

BOOK REVIEW

‘Some of the following was previously published’: Five (un)related notes on having reviewed Siya Khumalo’s *You Have to be Gay to Know God for Rapport*

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I !ke e: !xarra !ke

In 2018 I was asked to review Khumalo’s text for *Rapport* because of my work on the intersections between queer theory and citizenship. My scholarship is specifically interested in how South African iterations of ‘queerness’ can shed light on how we navigate frameworks of belonging (including national frameworks). As a gay South African, and an Afrikaner, I am invested in the questions that are surfaced by the reality of navigating the intersectional tensions between the privilege my racial identity affords me and the reorientations my gay identity necessitates. This is especially the case in a stratified and diverse society, and in a country where lived actuality is a series of encounters-with (difference and modes of otherness).

Broadening the scope of how diversity is conceptualised as bringing value to national identity – in a country with the motto, in !Xam, !ke e: !xarra !ke, lit. ‘diverse people unite’ – the term ‘decolonial’ implies that we more honestly and intrusively consider how mechanics of academia, such as the review, can be seen to sustain identitarian oppositionality while the tokenistic embrace of ‘queerness’ as a substitutive proxy for real change, can be seen as a settler move to innocence – as Tuck and Yang (2012) would have it.

LGBTQI* identity (and texts) is not necessarily queer identity (and texts). Rather, some texts carry the potentiality to activate both celebratory and oppositional responses. What, then, is activated by the very presence of a review of a queer text such as *You Have to be Gay to Know God* (Khumalo 2018), of which the readership overlaps in no way with the readership of conservative-leaning *Rapport*?

II ‘Some of the following was previously published’

In 2018 I was asked to review Khumalo’s text for *Rapport*, but rereading the review, now, I’m struck by how focused on – obsessed with, really – exclusionary identity the eventually published

review is. Instead of focusing on Khumalo's unabashed treatment of the joys and sorrows of sexual citizenship and as emblematic of the navigation of religious, political and identitarian discourse by a generation of sexy *blogueurs engagés*, the review opts to surface the perceived distances between the *Rapport* reader and Khumalo.

Mention is made of the (in)tensely hybrid intentionality of the text: *Hlala Kwabafileyo* and *Desperate Housewives*; the *Communist Manifesto* and Danielle Steel; Lohatla army base's bro code and the pink Shaka Zulu outfits Khumalo wears to the Mr Gay Durban 2014 pageant. As is the fact, Khumalo is not above inciting the reader – daring us to respond – whether through Over-The-Top (OTT) self-revelatory shock tactics or exclusionary statements on religion (read that title again), or through the twinning of desire and the abject. Indeed, Khumalo's making-erotic of crucifixion imagery (58) brings to mind a heady remix of *The Devils* – that is, if Ken Russel's 1971 film was redubbed by Æmilia Lanyer. See also the marked mention of the queer reinterpretation of the Pietà; with the underlying assumption that, surely, *Rapport* readers will fume about this. (The review's title, assigned as a substitute for my own, is no less than *Geloof en seks sal lesers laat stoom*, lit. 'Religion/belief and sex will make readers steam', with the doubled connotation of anger and arousal in the Afrikaans *stoom*.) What goes unsaid is how Khumalo charges, fearlessly, into the making strange of trite iconography of 'western' religiosity.

See also page 85's googling of water sports, a mere three pages after the description of 'tak[ing] a group of stillborn babies to the mortuary. I loaded about a dozen of them on the double-decked tray like I was filling up a shopping cart' (81–82). What is the exact reception-functionality of surfacing this abject-desire coupling? The best my review could come up with is comparing Khumalo to Dennis Cooper and Koos Prinsloo.

The Prinsloo link is specifically real – viscerally so, for me – in the description of his schooldays and daydreams of rugby-playing classmates that shift seamlessly between bullying and the erotic, with their 'legs clamped down on and around my throat while their angelic faces grinned down at me with delicious cruelty; constellations of bent joints' (14).

After a while the reader (Even the *Rapport* reader?) becomes accustomed to the making-together of metaphysical agitation, sexual activism, and the abject, and the focus shifts to the style of Khumalo's blogger bildungsroman. The text at times reads more like an edited collection – a printed series of thematically linked blog entries – and a stronger editorial hand would have helped avoid repetition and temper the self-referential rhetoricality. Or maybe that's exactly the point here, to embrace (and revel in) the highly subjective mode of the blogger – emblemised by the self-refracting self-engagement of the cover (with apology, one presumes, to Shepard Fairey).

But polemic fatigue invariably sets in. (The last eight chapters, especially if read in one sitting, start to come across as an extended trolling session.) The text – and the reader – is saved, however, by innovative phrasing (as when Khumalo describes a beloved's face as a 'geometric flower', 12) that attunes the reader to the potential of the blogger – over, say, the essayist – to intuit tech-stylistic novelty and to mirror the way younger generations speak-through-tech.

