The Popular Arts and Culture
in the Texture of the Public Sphere in Africa

Author

Tsitsi Dangarembga is an accomplished writer, dramatist, theatre and film producer. A graduate of the University of Zimbabwe and the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin, her short story *The Letter* won the SIDA Award in 1985 and her first novel *Nervous Condition* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1989. Among the plays she has written and directed are *She No Longer Weeps*, *The Lost of the Soil*, and *The Third One*. She has also produced fourteen films, most notable among which is *Everyone's Child,* shown worldwide at various festivals, including the Dublin Film Festival. She has also won professional merit awards in Zimbabwe, South Africa and the United States of America. Since 1989, she has been engaged in delivering lectures, addresses and readings at various literary gatherings, academic conferences and film festivals.

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Lecture Series

Contents

1

Introduction

Good evening learned guests, colleagues, friends. I would like to register my gratitude to the Executive Secretary of CODESRIA and the entire organization for inviting me to give this endnote address. We live in an era where many Zimbabweans are being struck off from guest lists, and many other Zimbabweans are being barred from activities, due to the situation that prevails in our country. Therefore, it strikes me as particularly auspicious, and particularly in the spirit of pan-Africanism, that I am standing here this evening to share with you some thoughts on the matter of the popular arts and culture in the texture of the public sphere in Africa.

My particular interest in this terrain is to plot a particular trajectory of African experience. My project in plotting this trajectory is that it should be a single one that does not fall into the trap of binarism, nor the trap of splitting, nor the trap of bifurcation, as that trajectory of African experience which is rooted in neo-liberal discourse does. This departure from a notion of African experience broken up into unrecognizable entities by the discourse of modernity is one crucial objective of my project. And I call it a departure rather than a regaining because my wish is not to regain in a triumph of nostalgia an almost mythical unity, but to transform in an observable way that which is fragmented into a functional whole.

Another crucial objective of my project is to avoid another subjective trap that African experience so often falls into. This second trap is the trap of nativism. Our colleague Ndlovu-Gatsheni, at this gathering, compassionately and with empathy navigates the confluence of experience and theory to point out the extreme and terrifying dangers of nativism, while at the same time, nevertheless, presenting the phenomenon of nativism as a predictable response to an equally terrifying condition of unbeing unleashed by what he so appropriately and poetically calls 'the darker side of modernity'. So, my interest is in the synthesis of disparate aspects of African experience over time and over many other variables. I am looking to synthesize African experience over demographic variables. I am looking at synthesising African experience across disparate and

often antagonistic histories. I am looking at synthesizing a common African experience over a present that is often steeped in ignorance and enmity. Indeed, my project will have to straddle mutually incompatible discourses and make them compatible. I shall consider the kinds of popular art and culture that might be beneficial for this project, and will explore how this benefit might be brought to bear in contexts of a particularly slippery and contracting public sphere such as prevails in Zimbabwe.

The African and the Not-African Subjectivity

Those forces that have resulted in the unbeing of the African subject have been documented extensively. These are the forces that spurred on the slave trade and the European lebensraum–motivated place-in-the-sun projects of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Shohat and Stamm (1995) have shown how these forces, which they summed up under the notion of eurocentrism, resulted in the development of specific cognitive and affective schemata within individuals which function to present as natural and 'common-sensical' a binary system which ranks African against not-African in such a way that African is inevitably inferior to not-African.

While more recent thought has been, in the spirit of political correctness, at pains merely to recognize the dichotomizing effect of neo-liberal thought on that which is African and that which is not African, without necessarily ranking or ascribing relative value to the two branches in the accepted dichotomy, it is my contention that the subjective effect of the pervasive ranking that took place in previous decades and centuries continues to have sufficient negative observable impact today as to merit further investigation of the phenomenon.

