

Pumla Gqola investigates the environment in which the textures of “South Africanness” are being explored and created especially in the media.

Where have all the rainbows gone?

Everywhere you look this year there are reminders and encouragements to celebrate freedom, to participate in the culmination of a decade of building and enshrining independence. It has been hard work, we are reminded by billboards and advertisements in newspapers, television and popular magazines, but it has been well worth it. Public declarations of pride and joy abound. The roles of the media in this celebration attest to the reciprocity of the relationship between culture and politics.

Whereas a decade ago it became necessary to stress unity, sameness and “rainbow nation” identity as crucial markers of being South African, the second decade of democracy is set to articulate South Africanness in another way. This shift of positions within memory-making and collective identity formation illustrates more than a superficial incarnation of development; it speaks more directly to the diverse applications of memory politically. Collective memory prompts engagements with some form of historical consciousness, and requires a higher, more fraught level of activity in relation to the past than simply identifying and recording it. Memmonic activity is crucial for the symbols through which each community invents itself because it resists erasure. Desirée Lewis, reviewing a recent collection of South African writing and its frames, reasons that evidence of South Africans’ “time and imaginative space”, in other words, freedom, lies in its public performances. She notes that “much cultural expression and the platforms for this have been looking simultaneously backwards and inward, opening paths into multiple pasts that are not unidirectional and straightforward but labyrinthine and multi-layered”.

This distinct opening up has gained more prominence in recent years. A few years ago I wrote an article on how race and racialisation relate to and are influenced by nation-building and self-definition in a democratic South Africa. “Rainbowism”, I argued, was central to shaping identities in a post-apartheid South Africa; the mere evocation of the identity “rainbow nation” in the print and electronic media, as well as popular culture, also worked to silence dissenting voices on the (then) state of race and racism in South Africa, thereby moderating more radical anti-racist critiques of a society in formation. This constant assertion of “rainbow nation” identity needed to parade as a descriptive activity in order to successfully navigate its existent aspirational effect: this was the only way in which this desired state could be actualised. In other words, the more we be-

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gan to see and describe ourselves as such, the more South Africans could become a “rainbow nation”.

In the 10th year of South Africa’s democracy, “rainbow nation” has disappeared almost entirely from public parlance. It is possible that at the precise moment we perceived ourselves as achieving “rainbow nation” status, its assertion became redundant. While the media had given us little reprieve from declarations of “rainbow nation” citizenship, the dominant trend now points to their apparent commitment to uncovering the textures of that status. Njabulo Ndebele predicted: “The emergence of an identity, with social values embedded in it, will in time, solidify into memories of cultural practice, which can be both a blessing and a curse, that predispose us to replicate our values and social practices wherever we are in the world.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s coinage of the “rainbow children of God”, and its incarnations across the political spectrum in speeches, editorials, and advertisements has been replaced, of late, by a particular fascination with “diversity”. It is logical that diversity would be the preferred means of expression because, according to Samuel Kiguwa, “[t]raditional politics exercised before the 1994 changes served to silence the voices of the weak and oppressed, consigned their histories and experiences to the margins and subsumed all experiences under the dominant outlook”.

A “Proudly South African” television advert shows a 10 year-old black girl conducting an outdoor cacophony of sounds which gradually blend together for a discernible melody. The sonic variety is buttressed by bodies which bear diverse marks of race, adornment and dance movements. As the scene concludes, bold letters declare the conductor’s birthday as the 27th April 2004, accompanied by the slogan “Born into Freedom”. The national flag propped against a white backdrop subtitled “Proudly South African” seems a natural sequel. The clever design blends the “proudly South African” campaign with pride in national identity.

Analogous visual and word play is evident in another television performance, this time the national anthem, which marks the transition between SABC2 broadcasting and the crossing over to the trans-national SABC Africa, at midnight. The national anthem is sung by South Africans situated in varied geographies: mines, football fields, outside restaurants, urban areas and rural landscapes. As with the advertisement above, vibrant colours are set up against well-lit backgrounds to underline what has become one of the country’s favourite

English words: diversity. The suggestion is that there is place for everyone. The multi-coloured clothing, surroundings, complexions and other symbols serve as shorthand for race and echo and expand the “rainbow nation”.

The importance and centrality diversity has assumed is evident beyond television. It has implications for the negotiations of space, and for re-thinking identities in South Africa. This too should be unsurprising, given the rigid policing of spatial and bodily integrity under apartheid. Part of the contestatory activity of memory, which engages this history, participates in the structuring of popular culture, as Nkhensani Manganyi told the Sunday Times in an interview on 20 April 2003. That this is part of a larger South African popular sensibility is clearer when attention is paid to the new place of music and visual arts in showing the innovation, which is being celebrated in the media as part of the South African identity.