Somewhat challenging is the way 'western' (for lack of a better word) experiences are wholesale made to fit onto South African lived experience: certain denominational expressions of Christianity come under intense scrutiny, while homophobia in other religious expressions does not; references to Freud, Pandora, Helios, Hitler construct a specifically European idea-world without

consideration of how interpretation of these is delimited in South Africa; the US political-cultural idiom ('mainstream media', Antonin Scalia, Bill O'Reilly, Jimmy Carter, Don't Ask, Don't Tell) is very strongly relied on. The incorporation of these examples of globalised discourse, in and of itself, is of course not a problem. Rather, what I wish to surface, question and critique (from the position of a reader) in the text are the ways in which Khumalo's borrowings become shorthand for lived experiences closer to South African actuality.

Such a zero-sum game of culture – where the US–European is magnified as idea-world, but lived South African actuality incorporated anecdotally – mars within contemporary decolonial praxis. Several passages briefly touch on the trope of 'gay is/as un-African', and a more extended analysis of this trope, especially within the larger notion of localised globalisation and the African Renaissance, would have been welcomed. If existing lenses and frameworks of sexual citizenship – such as homonationalism or homoaffectionalism – were incorporated, the argument's affective orientation would be strengthened.

Related to this: Namechecking LGBTQI* activists such as Simon Nkoli, Jason Fiddler and Paul Kasonkomona, is commendable. However, less critical references to Peter Tatchell, for example, without acknowledging the contested ways in which Tatchell fits into global LGBTQI* activism, point to areas of exploration that still lie ahead for Khumalo.

Irrespective of these minor misgivings, what stands out is Khumalo's pitch-perfect discussion of the South African Constitution, and of the intimate nearness and lived 'invisibility' of this document, of how the Constitution undergirds the day-to-day experiences of both gay and straight South Africans. Indeed, some of the most poignant passages in the text make the case that the fight for LGBTQI* equality closely coheres with the fight for dignity and rights of all citizens of our country. In light of this, Edwin Cameron's foreword attempts to address the connectivity between Khumalo's textured understanding of the constitutionality of daily life and religious/spiritual experience. That this takes the somewhat narrow form of a polemic against homophobia is perhaps understandable. It is a lot to take on, and this heavy burden of expectation (activated by the foreword) mars the reading of what could, instead, more productively have been framed and marketed as a pop-theological treatise, a slyly revolutionary manifesto for a bloggin' generation.

Indeed, there's a material immediacy to Khumalo's *kruistog* against the heteropatriarchal, an immediacy that is needed, brutal and necessary.

III *Ons praat jou taal*

In 2018 I was asked to review Khumalo's text for *Rapport* (established in 1970, during the heyday of apartheid; with the exclusionary motto *Ons praat jou taal* – lit. 'We speak your language'). Whilst on several occasions having officially distanced itself from the practices of the past, *Rapport* is still a (historically) white institution, catering to the specific needs of a primarily white and affluent, almost exclusively Afrikaans-speaking, readership.

As it is the only national weekly/Sunday paper still published in Afrikaans, and despite having a more socially conservative readership, literary reviews in *Rapport* are highly recognised. (More liberal and progressive Afrikaans readers will joke that they 'only buy *Rapport* for the book reviews'.) Its continuing popularity – although the fact that there is no directly competing Sunday

publication in Afrikaans surely helps – allows it to be one of the last remaining national platforms on and of Afrikaans identity. (Read: Afrikaner identity. One of South African whiteness' most workable sleights of hand was replacing 'Afrikaner identity' with 'Afrikaans identity'.)

While the newspaper's tenor and focus are nominally about Afrikaans identity – notwithstanding the inclusion of columns in linguistic varieties of Afrikaans – it still performs the role of platform for institutionalised responses to/from an Afrikaner *umwelt*. As such, it is a mouthpiece for what Melissa Steyn (2004) calls 'white talk', that is, institutionalised discourses that exhibit traits 'resistant to transformation'.

Reworking the submitted review into a published/(publishable) piece for the above-defined readership necessitated a number of changes. Instructive are those parts (of the submitted review) that did not eventually make it into print. For example, the observation that Khumalo's text feels a bit like an updated, hipper version of Struwig's *Fynskrif* – a heavily polemic book that angered and frustrated churchgoing Afrikaners in 2005. Also of note is the somewhat mystifying decision to change the neologism *blogueurs engagés* (in the submitted review) to 'betrokke' blogger (in publication), thereby reducing Khumalo's text to associations with the term 'betrokke skrywer' (a dog-whistle term that gained cache during the 1980s and referred in part to anti-apartheid authors) which in effect situates Khumalo outside the affective *umwelt* of the *Rapport* reader.

IV *Moddergevegte; mudslinging*

In 2018 I was asked to review Khumalo's text for *Rapport*, during a time when the South African review industry was facing large structural and systemic questions. This is especially evident in the Afrikaans literary system, with an ever-dwindling pool of academics and literary scholars available to participate in the review process. (In somewhat inverse relation to the disproportionately large institutional support still enjoyed by Afrikaans tertiary departments.)

