



History as Unfinished Business:

The Nongqawuse Episode in Modern South African Literature

Rachel Frankel

rachel.e.frankel@gmail.com

In 1999, Zakes Mda, a prominent South African author and playwright, was sent to the Eastern Cape of South Africa on a research project. He had been asked to write the script for an episode of a television mini-series named “Saints, Sinners, and Settlers,” in which major South African historical figures were put on trial. Although the series would take place entirely in a modern day courtroom in Johannesburg, Mda thought it important

to “get the feel for the place” where the historical event occurred (Wark Interview). The historical figure the South African Broadcasting Corporation had commissioned Mda to write about was Nongqawuse, the young Xhosa prophetess who brought about the cattle-killing of 1856-1857. Her televised trial was to be aired alongside the stories of Jan Van Riebeeck, Lord Kitchener, Dingane, and H.F. Verwoerd (www.imdb.com). In this rather strange historicization of the perpetrator trials of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the producers of the series have Nongqawuse keeping very interesting and infamous company. In the course of his research on the Eastern Cape, Mda stumbled upon the inspiration for his novel, *The Heart of Redness*:

The broadcasting service arranged with a trader who lived there, Rufus Hurley, who is well-versed in the history of the place, to show me around and to answer my questions. That’s where I met this girl. And I thought immediately, ‘This is a character in my novel’ ... and that’s what gave me the idea of creating the Qukezwa character (Wark Interview).

From this first character and his inquiries for the Nongqawuse television episode, Mda’s novel was created.

It is not surprising, then, that *Heart of Redness* is a story told both in the present and the past. Mda crafts his novel around two narratives: one from the 1856-1857 cattle-killing movement led by the young prophetess Nongqawuse, and one from the current conflict over the building of a casino complex. Both stories take place in Qolorha-by-Sea and are peopled by the “soft” Believers and the “hard” Unbelievers. Many of the names and even characters from the past are repeated. With his dual narratives, Mda is highlighting the present’s inherent connection to the past; his two narrative moments are, in many ways, inextricable. The historical subplot is not only fascinating in its portrayal

of the tragic events of Xhosaland in 1857, what David Attwell calls “the greatest disaster of 19th century Xhosa history,” but also in its connection to the present (47). The Believers and Unbelievers of the nineteenth century are still engaging in endless discord in the 20th century, and the people of Qolorha-by-Sea are still facing the choice between tradition and modernity. This binary opposition between “civility and barbarity” (Jones 162), or “Red and School” (Stapleton 632), or progress and tradition – it has been called all of these things – is important both in the past and present. In Mda’s novel, the contemporary characters are forced to make a choice between modernity and tradition, just as their 19th century counterparts had to make a similar choice between belief and non-belief. In modern society, however, it is not life or death that is at stake but cultural heritage. In staking the question of history in the present, Mda not only highlights the importance of the past, but he also presents an alternative to the aforementioned binary between traditionalism and modernity. As Attwell observes in *Rewriting Modernity*, Mda is striving to find an alternative to these two opposing forces: “Mda’s solution is to suggest the importance of an *Africanised modernity*” (my emphasis, 49). However, this alternative is not an unproblematic one and Mda struggles with what is at stake in preserving history, especially by staking cultural heritage on a traumatic event (the cattle-killing) that nearly wiped out that very culture.

First, I will briefly explore the historical context of the novel, specifically the cattle-killing episode and will then delve into the narrative effects of Mda’s use of this

historical subplot.¹ The inclusion of this story complicates the novel and gives it the problematic dimension of rewriting history and potentially commodifying the tragic events that unfolded in Xhosaland in 1856-1857 in the guise of preserving a threatened cultural heritage. My analysis of Mda's inclusion of the cattle-killing episode is focused on a literary interpretation of the ways in which Mda's text uses the story and juxtaposes it with the present.

