

Unraveling the rainbow: The remission of nation in post-apartheid literature.

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Unraveling the Rainbow:

The Remission of Nation in Post-Apartheid Literature

Shaun Irlam

"So this is the aftermath."

—Tricky, "Maxinquaye"

"Nuu t se gat . . . dis nie nuut nie, dis dieselfde gemors, gerecycle onder 'n ander naam."

—Marlene van Niekerk, *Triomf*

Over the past ten years, the "new" South Africa has been sustained by a prayer and the jussive mode that governs it. This prayer is best expressed by the nation's spiritual leader, Bishop Desmond Tutu. At the close of his foreword to the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he wrote, "Ours is a remarkable country. Let us celebrate our diversity, our **[End Page 695]** differences. God wants us as we are. South Africa wants and needs the Afrikaner, the English, the coloured, the Indian, the black. We are sisters and brothers in one family—God's family, the human family."¹ Tutu's prayer succinctly summons the impossible injunction under which the new South Africa now labors. He congregates all South Africans under the aspiration to a national unity grounded in natural law: "We are sisters and brothers in one family—God's family, the human family"; yet at the same moment, he urges, "Let us celebrate our diversity, our differences." It is this dual and difficult invitation to embrace unity and celebrate difference that has imprinted the decade since the end of apartheid.

Much joy and celebration attended the birth of what Tutu dubbed "the Rainbow Nation," the "New" South Africa during the last decade. This jubilation marked the end of more than three centuries of white domination that began in the 1650s with the establishment of a small Dutch supply station at the southwestern tip of the continent. The story of the emergent nation's first leader, Nelson Mandela, catapulted from prison to presidency, became a vivid allegory for the national story, the passage from bondage to ballot box. As Tim Trengrove Jones writes, "The air—and arias—of emancipation are all around us. We see in these notionally postcolonial, postapartheid times a reprise of an enlightenment faith in the presiding genius of reason and truth: truth is knowable and the truth will set us free."² Today, the current president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, speaks hopefully of an African Renaissance and travels to the world's capitals to promote his New Partnership for African Development.

In contrast to the footage of violence and carnage that spilled from television sets around the world during the 1980s, images of South Africa from the past fifteen years have shown the national euphoria around the release of Nelson Mandela and the first free elections; however, there is serious cause for concern about the fragility of the future. Images from the new South Africa have also shown the heartache around the harrowing testimonies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the deepening AIDS crisis and utter failure of the ANC government to offer leadership through this epidemic, the resurgence of atavistic and violent ethnic tensions, the swift insurgency of international crime syndicates, and the still-appalling levels of unemployment with all their attendant social pathologies: crime, disease, poverty, and hopelessness.³ If one looks closely at the demographic distribution of wealth and privilege in South Africa now, it would be difficult to decipher any significant change. These sobering realities perennially need to temper easy assumptions that South Africa's dark past no longer casts shadows across the future.

While South Africa has hosted several key international events—the International Conference on Racism and Xenophobia in Durban in 2001 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002—both events that brought the nation into the attention of global media, the government has also squandered international goodwill by its eccentric **[End Page 696]** responses to the AIDS crisis, its inability to secure the rule of law or employment for many of its citizens, and its utter failure of moral leadership on the kleptocracy of Robert Mugabe in neighboring Zimbabwe.⁴ A deepening sense of political malaise...

Shaun Irlam

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Die verkleurmannetjie (s) en Shaka's Vergelyking tussen D. J. Opperman en Thomas Mofolo

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