

'On Being Viewed in a Game Lodge and Other Thoughts': A review of *Fine Lines from the Box*

Njabulo Ndebele in Conversation with Victor Dlamini

In a riveting session that was a highlight of the Cape Town Book Fair, [Victor Dlamini](#) interviewed Njabulo Ndebele on the latter book of essays spanning two decades, [Fine Lines from the Box](#). The venue was crammed with hardly space for a flea. The author has just finished his tenure as principal and vice-chancellor of UCT and will be taking a sabbatical soon at Bard College in New York, USA.

Dlamini tackled some of the issues in the book, which, he said, "Teases, provokes and gives one a sense of nuance. Where many social commentators use their commentary as a blunt instrument, he uses it like a brush, utilising so many colours of the palette."

Dlamini is a superb interviewer. His attention to detail and probing questions, his consummate engagement with the text and insightful analyses make him a not-to-be-missed event at any literary programme in the country.

For him, one of the most unforgettable moments as he read the book was Ndebele's narration of unearthing the treasure trove of reading that lay hidden, literally, in a box his father kept in the garage. The box was stuffed full of literary contraband prohibited by the then apartheid government. "How much," he asked, "do you see writing as something you both treasure and that is, in fact, part of our larger social treasure?"

Ndebele observed that he'd grown up in an environment of books and reading and writing. "It's something I like to talk about, to mention upfront, because there is a stereotype about growing up in a township that is about poverty and deprivation. These things are there, but it's to

make the point that there are many other people in those environments who are doing all they can to rise from the trap. In the most unexpected places in the township one finds a piano, a guitar, a musical instrument, books, a whole lot of things you don't associate. I listened to the classical music my father played. And jazz.

"That environment nurtures the imagination of the young people in it. You learn to treasure the life of the imagination. Writing forces you to put down the word, then you return to think about its appropriateness, accuracy and nuance. Does it convey what you want it to? Writing is an act of contemplation. Not only do you express something, but you express yourself. Writing enhances self-knowledge.

Dlamini said he had sensed that expression is often highly regarded, not just because it renders the private public, but because when it is well done, it can lift the fog of ignorance with devastating effectiveness. "So what of reflection, which remains private, but must surely fuel the most meaningful expressions, or to use your phrase, 'meaningful engagement'? So much of it is your looking at South Africa with various engagements – with the self, with the university, the game lodge. How do you engage the views of others?"

Ndebele said he uses the genre that is the speculative essay. "I don't have to do the research necessary for writing a book of history or politics. The absence of historic and sociological data enables a depth of contemplation, using your experience as well as your engagement with the outside world to fashion something."

That morning he'd presided over a discussion with Mac Maharaj, Makhosazana Xaba and Mark Gevisser talking about biography and autobiography. "What came through over and over was the fact that biography is about an individual and those around them, but it succeeds to the extent that readers see certain aspects of themselves in a

biography. They recognise reference points in the environment, heightening their participation, and this leads to an urgent engagement. With more people reading biographies, a critical mass of South Africans are talking to themselves in a deep conversation. If the autobiography is sincere, it is sincere only when the writer is unflinching about those aspects of themselves that are vulnerable, insecure and how the subject overcomes this.

“We are going through critical history at the moment. We have absorbed so much that is obvious. Most people want to demonstrate their knowledge of the obvious. When somebody shows something different we become insecure. Writing is about opening up something that seldom gets talked about. We need to expand the boundaries of communication.”

Dlamini reflected that Ndebele was talking about leaders who were tempted to portray themselves as larger than life. “You take issue with nation when you write: ‘I have known all along that as we move further away from 27 April 1994 we will become increasingly normal and more ordinary, shedding the well deserved sense of specialness that we earned from our ‘miraculous’ transition.’” Looking back on the last 14 years, how much of a trap, perhaps even a curse, was it for South Africans to appropriate for themselves the tag of a ‘special nation’?

Ndebele commended the current government, under the leadership of the Minister of Finance because the South African economy is relatively free and independent. “We’re not under the control of the World Bank. We don’t have huge loans we can’t repay. Our vulnerability is that we can’t protect economic independence with strong social underpinnings. Our community life is very fragile. We have done much to ensure that economic systems and structures at a macro level are all in place, and these seem to be working well, but now there is some difficulty with the judiciary.

“Our vulnerability is at the local level. That’s where we have to focus our attention. There we have to confront our ordinariness in order to become a successful nation. We’ll have to do more than show a good economy. It has to be sustainable with a strong social base. We have to focus on our townships. What’s happening in Soweto is moving in the right direction. By creating a huge local economy grounded in the realities of the society. In order to avoid the vulnerability I’m talking about, we’ll have to be grounded. The question to answer is: ‘Who are we living for?’ We’re not living to prove to the world that we can be like it.

“The most fundamental challenge is to live for ourselves. By doing so we live for the outside world as well. We have to love who we are. This will take care of the violence in our communities. When someone is given a contract to build homes in the township for those who’ve long wanted and waited for these homes, but we discover they’ve put sand and water together and buildings collapse.

He labelled this a ‘profound disrespect’ and said the law should be harsh with those who commit crime directed at the poor.