I am not concerned with the extent to which Mda borrowed from or alluded to Jeff Peires' excellent history of incident, *The Dead Will Arise*. Mda's borrowings, or "plagiarisms," are the subject of Andrew Offenburger's "Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*." In this piece, Offenburger argues that Mda's novel "must be seen as a plagiarizing, unoriginal work, a derivative of Peires's historical research" (Offenburger, 168). Rather than focusing on the politics of Mda's borrowings, I am instead interested in the relationship between history and the present and how history can be (problematically) harnessed. If, as Offenburger asserts, Mda is (over) using Peires's text to augment his own then perhaps Mda's characters are doing the same to Nongqawuse and her story. To conclude my examination of Mda's novel, I will return to this idea of Mda's "culturalist" approach to modernity (and history) and its potential dangers – Mda privileges tradition over the potentially history-effacing effect of modernity, and yet what is at stake in the fight to preserve a culture by focusing on a

¹ The cattle-killing episode does not make its first appearance in South African fiction with Mda's novel. Rather, it has been a historical moment from which many authors have drawn inspiration. For examples, see: Sindiwe Magona's novel *Mother to Mother*, Jeremy Cronin's poem "The Time of Prophets," and H.I.E. Dhlomo's 1935 play *The Girl Who Killed to Save*.

traumatic event like the cattle-killings? Mda does not advocate a return to a traumatic past, but he is steadfast, both thematically and structurally, in his adherence to a culturally specific remembrance of it.

It is productive to first review the background on the historical moment that sets the stage for Mda's novel. The cattle-killing movement refers to the events of 1856-57 in Xhosaland, South Africa. A young prophetess, Nongqawuse, saw a vision that told her that the Xhosa should kill all of their cattle and not cultivate their land because their ancestors were going to rise from the sea and bring new cattle and crops. The crowning grace of the prophecy was that when the sea rose, it would also wash away the white settlers. The end result of this movement was the slaughter of over 400,000 cattle and the death by starvation of thousands of Xhosa people (Peires 319). According to Jeff Peires, after this event "Independent Xhosaland was dead" (321). Of course, this was the opposite of the movement's goal, which was preservation of the people, their land, and customs in the face of destructive colonization.

It is important to examine the potential causes of the movement because the interpretation and fluidity of history is central to Mda's novel. Peires asserts that,

[t]he Xhosa cattle-killing movement, suggested in the first instance by the lungsickness epidemic of 1853, tapped a deep-seated emotional and spiritual malaise resulting from material deprivation and military defeat ... Nongqawuse's prophecies provided an explanation for current circumstances and a rationale for future action (138).

In his interpretation, the actions of the people, although drawn from a desperate place, are deliberate and reasoned. He explains: "The central beliefs of the Xhosa cattle-killing movement were neither irrational nor atavistic. Ironically, it was probably because they

were so rational and so appropriate that they ultimately proved to be so fatal” (138). Thinking of the cattle killing as a “rational” and even “appropriate” response, as Peires does, undermines the colonists monopoly on enlightenment; the “red” Xhosa, in this argument, are in fact attempting to save themselves.

In direct opposition to this view, Timothy Stapleton suggests that the cattle-killing movement was a rebellion by the people against the tribal chiefs. To the Xhosa cattle were a sign of wealth and power, and it was the leaders who were in control of the cattle (they were lent out on a shared basis to the people). Stapleton argues: “Quite the opposite of British official beliefs that the chiefs had been instigators, the 1856 Cattle-Killing was essentially a popular revolution against the weakened Xhosa upper class, which had failed miserably in its primary function to protect the nation” (390). Stapleton’s argument, however, fails to capture the role of the white colonizers. This was a time when people like Sir George Grey were planning to “civilize” the people, and by his logic, “he had to take their land in return for civilization. Civilization is not cheap” (Mda 84). Stapleton also claims that during the cattle-killing, “It became mob action; it was frenzy. Rationalism vanished” (Stapleton 391). Mda’s novel disagrees with this claim and traces the victories and disappointments of the Believers, through Twin and Qukezwa; their actions might end in tragedy, but they are understandable and calculated. They are starving themselves in the ardent, if futile, pursuit of a better life and future for their people.

