative voice by adding touches of reflexivity and self-mocking. The text’s narrative authority and privileged sense of coherence are underscored by the narrator’s references to colonial travel narratives. They can be seen as appropriations or reinscriptions of the colonial texts to a point where Khumalo undermines the authority of the privileged colonial “self” with the gestured “sameness” of colonial mimicry.

6. Comfort zone

Heart of Africa is self-conscious in that Khumalo highlights the “irony that he, a Black African travelling to another African country, was so fascinated by white explorers of two centuries ago” (Khumalo, 2009a:107). As an African travel writer, Khumalo makes the valid claim that the “so-called discoveries by early explorers were nothing but first sightings by non-Africans; local people knew about the rivers and lakes and waterfalls long before exploring Africa became such a thing to Europeans”, and then comes to the conclusion that “in reality, there were no discoveries” (Khumalo, 2009a:220). His own “discoveries” of Africa tend towards the individual and interpersonal, rather than the geographical; while he makes vague generalisations about the beauty of Africa, he notes the specific human kindness of “people in Kigali who find it in their hearts to clean the yards of other people in the name of reconciliation and nation build-

ing" (Khumalo, 2009a:220). It was this emotive visit to the Memorial Centre at Kigali, epicentre of the Rwandan genocide during which, over a period of 100 days of ethnic violence in 1994, more than 800 000 people were killed, that brought home elemental questions: What is at the heart of Africa? What makes me an African? Where lies my centre?

In answering these questions, he, interestingly, loses his blackness. As soon as he crosses the border, he comes to realise that he is a stranger in a strange land who does not speak the language and who does not understand the local customs. His looks and the way he dresses, make him as much an outsider as any other young traveller, because every "guide", hustler or money-changer immediately spots the foreigner. And foreigners mean money, whether they are black or white. So Khumalo, just like anyone else, falls prey to the vultures lurking near bus stops and train stations, and has to deal with incredibly complicated and infuriating bureaucracy. So, in both travel books we see the perspective of someone whose perceived insider status gradually changes to that of an outsider; an outsider who continues showing dissatisfaction with Africa's apparent lack of interest in its own history.

What I found particularly interesting was the story of Livingstone's porters, Chumi, a freed slave, and Susi, a former woodcutter. After Livingstone's death on May 1, 1873 in Chitambo village near Ilala in present-day Zambia, these two men carried his body for hundreds of kilometres over a period of nine months to Bagamoyo on the East African coast. Chumi and Susi attended Livingstone's funeral in Westminster Abbey and made headlines in the British press. They were heroes and celebrities in London, but the minute they returned to their motherland they were forgotten. Their own dates of death and places of burial are unknown. (Khumalo, 2007:106.)

In the last chapter of *Heart of Africa* Khumalo ends with an honest question: What went wrong with the African continent? He does not look for the easy way out, which would have been to blame colonialism and racism. Instead he comes up with self-criticism: not only have African leaders, both traditional and political, betrayed their people: "Mama Africa has such incredible natural beauty that it is a shame that she has been so neglected over the past few decades through the mediocrity of the leadership on the continent" (Khumalo, 2009a:134), Africans themselves, he says, are too stuck in their comfort zone.

We are still stuck in the comfort zone, which explains why we are more comfortable being employees than employers. Even when we do take the risk of owning businesses we do it by using a 'special purpose vehicle'. (...) In the process, politically well-connected individuals become instant millionaires by 'owning' a stake in an established 'white' company. (Khumalo, 2009a:108.)

When travelling in Rwanda, he notices big herds of cattle herded by African farmers that seemed to have disappeared from the South African landscape; and on seeing young boys who should have been in school, pushing bikes loaded with bananas, he comes to the realisation that "we in Africa just do not have the competitive edge. I saw only one rather dilapidated truck carrying a full load of bananas on the road ... The rest of the bananas harvest, it seemed, was being transported by bicycle" (Khumalo, 2009a:166). He just cannot grasp why Africans continue to allow themselves to be put in subservient roles and do not push themselves further.