Exploring how in present day thought, education and everyday life, the phenomenon they called eurocentrism, and which this writer characterizes as the 'not-I-ness of the African' is naturalised as 'common sense', Shohat and Stamm emphasize how a not-African legacy informs all realms of experience from media representations to contemporary everyday subjectivities at work in the individual. 'The result of these processes has been, over time, the propagation of a fictitious sense of the innate superiority of not-African-derived cultures and peoples'.

Africanness is then defined as not having that which should be had, much as Mulvey (1975) showed that the feminine vis-à-vis the masculine, is defined in lack. The discourse of the not-African subject presents for our consumption an array of variables by which Africans are generally defined as lacking. These desirable variables, which sometimes are absolutely necessary for admission to the category of human, range from history through writing to clean water, vaccinations and democracy.

2

Fanon (1970) reminds us that, 'the Negro is a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety' (p.107). It follows that if the perceptions of the 'African as not-I' are informed by the tenets of the not-African universe; the Negro, as Fanon has it, will be a phobogenic object to the Negro self. I would argue that those Africans who perceive themselves as not-I do not merely have thin identities. They have terrifying identities that terrify themselves. These not-I African identities, like all other identities, are not absolute but graded according to experience and individual characteristics. Nevertheless, they are graded on the scale of terror.

Pushing the Frontiers of Inquiry

I am sure many of us here have anecdotal evidence to support these conjectures. Many of us can relate how a biologically not-African, which is to say lesser pigmented client, was served in a queue before one's African self by the similarly African service provider. Or we can relate how in a restaurant, the African waiter will remarkably often serve the not-African first.

This author has not been exposed to any empirical studies to test hypotheses concerning the existence and effects of the not-I subjectivity of Africans. Being ensconced in the heart of the very African country of Zimbabwe, in Harare, I am not claiming that such studies have not been carried out. However, the fact that such studies do not yet constitute major reference points in our canon on the subject of African subjectivities points to several issues we would pay little attention to at our peril.

The first issue concerns the agendas of our research. Literature, from the slave narratives through Richard Wright, Alice Walker, Toni Morisson and my own works of fiction have dealt with the genesis of the 'not-I' African subjectivity. Yet, empirical social science enquiry into this matter has been largely descriptive rather than empirical. This matter is of utmost significance to me, ladies and gentlemen, because I have said my project is transformational. My interest is to transform the ruptured African subjectivity that has been fragmented into the not-I into a contemporary African I. It is my contention that to effect such transformation meticulously gathered data, as well as theoretical soundness and rigour, are required. I am not unaware of the difficulty of acquiring the resources for transformational research that do not valorize the not-African. As capable, esteemed thinkers of our time, our engagement is framed by internal and external constraints that individually and together militate against positive enquiry into the positive, affirmatory 'I' of the African subject. I can only repeat, as you have heard so often, we dare not give up formulating, requesting and strategizing, and making our way, bit by bit.

3

Theory, Praxis and Transformation

I have referred in the immediately preceding sentences to the rich creative literary tradition that has addressed the genesis of the not-I African identity. An equally powerful body of creative work has described the condition of the many and diverse aspects of the not-I African identity, including its sad though seemingly sweet delusions, its agony and its ferocious consequences. The far-reaching and knowledgeable papers presented at this conference are continued evidence of this engagement.

In 1991, during the COSATU conference of that year where I was a delegate, although I was still a young woman, I had a bizarre conversation with Zoe Wickam. I had recently enrolled in film school after my disappointment with formal university education. I was not able to formulate my disappointment, but I remember telling Ms Wickam belligerently that I did not believe in theory. She fixed me with her twinkling eye and asked me what I meant by that assertion. I will have to ask her the next time I meet her, whether I answered her coherently. I fear I did not. However, nearly two decades later, I am able to make my second point this evening by saying I was disappointed with the discursive underpinnings of the knowledge I was being taught. I had little more than a gut feeling at the time that this knowledge that I, and other students, were being taught would not lead to practical solutions to our own condition, and for me knowledge was and is nothing if it is not a precursor to practice.