Neil Cochrane's (2018) discussion of the pitfalls of this situation for *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* is relevant here. Cochrane (2018: 175) points to the effects of 'destructive criticism', in relation to 'questionable editorial mentorship and impetuous publishing decisions.' Cochrane (2018) also warns against vindictiveness, one-dimensionality, blatant misinterpretation, and the prevalence of literary mudslinging creeping into Afrikaans reviewing.

While Cochrane's (2018: 177) observations may indeed be emblematic of all 'small literary landscapes' – or might even charitably be said to resemble a lively, interactive and joyously robust literary field – his comparative view between the Afrikaans and Irish literary systems shows the effects of the ever-retracting number of reviewers active at any given time within a small system. In smaller systems, these reviewers also (most probably) know each other personally (Cochrane 2018), and know the authors whose work they have to review.

The last few years have seen a proliferation of postgraduate qualification programmes in creative writing, a number of which are situated in – or affiliated with – Afrikaans departments. (Partly because these departments have realised that such programmes, as well as the teaching of compulsory modules to students from education courses, may be their saving grace.) Cochrane (2018) reminds us that manuscripts submitted in partial completion of such programmes are not necessarily equal to manuscripts ready to be submitted to a publisher, a seemingly obvious

observation direly negated by the large number of debut texts being published very soon after graduation from such programmes. These texts then have to be reviewed – brought into relation to the existing canon, and situated within receptional parameters – by closely affiliated reviewers.

In terms of the effects of social media, Cochrane (2018: 182) briefly re-emphasises the role of critical readers and reviewers above ‘friends, Instagram followers and colleagues’. The consequences of these sycophantic echo chambers of taste surely warrant further investigation.

Dwindling newspaper readership, and the sometimes desperate measures editors need to take to keep readers’ attention, is a last aspect discussed by Cochrane. He likens Afrikaans literary supplements (*boekblaaië*) to *The Jerry Springer Show* (2018: 178); leading to a (sometimes entertainingly robust, but) completely unsustainable approach where discussions of the value and function of texts are replaced with ‘irrelevant extra-textual anecdotes, unmotivated value judgements and the superficial pointing out of shortcomings’ (2018: 179). Controversy, sadly, still sells newspapers.

V Some unanswered questions around queer complicity in whiteness

In 2018 I was asked to review Khumalo’s text for *Rapport*, because I’m gay and white and Afrikaans. I read Khumalo’s text through my own field of academic interest, gay South African (read: Afrikaans) literature. What did my references to, for example, Koos Prinsloo activate? Why not also/rather make a comparison to Chike Frankie Edozien?

Queer identity can be radical praxis, and Khumalo’s text has the potential to supplement (if not subvert) the worldview of the *Rapport* reader. However, the text needed to be first ‘interpreted’ by a reviewer whose own subject position was (just) near enough to the heteropatriarchy of the assumed readership.

But why, in the first instance, publish a review of a text a *Rapport* reader will most probably never read? While I don’t necessarily question the editorial intention behind requesting and placing the review, we can be more honest about what the specific conjunction of gay-black ‘anti’ religious presence here activates and signifies and reinforces.

Finally, can we more urgently consider the implications for starting to think with – and through – decolonial praxis in reviewing? If decolonial praxis in and through literary reviewing is to become more substantive, what factors need to be acknowledged and which systemic issues are to be surfaced? (With, of course, also avoiding such simple binarism as subject X can’t review a text about subject Y’s lived experience.)

Can the very placement of the review, and its clustering of queer and black oppositionality – masquerading as inclusivity – be seen as a settler move to innocence?

The central questions which plague those invested in the substantive engagement of decoloniality are questions which may at times be seen as divisive. These, however, are necessary. What, for example, is the specific interpretative value brought by a white Afrikaner man to a text that revels in, and is centred on, affective resonances that I can only hope to start imagining? In the foreword, Cameron writes that the justified rage of Khumalo’s text is targeted toward ‘avoidable and interconnected suffering; he explores who has a vested interest in stigmatising “otherness” to

sustain suffering and exclusion' (Khumalo 2018: 9, emphasis in original). Through the specific and tokenistic ways in which the text has been incorporated into the idea-world of the *Rapport* reader, in and through the framing of the (my) review, Khumalo's searing and warranted anger is itself stigmatised and thereby (partly) neuters the queer potentiality it could give rise to.

How honest are we about how historically white institutions (of which *Rapport* is but one example here, but which permeates South African academia) construct, through a tokenistic inclusion of queerness, a seemingly inclusive public sphere of discussion?

About the reviewer

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Wemar Strydom lectures in Afrikaans literature at North-West University, with a research focus on the intersections between queer masculinities and citizenship. In 2018 he was guest editor of a themed issue of *Image & Text* on the reception of the film *Inxeba/The Wound*, and is co-guest editor of a March 2019 issue of *JLS* on repositioning Koos Prinsloo. Alongside Chantelle Gray van Heerden, he is co-convenor of the February Lectures conference series on queer lived experience in the global South.¹

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