I guess that is the story of most towns and cities in Africa. They have so much potential that remains just that – potential – because of neglect and a lack of maintenance and infrastructure. (Khumalo, 2009a:120.)

The only flourishing business he comes across in a very small town in Kenya is that of coffin making: "there must have been at least seven shops making coffins in Luanda" (Khumalo, 2009a:139). Ironical observations like these lend his narrative voice self-critical authority.

Khumalo suggests, 150 years after the colonial exploration of Central Africa, that colonial stereotypes may have changed and that the genre of travel writing may have broadened to include African explorers writing about their own continent. Yet, the legacy of colonialism still reigns, as his comments on Kenyan brides wanting to have their picture taken next to Lake Victoria clearly show: "No matter how you look at it, Queen Vic, even more than a hundred years after her death, continues to reign supreme." (Khumalo, 2009a:124.) There is also the future of neo-colonialism to think of when he comments on the Chinese as the new colonisers of Africa.

As I was walking back to town, I could not help but think how we Africans have always been victims. First it was slavery, then colonialism, then independence marred by coups and civil wars. And now the Chinese are taking over. (Khumalo, 2009a:121.)

Earlier on in the text he wondered why Africans still considered Arabs their “brothers in arms”, whereas the slave trade had been in the hands of Arabs long before the Europeans started colonising.

... I find it strange that we Africans are forever going on about colonialism and Europeans ill-treated our forefathers, while people who practiced chaining, whipping, selling, dehumanising and degrading Africans are considered our ‘brothers in arms’ (Khumalo, 2009a:107).

But he does not put the blame for everything that has gone wrong on outside forces: “We Africans seem to be obsessed with our own comfort zone. Pushing limits and taking a step into the unknown is one big mission and not something we seem to do willingly.” (Khumalo, 2009a:207-208.) Again he is not shy to utter self-criticism.

... as long as African leaders make their cap-in-hand pilgrimage to the G8 summit to kneel and plead for more foreign aid because we are not self-sufficient, nobody will take us seriously. They’ll just continue to see us as a burden to the world. It is because of our obsession with being comfortable with the status quo, I thought, that people on other continents will never in a thousand years exclaim: Have you noticed how these Africans are taking over the world? Damn it! (Khumalo, 2009a: 121.)

Comments like these turn his books into double-voiced texts as Khumalo addresses both a general and an African audience, although he is acutely aware that there is hardly any African readership in South Africa.⁵ What makes Khumalo’s texts interesting is that the division one usually comes across in travel writing, that between observer and observed, between writer and native informant, is broken down here. There seems to be a role reversal as the writer Khumalo also becomes the native informant Khumalo, thus lending more authority to his narrative voice.

When we consider the prime themes of postcolonial writing, questions of origin, belonging, identity, nationality, et cetera, we can see where black Khumalo and white Otter converge – with Khumalo travelling the African continent to find out what it means to be

5 In an article in the *Sunday Times*, Khumalo vented his frustration with the lack of black readership on the occasion of the closure in August 2009 of the only bookstore in Soweto (with more than one million inhabitants): “Black people and reading just do not mix.” (Khumalo, 2009b.)

African, and Otter travelling to a black township to find out what it means to belong in South Africa.

7. Stranger in a strange land

The third text in this article raises the question whether by moving into a South African township, as Steven Otter has done, it is possible to become a postcolonial traveller in reverse. If the postcolonial traveller in Barbara Korte's definition is one who migrated from the former colonies, Benson and Conolly's definition is broader to include "within the country travel where the traveller explores his or her own national community". In 2001 and 2005 Steven Otter took the road less travelled by moving into Cape Town's largest township, Khayelitsha. The subtitle "umlungu in a township" says it all: this is the story of a white man (umlungu) in a traditionally black township: a stranger in a strange land. Except, as Richard Holmes rightly observes in his undated internet review of Otter's book, that this is not a strange land as it is his own land, which is, however, a universe away from the land he grew up in as a white, middle class South African with an Austrian/English background.