Practice involves action, and action inevitably involves some degree of change. I am arguing for the production of social knowledge that will provide for the interventions that change our fragmented not-I African subjectivities into functional positive African wholes. To have impact, we are going to need data. So, let us stand in queues and place little ticks for the number of times service providers display not-I African subjectivities. Zora-Neale Hurston, with her tape measure and her literature, contributed to the Civil Rights movement that was part of the long trajectory that gained the desired results for US President-elect Barack Obama. The last great resource of the imperial not-African has been said to be the African subjectivity, and this is most definitely the case. To challenge the imperial not-African effectively, we must engage more in the work of subject relevant figures, as well as the work of the subject.

What I am talking of here is expanding a kind of capillary power which nourishes the project of those who have made the revolution of the imaginary successfully (Cheater 1999:3). I am talking of a process, a subjective transformation that enables people to become their own authorities over their own subjectivities (ibid.) not in the counter discursive mode of nativism but in an independent affirmatory manner.

4

2

The Discourse of the Affirmatory African in the Public Sphere

The not-African neo-liberal discourse, based as it is on the discourse of modernity, is as noted before, everyday discourse that permeates the public sphere. To transcend that which is already in the public sphere, the discourse of the African 'I' must itself enter the public sphere and permeate this sphere as widely as possible until it becomes everyday common sense. The requirements of such penetration are great, often dauntingly so. Up rises the head of that lacking technology, as well as so many other heads belonging to various kinds of resources which are also lacked. However, just as the not-I African subjectivity is the greatest resource of the neo-liberal project, so is that very subjectivity a prime resource for the transformatory project by providing the subject who is to be transformed. To be reached in numbers that justify the term 'revolution of the imaginary', the subject must be reached in numbers that are present only in the public sphere. For bringing self-affirming actors first into being and secondly together into common purpose, as our nascent African nations demand, requires subjective determinants that are disseminated not in the private only, but also in the public sphere.

In powerful not-African groupings, including nations, the public sphere has been characterised in many ways, including as a space that encompasses people of different personal and group identities where these people come together for solidarity and choice (Calhoun 2002:165), or as 'the sphere where people come together as public and discuss matters of common concern' (Habermas 1989:27), or both these definitions. The actional, actioning nature of the public sphere is clearly apparent in these formulations.

Definitions of an African public sphere are problematic. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008) has defined a colonial public sphere as a 'sacred site reserved for colonial white settler bourgeois group that drove colonial public discourse and 'thought' and 'spoke' on behalf of disenfranchised and subalternised colonial 'subjects''. Ndlovu-Gatsheni appears to have traced a post-colonial African public sphere

from the confluence of this colonial sphere and African nationalism (p. 4). The project I espouse would reject such a conceptualization of the African public sphere as flowing from that established in the sunset the colonial state. This author's conceptualization of the African 'I' requires that any sphere that excluded the African be itself excluded as a public sphere. However, a clear definition of the African public sphere is difficult to formulate.

Colhoun (ibid.) has pointed out that where people share the same views, no public sphere is needed. Thus where groups in precolonial times were small and cohesive, the public sphere was also of little magnitude and while it might have been important for purposes of promoting solidarity, such a public sphere was of little importance in shaping the affairs of inhabitants as well as their subjectivities. At best, such a low-power, high-trust sphere would have reinforced existing subjectivities rather than fomenting change and transformation.

Ngugi (1987:37), following Brooke, has characterized the African public sphere as an empty space among people, which contained in its emptiness and by virtue of being among people, a potential for being occupied by actors with the intention of purposive action. In Ngugi's case, the actors were theatre players, the action was theatre, its making, rehearsal and performance. Significant here is the kind of theatre that was engaged in. According to Ngugi, the theatre that he and his colleagues engaged in was transformational in intent and result. Ngugi juxtaposes this transformational theatre to the theatre that reinforced other comfortable existing status quos and subjectivities in Kenya of the 1970s, much in the way that village dances and social occasions might have done in the pre-colonial era. Thus, in considering the role and effect of popular art and culture in the public sphere, it is pertinent to characterize the various public spheres addressed. Of interest, in the context of this discussion, is whether the spaces in question ordinarily host or ordinarily do not host transformatory activity.