Dlamini said Ndebele’s book addressed the reaction of naming and shaming the corrupt. “You ask South Africans to imagine focusing on what leads to corruption. In a society that likes to apportion blame, why are you moving to a structural view of the moral and social cancer? Perhaps it is easier to understand corruption at personal level, stealing from government and society? Why do you feel compelled to go against the grain? There’s a great deal of counter-intuition in your writing, yet it seems that often when we engage in this the results are far more profound.”

Ndebele referred to the horrendous humiliation at Reitz hostel and said he was fascinated by South Africans’ response. “The fundamental question is not discovering yet another instance of racism. Investigating commissions

will confirm what we already know. These young men were three or four when Mandela was released, so it can't be racism as such. This puts a light on the socialisation of the next generation. That's the question. As soon as you ask how to do this, it ceases to be racism of the three or four individuals involved, but a question that goes back to schools, families, and communities. We must focus now on schools, churches, and institutions of governance at a local level."

He urged a different view: "Let's not look at the obvious. The more attention you give it, the more you trivialise your own perceptions. You can't move beyond them. If you twist things a bit, you're more likely to find sustainable solutions in discovering a South African identity."

Dlamini noted that when the 'rainbow nation' first appeared it seemed to capture the hopes of South Africans, but looking at Njabulo's essay "Liberation and the Crisis of Culture" wherein he writes, "The challenge of culture in South Africa results from interaction of many languages yielding discordant meanings." The interviewer asked, "Given the fissures and fractures over the past two years, do you still think the pursuit of a national culture can be meaningfully imagined?"

Njabulo believes this is elusive. "Now you have it, now you don't. If we aren't looking for something encapsulating, we aren't likely to find it. If we accept that we will be confused along the way, then it's by working your way through confusion that knowledge emerges."

Dlamini steered the discussion towards President Mbeki's contrary views on AIDS orthodoxy.

Ndebele said his essay on Mbeki and AIDS had been a difficult one to write. "I'm trying to understand this how at a certain point it's easy to define Mbeki as a denialist. Yet, when you go to the origins, you can trace extensive research on the issue."

He recalled being in New York when Mbeki took office. At the time, Minister Essop Pahad was asked who Mbeki was. He responded by saying, "We South Africans are not like you Americans. Why do you bother about the presidents' private life?" Ndebele said, "I liked his telling them to get lost. Americans need to be reminded of this. On the other hand I saw a grave danger. I remembered thinking: if someone doesn't market or manage the president's image, somebody else will do it for him. And indeed, this happened. It started with the *Washington Post*, and took on a life of its own."

Ndebele wanted to pay attention to how an idea can take a life of its own, subjecting others to its power. "Whenever that happens, and many are sucked into it, my instinctive reaction is to go the other way. I want to understand what got Mbeki into this situation. I discovered a very complex matter. Even as he was trying to understand AIDS, trying to bring together, he'd already lost the battle and has never regained it."

He believes the piece was not about defending or condemning the President, but about understanding how we're socialised into accepting something, even when it's wrong. "Many of us will forget Travelgate," he said, "because we move on. The stasis around the issue assumes a normality that then dissipates. And some people get off scot-free." Ndebele sees the exercise of personal responsibility as imperative. "The multiplicity of independent autonomous South Africans that can make up their own minds makes the task of leadership more difficult, but the country's leadership should not pretend it is not there."

Dlamini cited the essay 'The Year of the Dog' where speculation yields a moment of linguistic and philosophic delight. Ndebele wrote: "I like to think he yielded to the seductiveness of a thoughtless moment." Dlamini asked, "Is it not the thoughtless moment that makes populism so dangerous?"

Ndebele reflected on those who felt they had the power and justification to say that because he expressed an opinion he was a dog to be beaten to death. In the essay, he plays with that image, pushing it to its logical conclusion in order to locate the ugliness hidden therein. "Where they say 'Beat the dogs', you see the thoughtlessness of the moment. The essay explores what happens when you give away power to define your perceptions."

Dlamini observed that Ndebele revisits those often invisible anthropologies that define us. In the piece, "Game Lodges and Leisure Colonialists" Ndebele asks how it is that a simple quest for peace turns into a painful journey? We think there's no peace for those caught in the process of becoming. "How much is the culture of game lodges a symptom of a larger cultural divide?" he asked.

Ndebele recalled visiting a game lodge where he struck up a good friendship with some visiting Americans. It gave him pause to consider that as a black person, everything in a game lodge is about the 'old Africa'. Even you, the visitor, feel yourself under the scrutiny of the same circumstances you voluntarily brought yourself to enjoy. You become the object of the tourists. You get locked into a relationship between yourself and the black workers, which rapidly becomes problematic.

"You realise you're both in this situation and there's a sense of solidarity. But this solidarity is perilous. As it plays itself out, you lose out on the quality of the service. When they think you're just friends, you don't get the service you paid for! As the days go by, you feel a sympathy for the animals being viewed. You get the sense that you should be there, being viewed alongside them. It's an existential quandary, and the more devastating part of the experience at a national scene: black people have to be careful the experience is of being observed in a game lodge. In relation to other Africans you feel you're better off, but in a fundamental way, you're not. You have to negotiate – are you in charge? Or are you

just being viewed?" He asked again, "Who are South Africans living for? Who do black South Africans live for?"

Quote of the hour: "Writing forces you to put down the word, then you return to think about its appropriateness, accuracy and nuance. Does it convey what you want it to do? Writing is an act of contemplation. Not only do you express something, but you express yourself. Writing enhances self-knowledge."

-Njabulo Ndebele