The historical subplot functions in *The Heart of Redness* as proof that history is in fact a living and fluid thing that still plays a salient role in the present. As Mda has said in

an interview: “It is clear that in *The Heart of Redness* I am saying that the past is always a strong presence in our present. Indeed our very identity is shaped by memory!” (Wark interview).

Another effect of the focus on history is that it becomes clear that the same challenges of the past plague the present. These challenges range from cultural exploitation to the commodification of culture to the age-old conflict between the Believers and Unbelievers over tradition versus progress.² These are issues that South Africans today face, just as they did in earlier times of colonization. However, it should be noted here that the two temporal settings that Mda chose purposely skip over apartheid. In the novel it is referred to merely as, “the sufferings of the Middle Generations” (3). And even when they are mentioned, they “are only whispered:”

It is because of the insistence: *Forget the past. Don't only forgive it. Forget it as well. The past did not happen. You only dreamt it. It is a figment of your rich collective imagination. It did not happen. Banish your memory. It is a sin to have a memory. There is virtue in amnesia. The past. It did not happen. It did not happen. It did not happen* (137).

² While the role of religion itself is not the salient focus of this article, questions of belief are obviously central to Mda’s novel. Mda blurs the boundaries between Western religion and savagery (which contradicts the colonists’ roles as both political and religious enlighteners) by Twin-Twin’s repetition of the fact that the Christians can’t be trusted because they killed Jesus (Twin-Twin says the white god is not powerful because “he sat idle while the white people killed his son”) and the fact of the white settler’s beheading of Xikixa (Mda, 259). It’s interesting, of course, that Mda’s critique of the dangers and irrationality of belief comes from the alleged “heathens” who then choose to opt out of belief forever more, seeing its catastrophic effects. And yet belief is not so easy to opt out of as the Unbelievers would like to think; as Mda points out, “The revered Twin-Twin had elevated unbelieving to the heights of a religion” (5). Mda disrupts the distinct binaries of science and sacredness, as he also disrupts the binaries of past and present and tradition and progress.

Clearly, this does not represent Mda's views on history and collective memory, but as a post-apartheid writer, it does show that he has the agency to write a novel that is not about apartheid. He is writing a localized history of a particular region, as opposed to a novel of national allegory à la Frederic Jameson³. Atwell opines, "Zakes Mda, arguably the most innovative of writers on the post-apartheid scene, has also suggested (albeit in the language of fiction) that the present demands a fresh approach to the cultural archive" (9-10). Mda takes up this fresh approach, one that is both attentive to and critical of history, without directly dealing with apartheid. What we instead see here is a long-term examination of the project of modernization not limited to just the last 50 years.

Now to the task of how the historical subplot functions in the novel. One of the pronounced effects of the inclusion of the Nongqawuse episode is to highlight exploitation of the Xhosa people in both past and present. Looked at linearly, the first major instance of exploitation is the decapitation of Xikixa, father to Twin and Twin-Twin. From this point on, Xikixa's identity is based solely on his decapitation; he is referred to as the Headless Ancestor, and his posterity are known as "The descendants of the headless ancestor" (Mda, family tree). His name, in isiXhosa, fittingly means to deface, to mutilate. When the two sons see their father's head in the boiling pot, they believe that the white men are cannibals. John Dalton clarifies, "We are civilized men. We do not eat people ... These heads are either going to be souvenirs, or will be used for scientific inquiry" (Mda 20).

³ See Frederic Jameson's seminal, and much critiqued, essay on the postcolonial novel as national allegory from 1986: "Third World Literatures in the Era of Multinational Capitalism."