The Public Sphere in the Example of Zimbabwe

In the case of the colonial state, taking as an example Zimbabwe, there were the legal and the illegal public spheres. The legal public sphere was the space of social events such as weddings, funerals and dances. Or there was the bioscope truck coming to rest on the grass in an empty space, in order to show American cowboy movies interspersed with advertisements for Lifebuoy and Surf. People wore their best at social gatherings. People bought Lifebuoy and Surf. So the agenda that was served in these legitimate public spaces during the colonial era was the agenda not of the people, but the materialist capitalist agenda which was the colonial project.

6

The clandestine public sphere of the colonial era emanated out of the private clandestine. The private clandestine was a designated house in a township. As the nationalist liberation movement grew and militarized, the clandestine public sphere was the hidden vlei where freedom fighters gathered villagers for what we in Zimbabwe called *pungwes* – all night sessions of conscientization and morale raising during the war of liberation.

This latter clandestine public sphere became legal at independence. Civilians and ex-combatants paraded freely in the streets singing Chimurenga war songs. The same texts and messages were printed and broadcast in the national media. Those who sang the liberation songs were jubilant: the public sphere had mushroomed out from its location under a tree in the moonlight to encompass the entire country, around the clock. The citizens of the colonial state, however, saw their own nation's public sphere contracting under the new order. The point I am making here is that the public sphere does not exist *sui generis* as the public itself often tends to believe, but is made and unmade by those who make their onslaught on subjectivity. This is always to the outrage of those members of the true collective public who are not members of the dominating group, whose subjectivity is not yet interpellated, but is under attack. Otherwise, the onslaught is to the applause of the dominating group and to the smiling acquiescence of those who have been successfully interpellated.

The jubilation of the public that was pro-liberation at independence soon turned to concern as neo-liberalism clamped down on Africanist and pan-Africanist strategy in Zimbabwe and the SADC region. Gourevitch (p. 323) points to a pan-African military alliance that contributed to containing the Rwandan genocide and the significance of this appreciably successful alliance of African subjects in mitigating a horror of historic proportions that was Hutu power.

It is difficult for me to discern from this distance whether this pan-African alliance was nativist or tranformatory. What is known from the point of view of Zimbabwe is that this 'adventure' of Mr Robert Mugabe's, as it was called in the opposition press, combined with the fast track land reform programme, elicited severe neo-liberal reprisals on the young state. The ZANU-PF government responded with tactics that were, to my mind, increasingly militaristic rather than nativist, reflecting the military origins of the party's power, and even though the actions were shrouded in nativist rhetoric. Neo-liberal players responded with further clampdowns, justified by the utterances of the then well-interpellated and politically naïve Movement for Democratic Change. So, an ever-tightening spiral ensued in which the ZANU-PF party gradually and, under increasing duress, abdicated its position as the responsible government of a state and increased its militarization, always veiling these manoeuvres in nativist

7

sloganeering through its influence over the public media. The international community responded with stronger sanctions which prompted ZANU-PF to increase its militaristic pseudo-nativist campaign.

The victim was the public sphere and the Zimbabwean public that it contained. Today there is, in my opinion, practically no public sphere to speak of. Those who wish to parade peacefully for non-political issues, such as the International Images Film Festival for women, of which I am founder, are refused permits. As we are not political activists, we comply. Those who do not comply with the refusal, and march or parade, are quickly broken up by the police. What carried the seed of hope that it would develop into the public sphere has fractured into the very fragments I have spoken of – a series of mutually opposed camps. Those who have voice in the opposition media, whether legitimate newspapers which can be bought on the streets of Harare, or shortwave radio broadcasts or clandestinely shot documentaries, are generally barred from what is called the state media; but this so-called state media must now, after this year's elections be recognized as a new entity – the media of a self-hijacked state, a demonstration of futile nativism par excellence. And it must be said that the reverse is true, that those who have voice in the state media are denied presence in the opposition media.

