
Sandile Dikeni. *Soul Fire: Writing the Transition*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002. Pp. x, 277. \$24.95.

Sandile Dikeni's important collection of his *Cape Times* newspaper columns provides a rollicking perspective on South African culture and politics. Concerned with exposing the grit beneath lush places like Cape Town, with their famous grape vineyards, the book comprises a little more than one hundred pieces of prose and divides into three parts: "Behind the Grape Curtain (1992 TO 1995)"; "Beyond the Grape Curtain (1996 TO July 1998)"; and "Lifting the Grape Curtain (August 1998 TO 2001)." Antjie Krog, in her introductory chapter, describes Dikeni as "one of the most authentic voices of this land." More, in his columns and editorials, he not only "exposes us to soul fire" but he "knows where the nerve is closest to the skin and he cuts with expertise" (3).

How to address the complexities of a multi-ethnic society newly emerged from apartheid rule is the challenge of Dikeni's observations and writings. The "cut" that he makes, therefore, is necessarily deep. His impatience with the identity crises of many of Cape Town's so called Coloureds who align themselves with Europe rather than Africa, is a thread that runs through his entire work. Writing in 1992 before the end of apartheid repression, Dikeni's goal is for South Africans who otherwise "hate each other" (20) to "make tracks together" (21). But seven years after the official end of legalized segregation Dikeni vows, in his usual caustic manner, "Next time a white South African tries to hug me I am gonna dive—unless I am sure that he or she is one of my people" (266).

A self-professed non-racialist poet and journalist who writes candidly about aspects of his personal life, including relationships across South Africa's once rigid colour lines, Dikeni finds it awkward to embrace many Cape Coloureds and especially white South Africans as "his people." Both in his earlier and later columns, Dikeni rants about Coloured racial prejudices and particularly the ongoing racism of whites who refuse to shake their boss mentalities. The titles reflecting this unease speak volumes: "Be sure to take a black pal with you"; "Ain't no one's boy but my old man's"; "The thing with you white people"; and "If whites want to leave, please go." In his 1994 column, "Tremble as you read this, racists," he berates the spoilers of the new dispensation. To them he writes: "Let Uhuru echo against the bomb blasts of white people gone mad in their bid to keep chains dangling from our black torsos" (67). In the year 2000 Dikeni is convinced that "the non-racialist in white South Africa is an exception rather than

the rule" (255). Whites in South Africa are asked to "stop brutalising black people" (256).

When Dikeni writes about racist pockets in South African sports, the police forces and even in the playground talk of children, he is not making sweeping generalizations. Although his targets are racists everywhere in the world, in Holland and Germany where apartheid had its many supporters; and in America and New Zealand where the indigenous populations remain suppressed, he is aware that "whiteness is not homogenous" (255). In this vein he gives credit not only to the two white lawyers who saved his father from the gallows due to trumped-up treason charges during apartheid rule but also to his white mentor and father figure Kosie Viviers who, in 1992, invited him to be the *Cape Times*' first black columnist. But even this gesture is used as confirmation of a racist South Africa that closes doors to many other equally qualified black professionals.

Although tired of being angry, Dikeni has much to be angry about. His columns are full of story after story of brutalization by a racist apartheid government which not only unjustly kept him in solitary confinement for three months but also made it acceptable for white children to assault him with pellet guns when he was seven years old. As an adult in a democratic South Africa of 1994, he rates Cape Town as "a bad place to live as a darkie." After all, it is here that he says, "I was kicked and beaten out of so many places I forgot to count" (203). This violence notwithstanding, Dikeni continues to search for "his people" who, as explained in his concluding chapter, are society's marginalized of all colours, genders and sexual orientation—and those socially conscious people who empathize with them.

Dikeni's craving for a normal and healed South Africa resonates in all his words. It is not only white South Africans who are encouraged to evaluate themselves. Black South African who are the last to promote their own cultures in their mimicry of American culture, for example, are the subject of many of his columns. Despite his ethnic pride in an isiXhosa tradition that inspires him to "walk a little taller" (191), he observes a lack of pride and even self-hatred in black people. To remedy this state of affairs, he suggests a revival of black consciousness ideologies. In terms of national pride, he is repelled by the symbols of apartheid such as the canon at Grahamstown which celebrates the murder of his ancestors, but proud of Afrikaans writers like Ingrid Jonker.

Despite his tongue in cheek reference to Viviers who helped steer his writings from going "down township way" (192), Dikeni writes in a manner that suits him and that reflects South Africa's polyphony of voices. A mixture of isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English, Dikeni dialogues with South

Africans familiar with the context of his culturally nuanced pieces. Though not interested in playing the role of “cultural big brother” (198), what he does do, in the tradition of people like Biko, is to write what he likes (250) in a South Africa where black folks are still expected to be hewers of wood rather than thinkers.

Dikeni’s prose which strikes a delicate balance between seriousness and humour reveals a true satirist who enjoys “pissing on the nation” (211) with a goal of contributing to its healing. His arguably off colour jokes run the gamut from former president Nelson Mandela’s failed marriage; his playful sneer at the failure rate of partying black students in 1998; and his scandalous idea of publicizing the names of South Africa’s super rich to better guide those burglars who want to “nationalize” their property. Offering a necessary critique of South Africa’s discourses of reconciliation which are interpreted superficially by some white South Africans as possessing African art Dikeni, who calls for a “return to laughter—but not forgetting” (175), at times does not lift the curtain far enough. Former and current presidents Mandela and Thabo Mbeki are mostly glamourized as leaders. While the African National Congress’s “arrogant Africanism” (120) during the 1996 local government elections in the Cape is criticized, Dikeni purports to know the “real Mbeki,” a brilliant and caring leader “made to be president” (159). Like Mbeki’s flaws which are largely ignored, Dikeni dwells not on Mandela’s sometimes autocratic rule but on a near saint who romantically “lives in us” (125).

In this otherwise excellent collection which should captivate scholars of South African literature and culture, Dikeni clears an important space where he, as a “darkie,” can be noisy and pushy because, as he rightly says, “the days of silent suffering are long gone” (204).

Gugu Hlongwane

Jami L. Carlacio, ed. *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: Reading and Writing on Race, Culture, and Identity*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2007. Pp. xxv, 279. \$37.95 pb; \$27.95 (for members of the National Council of Teachers of English).

In 1997, the Modern Language Association published *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*, edited by Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle. Since the publication of that foundational work, Morrison has published two more novels (*Paradise* [1998] and *Love* [2003]), a series of co-authored children’s books, and has continued her critical work concerning literature,