The act of decapitation is one that is steeped in history in South Africa. Regina Jones asserts in her book *Losing Our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture*, “In the code of the 19th century European imperial decollations, only barbarians cut off heads, and only barbarians have their heads cut off ... the act of decapitating separates the barbarian from the civilized” (Jones 140). The contradiction here of only barbarians being capable of beheadings and being beheaded is one that protects the white colonizer from any taint of barbarism. And yet in the case of the headless ancestor, it is the white men who do the beheading, purportedly in the name of science. Jones suggests, “To retort the practice onto Europeans ... is just but evades the question of what one makes of one’s own heads, taken and takers” (Jones 154). This is true in the novel, as Twin and Twin-Twin do not know what to do with this situation; they assume it is “witchcraft of the white man” (Mda 20), but worry “How would he commune with his fellow ancestors without a head?” (21). Mda’s engagement with Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz is helpful in addressing this issue. *The Heart of Redness*, with its title, is inviting comparisons to *Heart of Darkness*. In the case of decapitation, Kurtz beheads Africans and puts their heads on sticks outside of his compound. Jones interprets this act: “Ignoring African minds, Conrad needs African bodies to symbolize a lost, irrecoverable difference. Whether oppressed and exploited, defended and pitied, or admired as thrilling romantic primitives, the natives can neither save themselves nor speak for themselves” (170). This is also true in Mda’s novel. The beheaded amaXhosa are stripped of a voice and identity and will be show-cased in a museum as science or on a coffee table as souvenir. On the other, more modern, side of that coin, NoPetticoat is made into all voice and no identity

by the tourists at the hotel where she works. They turn on their video camera (metonymically standing in as a modern, personalized museum) and ask her to

talk into the machine in her language. And say what? Anything. Any old thing as long as it is in the clicky language ... Then they asked her to sing. She sang a few notes into the machine, even though by this time she was feeling foolish. Fellow workers were looking at her, laughing (142).

The colonial violence of the past has been watered down from decapitation to cultural exploitation at the hands of tourists; what remains constant though is the (literal and then figurative) disembodiment and emptying out of identity.

This brings us to another example of exploitation in the novel: the displaying of heads and genitals in museums in the twentieth century. Here Mda is making a direct connection with the past but also showing us that the same issues still exist. At his housewarming party Camagu, the protagonist and urban transplant to Qolorha-by-Sea, tells his guests that,

in one of his travels abroad he went to the Natural History Museum – part of the British museum – in London to see the reconstructed skeletons of dinosaurs ... He was shocked to discover that there were five dried-out heads of the so-called Bushmen stored in boxes in some back room of the museum (168).

Camagu feels the practice of displaying heads is a “barbaric” way for the British to “celebrate their superior civilization” (168). This is an ironic juxtaposition of the two binaries; it is of course the barbarian that one would expect to do the beheading, but the British do it under the guise of science and progress. This is a troubling instance of the past being brought into the present. Camagu further complicates the issue by saying, “The heads of our ancestors are all over Europe ... trophies collected in military actions and executions ... Not only heads. In Paris the private parts of a Khoikhoi woman called

Saartjie Baartman are kept in a bottle!” (168). This not only genderizes the barbaric practice of scientific display, but also offends his guests. As grotesque as the image of severed heads and genitals in a museum might be, Mda will not let the reader write this off as a barbaric act of the past: “‘It is not the past,’ says Camagu emphatically. ‘It is the present. Those trophies are still there ... today ... as we speak’” (169). Ironically, it was not until 2002, two years after Mda’s novel was published, that Baartman’s remains were transported back to South Africa (“Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman’s Story”). One can discover this fact by visiting the website for an abused women’s shelter in the Cape Flats that bears her name. The website explains the inspiration for the center’s name explaining, that, “By naming our centre after Saartjie Baartman, we are remembering and honouring a woman who has become an icon, not only to her own Khoikhoi people, but to all women who know oppression and discrimination in their lives” (“Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman’s Story”). This connection of gruesome past to present makes the reader complicit; it is our present-day civilization that has gone to museums and seen these “scientific artifacts” and uses the traumas of the past, even for recuperative means.