The Hijacking of the Zimbabwean Public Space

To explain what I mean by self hijacked, imagine this scenario. A plane takes off with passengers who are happy and united as to their destination. As the journey goes on, the crew begin to suspect that the passengers will not allow them to do what they want to do when they arrive at their destination. The crew then exaggerate reports of turbulence into a veritable storm and change course. The passengers do not rush the crew because they still have their luggage in the hold and their lives in their breasts and do not want to go down into the abyss. The crew continue to change course on any pretext because they do not want the passengers to see who they really are, nor do they want to see it themselves. Passengers begin to suffer from dehydration and air sickness. The crew does not care sufficiently to return to the promised destination. The passengers wonder whether it is worth storming the crew, but no one can fly an aircraft. Eventually, the plane flies into a mountain or an ocean, and all perish. If the plane were the public sphere, we would see it shrink into the cockpit where the crew who can control action confer. And finally it is no more.

3

Action through Popular Art in the Residual Public Sphere

Using a conceptualization of the public space as 'that space where people from diverse groupings may confer to agree on and initiate action', we can see that some public spaces continue to exist even in quite militarized and repressive societies, such as prevail in Zimbabwe today. These are the spaces where messages that do not expressly touch on matters of power can be propagated. What are propagated here are messages that address the development agenda, rather than a transformational agenda.

Turning again to that plane, one can assume that the neo-liberals and the hardened colonials in the sense of Rhodesians who never die, as the old Rhodesian song boasted, did not embark but remained on the ground, far away with their backs turned to the airport while the newly legitimate public thronged the runway in the wake of the leading crew. There was laughter and congratulations and singing and chatting as the plane taxied down the apron. There were cheers as it soared up into the sky. Then something went wrong. What was in the beginning a high-trust group became a low-trust society. No, or unsuccessful modes of negotiation were employed. All perished.

To my mind, the unpleasant truth is that our leaders in Africa are ourselves. Our societies, which are also ourselves, regularly fail to produce the calibre of leader that we need to bring us forward as groups, as nations as regions and as a continent. It is my strong contention and considered position that we have to take responsibility for this failure, and stop reproducing the binaries of modernist and neo-liberal thought that make us into the good or enlightened Africans and the bad or savage Africans. It is precisely in this area of a shrunken public sphere that I would like to suggest that popular art and culture might serve us well, if it can refrain from propagating only the negatives of neo-liberal thought, as so much of our popular culture does.

Because of the disjuncture between us the learned and the popular artists, it is hard to see how popular artists might be persuaded to disseminate values that

bolster trust and other positive cohesive values, as the first process in mixing a glue that binds the fragments of our different positive African subjectivities together, and beyond that binds our new positive subjectivities into the beginnings of a public consciousness. Perhaps bringing the learned and the popular artists together is the project of a kindly development worker who has secretly been transformed.

I am suggesting that the old values we last heard of some time ago are the tools we have to fashion transformation in our conflict-ridden societies that are characterized by violence and mistrust. I believe these basic values are ones that almost any individual can relate, regardless of background.

I would now like to show you one example of how I have worked to implement this concept. My example is drawn from the development paradigm because of the constraints of my situation from both the local governmental and international neo-liberal point of view. If I had had more creative freedom, the story would have been different, but I believe the values would remain the same. I hope you will be able to draw some parallels from the narrative of this short work and the general values it espouses with the bigger works of well known cinemas of emerged and emerging nations such as Great Britain, the United States of America, India and China. The film is called *I want a wedding dress*. It is thirty minutes long. I am here to take questions afterwards. Thank you.

10

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