Khayelitsha is known as a place notorious for poverty, disease and crime. Yet, Otter's time in the townships reveals some strange contradictions; the nitty-gritty of a hard life in informal settlements is balanced by the sharing spirit of *ubuntu*, where neighbours look out for one another and a request for help is never turned down. Khayelitsha, meaning "new home" in isiXhosa,⁶ this is exactly what Otter finds there, where he is befriended by everyone from the regulars at the nearby shebeen to some unsavoury township *tsotsis*. On the surface this is simply an entertaining tale of township life, which is, however, an eye-opener for thousands of middle-class South Africans. But Otter offers more. One by one we see Otter's prejudices fall. Prejudices, as Richard Holmes (who has the same background as Otter) comments in his review of Otter's book, that are "ingrained in his psyche from childhood by a country divided into first- and second-class citizens". But Otter manages to overcome these prejudices; from an outsider we see him slowly but surely turn into an insider.

6 Khayelitsha's meaning "new home" is ironic as it designates a sandy area on the so-called Cape Flats where thousands of black people were resettled under apartheid laws.

Very soon I felt that I had known this place and its people my whole life. I felt that I had returned home, home to a place I had always pined for, but had never managed to find until now. I had always been mindful of the fact that as long as I felt like a white, English South African, I would be guilty of ignoring the truth about my identity. (...) I had always identified more closely with a European identity than an African identity. My move to Khaya forced me to realize that I had far more in common with Africa than with any imagined European roots. (Otter, 2007:35.)

He increasingly blends into the township to become what should one day happen to every inhabitant across South Africa: merely another South African, living in just another South African suburb. As in Khumalo's travels across Africa, Otter's race becomes irrelevant. Although he confesses to still feeling like a racist bigot at times, his willingness to throw off the baggage of the past allows him to get away with the racism that had been deep entrenched in him during his youth by apartheid education, in much the same way that Khumalo had been taught about white colonial explorers of Africa (Otter, 2007:185). Otter realises that if white people in South Africa continue to keep a distance between themselves and the black man, how will they ever get to know each other? How, he wonders,

... can we pass judgment on someone we don't know? There are thousands and thousands of Tafumsas [friend] and Madibas [Mandela] out there, but we whites ignore them and do our best to encourage them to become the thugs we so desperately fear. (Otter, 2007:195.)

When he is attacked by a township dog who has never seen a "pink pig" before (as he is called by one of his friends), he has really landed in the new South Africa, as "at least I know now how black people in Uitenhage felt when our dogs barked at them" (Otter, 2007:233). He realises he has had to travel a long journey to lose just a small portion of the prejudices and fear he had harboured for black people most of his life, and that he still had a fair distance to travel (Otter, 2007:237). He found the people in iLitha park friendlier than their counterparts in the suburbs of traditional white South Africa, and when he stayed in an informal settlement,

... friendliness took on a different meaning entirely. Sharing was so pronounced that it was quite simply automatic. There was no hesitation about giving and there existed in everyone a natural socialist attitude towards neighbours, friends and acquaintances ... Over and over again I was amazed at how

good manners, smiles and happiness can survive poverty of a level I had never been exposed to before. (Otter, 2007:273.)

He comes to realise that the image he had of black South Africans was created by apartheid education. He only heard of freedom fighters like Steve Biko after the fall of the apartheid regime in 1991. The picture he creates of Khayelitsha is realistic. It is no paradise. There is enormous unemployment, there is an abundance of HIV/AIDS (as one of Otter's friends observes: "was it not John Lennon who said that if you do not have anything else to do, you can always have sex?"), there is rampant crime and alcohol, and drugs are everywhere. Moreover, there is xenophobia, which in the past few years led to plundering and even killings of fellow black Africans who are scathingly referred to as *makwerekwere*.