The idea of cultural villages is another instance of exploitation in the novel. Though less extreme than beheading and museum displays of genitals, perhaps much of the danger of cultural villages lies in the obfuscation of its exploitative potential. This issue is complicated by the introduction of the idea of history as a commodity. Jean and John Comaroff explain in their essay, *Naturing the Nation*: “Heritage has become a construct to conjure with as global markets erode the distinctive wealth of nations, forcing them to redefine their sense of patrimony – and its material worth” (629).

Especially in times of transition, turning culture into a commodity is one way to preserve it; however, it is a slippery slope between utilizing a culture to make a living versus selling out its people and its history. *The Heart of Redness* deals with these issues as the characters grapple with the impending casino project. The Unbelievers see the casino as bringing Qolorha-by-Sea into the future, while the Believers see it as exploitation that will ruin the natural beauty of their community without bringing any real benefit to the inhabitants. Bhonco, the staunch Unbeliever, asks the believer, Zim, ““What does the bush *do* for you?”” (my emphasis, 92). This very pragmatic way of looking at nature is a trend that the Comaroffs discuss. What is the land actively doing for the people? Is history alone enough of a reason to preserve it? And looking at culture in this pragmatic fashion, it is in one’s best interest to protect those parts of history that can make turn a profit. One way in which to preserve culture in that way is to create a cultural village, as John Dalton suggests. However as Camagu views it, such villages are dishonest: “It is just a museum that pretends it is how people live. Real people in today’s South Africa don’t lead the life that is seen in cultural villages”” (247). They are false performances for the sake of tourists, and Camagu does not believe in them. Mda seems to share Camagu’s view, as he explains in his interview with Wark:

I do not advocate going back to that past. That is why I ridicule the whole notion of cultural villages that are big tourist attractions in South Africa. They purport to portray the culture of the African peoples of South Africa but in fact misrepresent that culture as a museum piece, as if it has been static since the pre-colonial times (Wark Interview).

Like the heads and genitalia at museums, cultural villages, in a far less violent and grotesque sense, are another way of objectifying the South African people and their

culture. They also suggest that contemporary culture is devoid of value. Camagu criticizes Dalton's plans for a cultural village saying, "When you excavate a buried precolonial identity of these people ... a precolonial authenticity that is lost ... are you suggesting that they currently have no culture ... that they live in a cultural vacuum?" (248). And just as problematically, cultural villages can allow the tourists who visit them to return to a precolonial past in which he can play the role of colonizer: "The tourist thus steps into the imagined archaeological tracks of 'early explorers' and 'white pioneers' in a well-rehearsed colonial encounter" (Witz, Rassool and Minkley, 278). If black South Africans play the role of tourists in these cultural villages, there could be the possibility for the creation of an ambiguous and historically impossible space, but Qolorha-by-Sea isn't courting these more local tourists. As Bhonco points out, "The new developments will bring people from all over the world. From America!" (Mda, 93).

These cultural villages are clearly not the solution for cultural preservation that Mda advocates. And yet, Mda does clearly advocate for the preservation of the specific, if problematic and complicated, history that he narrates in his novel. Perhaps one motivation for this preservation, even when done in the form of a cultural village, is a type of defensive preservation against the hegemonic forces of history. Sir George Grey represents the imperial impulse to control what is remembered and what is forgotten, saying,

You know, in Australia and New Zealand I did the same thing ... I built an important collection of the languages, customs, and religions of the natives. It is important to record these because they are destined to disappear along with the savages who hold them (Mda, 206).