Art has been linked explicitly to self-formation, to opening up possibilities. Examples of this, such as the rebellious playfulness of clothes named Stoned Cherrie, Loxion Kulca, and Craig Native, make sense alongside the unprecedented cross-over appeal of artists like Phuzikhemisi and Mandoza. Here, innovation is about referencing previous and ongoing black cultural and experiential terrain, and at the same time it links with new creative forms. The media’s own explorations and investigations into identity synchronise with this creative playfulness, as evidenced in the hyper visibility of these creative cultures.

It is in this environment, where media are partners in the creation and exploration of the textures of South Africanness, that even the conservative *Volksblad* would carry ongoing front page coverage of Brenda Fassie’s hospitalisation and death. However the specific coverage is interpreted, a new spectrum of possibility was suggested here. From a different position in the political spectrum, the *Mail&Guardian* on 11 June 2004 would foreground the existence of difference within the ruling political party, the ANC. That this thread runs through the paper’s lengthy interpretation of the ongoing Bulelani Ngcuka/Jacob Zuma controversy is significant; as is the journalistic trend to link apparent ANC membership flexibility with evaluations of the successes of the South African democracy.

Freedom is repeatedly interpreted as the ability to aspire to and achieve greatness, where greatness is open to restyling. The Woolworth’s advertisements in the print media are the best example of this



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in their integration of architects, performers, visual artists, engineers and other (young) professionals as evidence of the freedom of diversity. The associations between these professions and creativity are clear; their juxtaposition reinforces the range of possibilities. What define South African “essence” links with diversity, is an ability to choose from a range of ever-increasing possibilities. The suggestion defies failure: everybody wants to be a Nkalakatha. In a country and time where a much loved kwaito artist can rock white clubs in conservative central South Africa, and a previously unknown white woman can shoot to the top of kwaito hit lists, crossing over has never been so appreciated. Diversity has become significant because it permits celebration, participates in important socially transformative work and is hip.

From all of this then, it appears as though freedom effectively permeates all terrains in South Africa, at least at the level of representation. When South Africans can be whoever they want to be, and inhabit those positions proudly, perhaps we really have become the “rainbow nation”.

The media have had as significant a role in that as anybody, and yet, I am not as convinced as Xolela Mangcu, who said in his lecture which was part of the Rhodes University Centenary Series, that “despite the constant attacks and problems of racial bias, the media have done a wonderful job as a vehicle for self-expression”. It is obvious that we have a press free from governmental and other intimidation. Nonetheless, this recognition is not the same as acknowledging that the media are equally available for the expression of our different realities, of our various forms of taking issue with reportage. This certainly appears to be the case, and in many of the instances discussed above, proves to be so. There remain, nonetheless, traces of very disturbing

tendencies in the print media.

Television and radio have risen to the challenge of language much more imaginatively than print. Language is used here both in the literal sense of the official 11 languages and more abstractly to denote the kinds of discourses which have been foreclosed. This foreclosure accompanies a facet of diverse expression which participates in at the same time that it problematises the celebration of diversity in the construction of South Africanness. While there are numerous examples of this, the sloppiness which characterised the Zine Magubane coverage in the *Sunday Times* (October 2002), and its re-publication by other newspapers nationwide, such as the *Daily Despatch*, among others, or the puzzling Xoliswa Sithole saga in *The Star*, suggest more than cases of insufficient background checking. The editorial response was a closing down of ranks in the face of Magubane’s challenge to what she maintained were fabricated published citations of her, pointing to the presence of something more nuanced than carelessness.

The specific kinds of multiplicity questioned, suggested and engaged in, in both the work of Sithole and that of Magubane, pose difficult, albeit necessary questions for the project of collective South African identity formation and the power dynamics attached to these performances. It may well be a coincidence that both these black women’s work, at the time of their controversial exchanges with the print media, explored ways in which power informs who can articulate which realities in contemporary South Africa and when.

These are two examples of a broader phenomenon, which seems to undermine the general claims to accessible self-expression. It suggests that there are certain participations in innovation which cannot be co-opted and made to function in the interest

of specific diversities.

This raises questions for the meanings of diversity and what it can acknowledge and celebrate if there continue to be attempts at gate keeping. Participation in uncovering and contributing to the “proudly South African” sensibility centres on stressing freedom in negotiating identity.

This uncovering of diversity needs to be attentive to the manner in which every cultural production and all knowledge-making is implicated in relationships of power. Diversity and a powerful expression of freedom are not in and of themselves automatically transformative. While the opening up of identity, which the country’s media have contributed to, is an acknowledgement and result of freedom, inattention to the crevices of power in representation can work to threaten precisely this freedom. It can, and sometimes does, suggest disparity between the mythologising of diversity and its felt contradictions.



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