8. African identity

Otter also comes to realise he is a real African. Being an English speaking, white South African, and not an Afrikaner, he was taught not to feel responsibility for the evils of apartheid, even when the Anglos had benefited from it. Being of European descent and having been raised as someone with dual citizenship, he had a Dutch girlfriend and tried to settle in Europe, but like so many diasporic, white South Africans, when living abroad he became homesick for Africa. It was only by living in Khayelitsha that he came to realise he was an African. "The only sacrifice I ever wanted from my black friends was that they would accept me as an African, regardless of the colour of my skin. And they did." (Otter, 2007:278.) He feels confident that he is no longer a *soutpiel*, or salt dick, with one foot in Europe and the other in Africa, leaving one's dick to hang in the ocean. "At last", he feels he has "taken on a fresh identity, an African identity. For the first time I knew that Africa would make it, whatever the odds" (Otter, 2007:279). Using almost the same words as Khumalo had used to end his first book:

... against all logic and rational judgment, [I] had this very deep, profound and unshakeable belief (...) that the future of the world is not only in Africa, but the future of this world is Africa ... It was then that I also decided that when everybody else ran away from Africa I would run to her. After all I have no other home, this is the cradle of mankind (Otter, 2007:220),

referring to the archaeological burial site of Sterkfontein, near Johannesburg, where the oldest remains of human beings on earth are found.⁷

When his friends in the Vovo Cash Store teach Otter a song for the military wing of the African National Congress, *Wena nawe umkhonto* – “a song from a struggle I’d never been part of, one that, if I closed my eyes and joined in the passion of my brothers, I could very nearly see” – and especially when they joined him in singing *Uit die blou van onse hemel*⁸ – “Although there was quite a bit of laughter throughout, all my friends sang the words with an enthusiasm no less genuine to that shown to the earlier song.” (Otter, 2007:176.) Otter realises he has landed in an all-inclusive South Africa and feels accepted by his African brethren.

Unlike the early nineteenth-century travellers described by Alain de Botton in *The art of travel* (2002), who due to the absence of earlier travellers had lots of imaginative freedom, as they discovered new regions and places not visited before (De Botton, 2002:114), neither Khumalo nor Otter have this imaginative freedom, both being interested in finding out how they fitted into expectations raised by earlier travellers. The value of their recordings is therefore situated not so much in their description of regions and places new to them, but rather in the effect these have on them. In other words, as travellers they

... learn how societies and identities have been formed by the past and so acquire a sense of continuity and belonging. ‘The person practicing this kind of tourism,’ says De Botton quoting Nietzsche, ‘looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city’. (De Botton, 2002:113.)

Both Khumalo and Otter have used their experiences to get to know who they are and where and how they fit in in (South) African society. In this sense, De Botton’s words “journeys are the midwives of

7 Sterkfontein is known as the “cradle of mankind”. It is at Sterkfontein (within the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site) that the famous Mrs Ples (*Plesianthropus transvaalensis*) was discovered – a well-preserved skull of a species of early man who lived there about two million years ago.

8 *Uit die blou van onse hemel* was the national anthem under apartheid rule; the government of the democratic Republic of South Africa incorporated the Afrikaans anthem into the new multilingual national anthem, thus symbolising reconciliation between the different population groups.

thought" (De Botton, 2002:57) ring all the more true for both of them, as they seem to have come to terms with questions of origin, belonging, identity and nationality while travelling. Both of them have grasped a better sense of where they belong. In this sense all three books could be considered "home-coming" texts. Khumalo ends *Dark continent* with a thank-you note to Mama Africa and a direct invitation to e-mail him if after finishing the book the reader still feels Africa is a dark continent. Otter walks with his girlfriend hand in hand in the Company Gardens in Cape Town: "like me," he writes, "she is from Khayelitsha" (Khumalo, 2007:290) and feels fully accepted. When a *bergie* shouts after them: "That is wrong (...) A sheep and a pig can't be together" (Khumalo, 2007:291), Otter realises this old hobo, stuck in the past, does not seem to grasp that the two of them have moved beyond the ignorance, distrust and contempt associated with the pain of the old South Africa.

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