To preserve culture at all is half the battle, while the other half is the terms of that remembrance and who are the actors of preservation; the question is first existence and then agency. Mda's culturalist impulses, then, can be read defensively: to record at all, and to do so in his own voice second to that, a history that has been subjugated and subsumed. If a cultural village is imperfect, at the very minimum, there is the rudimentary fact that it exists and does the work of preservation, even if the culture is anachronistic. Further, Mda presents Camagu's attempts at preservation in the form of a community collective that would run a hotel and manage tourist activities in town. This is a type of preservation controlled by the people whose culture will be presented, as opposed to controlled by the (neo)colonist or financially privileged outsider. Unlike Camagu, John Dalton wishes to help the Xhosa in Qolorha-by-Sea, but on his own terms and with himself in charge. Camugu criticizes this neocolonialist impulse, saying,

Your people love you because you do things for them. I am talking of self-reliance where people do things for themselves. You are thinking like the businessman you are ... you want a piece of the action. I do not want a piece of the action. This project will be fully owned by the villagers themselves (248).

The modern day Dalton cannot help but enact the neoliberals' version of his ancestor's wish to profit from the "natives," even as he is nearly one of them (multiple characters comment that Dalton's outer whiteness is false and that he is Xhosa on the inside, speaking "better isiXhosa than [Camagu will] ever be able to" (57)). Camagu's collective has the potential to enact preservation while granting agency to those whose culture is being preserved. This is not to say that these methods of preservation are not problematic; they clearly are, and one cannot ignore the complex and troubling politics of

preservation, especially founded on a traumatic past, just because local people are granted agency to defensively preserve their past.

And yet, Mda suggests, there is perhaps an alternative: a way to profit from history without destroying it or exploiting the people. That comes in the form of eco-tourism. Eco-tourism is seen as the middle ground between building the casino and creating a cultural village. Yet, far from being a panacea to the conflict between tradition and modernity, there are still problems even with eco-tourism. It is still the commodification of history and culture this is dangerous. Is this not, in a sense, what Mda is doing with his book? He is using the specific heritage of the Xhosa people to frame his narrative and give it cultural significance. Like the eco-tourist, he is doing so in a magnanimous way, but he is still buying into the system of culture as economy, as something you can use and sell.

History, as it is imagined in *The Heart of Redness*, is a thing of power to be reckoned with. It will not let itself be forgotten, nor does it stay in the past, as is seen through the similarities between past and present. Because history is not a static thing, it follows then that it can be invented and invoked in the present. The novel shows us instances like this where history is invented, so to speak. For example, the Unbelievers use a dance borrowed from the abaThwa people in order to visit the world of their ancestors, and to “induc[e] sadness in their lives, so that they may have a greater appreciation of happiness” (Mda 73). Zim tells Camagu that the dance was, “Invented by the Unbelievers of today” (Mda 73). This is one place in the novel where the character is attempting to create history. However, when the abaThwa demand the return of their

dance, the Unbelievers are left alone in the present without a tangible connection to their past. They try to make a new dance of their own, but “[t]hey ha[ve] no experience in inventing dances that send people into a trance, especially the kinds of trances that send people back in time. Their invention lacked potency” (259). In this case, the Unbelievers do not have the power to effect history and find themselves impotently helpless in the present. As powerful as history is, it is not simply a thing that one can decide to create; that is why the cultural villages are such an appealing simple solution. They allow one to view and see this thing “history,” while ignoring the complications both of past and present culture and see it in a museum-ized form. Cultural villages are a way to invent a false history; one that is not true, but is profitable. It is an incomplete invention, in its dishonesty, but one that is dangerous and a threat to the authenticity of culture.

And yet Mda shows us a nobler attempt to invent history: through language. The book itself is his attempt to play with the role of history in the present. All of the twinning in the novel not only draws connections between past and present, but also makes the book more challenging to follow. The complexity of pronunciation has the same effect. Although Mda says that he writes “novels primarily for the South African audience,” he knows that they will be published internationally. When they are, he says, “I do not adapt even those linguistic and cultural codes that are particularly South African to suit the needs and even the tastes of American or European readers” (Wark interview). The language is intentionally difficult, as is the two-pronged structure with its built-in ambiguities. Beyond the names, Mda makes a point to include many Xhosa terms, like

‘izitibiri’ (142), “imiphefumlo” (132), “imbhizo” (52), etc. This sets the novel in a specific African locale, but also challenges the Western audience linguistically.

Attwell asserts that, “Complex language is in itself a mode of resistance” (Attwell, 193). In this instance, it is a form of cultural resistance. Though he writes in English, Mda complicates the language of this novel with this idea of cultural authenticity. The doubling of names also adds to the novel’s difficulty. In the end, the blurring of the two narratives is made possible because of the dual Qukezwas and Heitsis. There is a mix of simple and complex names in this novel, from Twin and Twin-Twin to Qukezwa and Nongqawuse. Clearly, Mda does not have the agency to choose all of these names, as the prophetess is an actual historical figure; but this historical allusion makes the idea of language as resistance all the more interesting.

The most difficult name for the Western tongue to pronounce is the one given to us by history, not the author. It resists translation. Is that also true of culture? Is it impossible for us to understand the nuances of this culture, which is why we prefer to see it in cultural villages and museums? Mda does not take the argument this far, and prefers to find an alternative to extremes. He also uses language as another way to split his narrative, like the umngqokolo singing. The two-tone quality of Qukezwa’s voice parallels the “narrative polyphony,” as J.U. Jacobs sees it, in that the novel itself is split between past and present. This adds another element of cultural and historical complexity, as umngqokolo is a unique practice of the Xhosa people, learned over generations. Unlike the Unbelievers’ failed attempt to recreate a dance, Qukezwa’s singing does have a poignancy that affects Camagu to the point of apparently engaging in

immaculate conception. The child conceived will bear the name of the first Qukezwa's son, Heitsi; it recalls history as it begins to invent it.

The debate between tradition and modernization is not one that has a simple solution. This is seen in Mda's novel – both its portrayal of the 19th century and the contemporary context. However, the intricate ties between past and present are productive in the sense that they highlight the continuing struggles of a people in transition. The “redness” debate is far from over, although at the end of Mda's novel, it appears that “redness” has scored a victory as the casino project is blocked. And yet, even then the moment is bittersweet; in the closing pages of the novel, the boy Heitsi refuses to go in the water. In this section, the line between past and present is very blurry, and the twin narratives blend together. The last line is spoken by Heitsi, the descendent of the Believers; he says, “This boy does not belong in the sea! This boy belongs in the man village!” (Mda 277). This is a problematic statement, and allows the reader to see that the Believer's victory is temporary – unlike his mother, Heitsi wishes to be in civilization, not nature. He represents a hybrid. The division between what Philip Mayer called “Red” and “School” groups, is in fact “gradually fading away” (Banks 632) in the modern day Eastern Cape of South Africa. Leslie Banks, however, suggests that the differences are still present, if latent: “Even if Red and School are no longer as visible as embodied identities as they were in the 1950s ... they are nevertheless inscribed in the collective social memory of many rural communities. This means that they can still be evoked and even reconstructed, as rural communities grapple with the uncertainties of change” (Banks 633).

Mda's account definitely places cultural history above the progress that destroys it; yet it does not advocate a return to the past, only a remembrance of it. And that remembrance is tainted at its roots, at least in this novel. One cannot forget that the history that the Believers are trying to preserve is one rooted in the catastrophic fall of their people, and yet Mda seems to suggest that we should. The Nongqawuse prophecies, from a historical standpoint, were an unmitigated disaster. There is a danger in Mda's culturalist position, with his twinning and attention to this disastrous event. Turning a tragedy into a source of cultural heritage is a dangerous thing and one risks aestheticizing the pain into something beautiful. Walter Benjamin states, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, "[Humanity's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Epilogue). Of course this is taking Benjamin out of his original context (of critiquing fascism and its effects on art) and yet the aestheticization of pain that he described is also applicable to the retelling of a tragedy that turns it into a sort of 'roots' story, as Mda has done. This re-imagining of tragedy is described by Camagu: "'Nongqawuse really sells the holiday camp,' Camagu tells John Dalton, who is lying in a hospital bed, 'When we advertise in all the important travel magazines we use her name. Qolorha is the place of miracles. It would have been even more profitable if she had been buried there'" (276). This statement shows how the destructive past has now been harnessed (and glorified) for future gains. It is also interesting that he points out the even greater profits that could be realized if Nongqawuse was buried in Qolorha. That would be a perfect tangible

connection between past and present, if people could see her grave as part of their trauma tourism; her grave would be the ideal, marketable cultural relic.

This culturalist view is not without critique in the novel, and Bhonco tells Camagu, “It is you learned ones who have turned her into a goddess who must be worshipped. Yet she killed the nation of the amaXhosa” (61). But with his dual narratives and culturalist approach, and even, more literally, in his writing of this novel, Mda is now the “learned one” telling the tale to an international audience. Of course he is not encouraging the reader to worship Nongqawuse, but by propagating the story of her past, he is still buying into the system. He is, even if unintentionally, making history into a commodity with his novel, as his characters have done with the eco-tourism and the women’s cooperative group. Attwell says that an “Africanised modernity” is “Mda’s solution” (49) to the problem of reconciling tradition versus progress, and it is “the inevitable path to the future” (Attwell 199).

The novel is not tied up into such a neat package. Although Mda does argue for a new conceptualization of history and culture, his “solution” is still wrought with conflicts. Speaking of a specifically “Africanised” modernity is appealing in that it preserves a local culture, an idea which clearly intrigues Mda, but it also presupposes that modernity has excluded Africans, and more specifically in Attwell’s imagining, black Africans. One must then ask whether modernity must take on a new meaning in order to be applied to the South African context and what exactly that transition entails. When interviewed Mda states, “I am talking of engagement with modernity on different terms ... terms that will take into account the interests of the people” (Wark Interview). And

yet, as we have seen via the complex and often contradictory ways that Mda attempts to engage with a traumatic past and preserve it in a culturally responsible way, the complexities of his own novel seem to undermine the idea that there could be a simply defined “African modernity” to engage with on these as yet unnamed different terms. In *The Heart of Redness*, it is clear that Mda is still trying to work out exactly what those terms could be and what solution, if any, is possible with everyone’s implicit complicity.

Works Cited

Attwell, David. *Rewriting Modernity*. South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005.

Bank, Leslie. *Beyond Red and School: Gender, Tradition, and Identity in the Rural Eastern Cape*. *Journal of South African Studies*. Vol. 28, No. 3, Special Issue: Changing Livelihoods (September 2002). pp. 631-649

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Found in *Illuminations* by Hannah Arendt. Schocken, 1969. Translated by Harry Zohn.

Comaroff, Jean and John L. *Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State*. *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 3 (September 2001). pp.6 27-651.

Jacobs, J.U. *Zakes Mda’s The Heart of Redness: The Novel as Umngqokolo*. Kunapipi. Issue XXIV: 1 & 2. 2002.

Jones, Regina. *Losing Our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2005.

Mda, Zakes. *The Heart of Redness*. New York: Picador, 2000.

Mda, Zakes. Interview with Julie Wark. London. 15 and 16 October 2004.
http://www.zakesmda.com/pages/Interview_Wark.html

Offenburger, Andrew. “Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*.” *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 39, No. 3 (Fall 2008). pp. 164-199.

- Peires, J.B. *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Stapleton, Timothy J. "They No Longer Care for Their Chiefs": Another Look at the Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856-1857. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*. Volume 24, No 2. 1991. pp. 383-392.
- "Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman's Story." *Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women & Children*. 27 December 2010. Site by Interiority 2008-2009.
<http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52&Itemid=69>.
- "Saints, Sinners, and Settlers (mini) (1999)." From IMDB.com.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0831897/combined>
- Witz, Leslie, Ciraj Rassool and Gary Minkley. "Repackaging the past for South African Tourism." *Daedalus*, Vol. 130, No. 1, Why South Africa Matters (Winter 2001). Pp. 277-296.