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Mxolisi Nyezwa on *Kotaz*
Interview by Alan Finlay

Alan Finlay:This interview is part of my Wits masters thesis that documents several post-apartheid independent literary publishing activities, and considers the extent to which they can be thought of as counterpublics – or 'acts of poetic world-making' as Michael Warner puts it – that contest the mainstream. Other publishers interviewed include Dye Hard Press, Botsotso, Timbila and Chimurenga.

AF: Can you say something about the 'Kotaz story', its genesis? How did it start?

MN: *Kotaz* started by accident. Already in the township in the early 90's I was sensing that all human life is a mistake – that there's no reason whatsoever to take things seriously. Reality is a big lie. This is actually very important to a writer: the sense that something else beside what you see or hear and smell is significant or really taking place. Good writers have this acute awareness, this perception of higher things. Very often you're in conflict with everything that you know. The sensation throws you off-guard completely. And you want to try out new things. All of a sudden you doubt all the stories that everybody told you about yourself, how you fit in with the world. You know that you must begin to grapple with your truth before a bad thing happens. So I was brought suddenly into all this.

Lucky for me when this happened I was attending a workshop for writers in Grahamstown, run by my friend and mentor Robert Berold. It was my first time on a farm, and I was with twenty or so other writers. Also I had been roaming in the township doing nothing for about a year. A few years before my first sensations of my new revelation I buried all my poems in a hole in our backyard. I was very tired. It was a few years after the 1994 elections. My friends were on the national newspapers, some on television, others outside the country on foreign missions for the new government. I was confused with all this. And I was feeling pretty useless and out of place.

AF: And this sense of things led to the magazine...

MN: I began *Kotaz* after a lady at this poetry workshop told me about the available fonts on a PC. She sat down on a stoep with me in front of St. Peters Building at Rhodes University and told me about the available fonts, the different shapes of letters. This all fascinated me very much that I immediately decided to do further investigations on my own. After this short session with this white lady I planned my next purpose in life, which was eventually to become *Kotaz*.

AF: *Botsotso* has an editorial collective. How do you go about putting your issues together?

MN: I have edited almost all of the past *Kotaz* magazines. This has been highly upsetting for many people in the past with good reasons. I have often given space to writers writing in languages that I'm not familiar with to encourage writing in these languages. That sometimes makes for a chaotic and uneven publication.

AF: What kind of work do you prefer to publish?

MN: Everything that talks to me and is conscious of life's complexities and absurdities. The text

has to do all this to work for me. The narration must not simplify and has to be sensitive to complex/diverse realities. But the writing itself doesn't have to be complex or logical. Most times it's not even the product of experts and intellectual gurus. It comes from those who walked life's harrowing roads and tasted defeat. I focus on the urgency of the work – that the writing is itself an organic form. The writing must be distinct in construction, grounded in life's metaphor. It can be a poem or a story about anything, love, hate, injustice, anger, fantasy, politics. The work must be organic with a distinct form and a clear urgency. I've also noticed that many South African writers experiment with writing in more than one language. You find that a good writer in one language, for example English, has the same ability (maybe even more) as when writing in the vernacular. So I kept my faith in the writer's vision of creating literary texts and allowed more space to experiment for selected writers.

AF: Who are the contributors? How do you distribute the magazine?

MN: Like a bones diviner, I throw all my bones up in the air and see how they fall. I'll always have a feeling for the suffering peoples of the world. They have the better story to tell. But contributors come from all walks of life. That makes me happy. Writing and language are shaped by the experiences of people. It's not the other way round, where language and writing become the property of experts and elites. I'm trying more and more often to develop my own understanding of this, that the people always come first, in everything. That magic and realism belong to those that have suffered greatly in life.

I also think *Kotaz* publishes writers who have no outlets for their work, due to a lack of interest in their writing. There's something singularly earthy and real with the poor – the New Brighton township which forms the context out of which the magazine publishes. But there's also the huge difficulty of actually getting one's work published. I'm not at all worried about the reputation of the writers and the risks involved in publishing new writers. I'm also aware of the high costs involved in publishing and don't seek to make political statements in my selections. But I'm also sensitive of the struggles that new writers face, the doubts of working in a language that is not necessarily one's own or of immediate preference.

AF: And your ideal readers?

MN: I publish for writers who read. I also publish for writers who don't read, that they begin to read other writers. I also publish for readers who are not afraid to hear other voices, who've not been cowered down by established trends and given standards of literary works. As ultimately that is what kills our readership - and the impetus to write. The fear that one's literary tastes are poor or not classy or fashionable. We all lack the big spirit of adventure for our literature. School teachers and the academics in our universities are largely to blame for these evils. Including the bookshops and publishers who show us the wrong way how to understand our literary selves – through the eyes of a dispassionate world.

AF: How do you distribute *Kotaz*?

MN: *Kotaz* is first given to the writers. We post it and sometimes hand-deliver to local writers and schools all over the Eastern Cape. We have a few people. mostly writers in different areas who are often quite happy to do this. Then *Kotaz* is distributed to subscribers who also include a few community schools. Finally the magazine is distributed freely to non-subscribing schools in

the Eastern Cape. It is also sent to university libraries at UCT, Wits, Unisa and also to public libraries. It's quite important to do this, to have some imprints of our new writing in these public institutions.

AF: A journal like *Timbila* has, over the years, developed a following – there are people who think of themselves as 'Timbila poets', and who have identified strongly with what Vonani is doing. What has *Kotaz*'s experience been?

MN: Some writers identify themselves with the magazine. But *Kotaz* does facilitate some writers' interactions through organizing seminars and workshops. We've had these writers' indabas around the Eastern Cape for quite a number of years now where writers from as far as Umthatha and Lusikisiki come to Port Elizabeth for writing and language conferences. *Kotaz* has worked with writers associations to hold poetry readings during cultural events and as part of reading & writing sessions with young people at the local public libraries around PE. We've held writing workshops for years. Just recently I, with a few poets like Mzi Mahola, have visited different rural communities around the Eastern Cape to do writing workshops. The workshops are organized with the help of local schools. Sometimes we work with a few writers who help us to convene interested writers and other participants.

I think *Kotaz* forms part of the current network of small literary journals. Our main focus as small magazines I think is to bring stability to literature development in South Africa. Very little is currently being done formally to enhance the appreciation of local writing publicly and in our schools. So we're trying to bring back the focus on local literatures. Through various publishing attempts small publishers seek to bring into full focus the ability of our writers to tell and to write their stories. In 2005 we published an anthology of essays by Soga Mlandu, a writer from Umthatha. We also have a number of poetry and short stories collections that we plan to publish soon. Yes, Kotaz has a small office which is used to put together the magazine and to organize writing workshops. But writers don't gather in our offices for discussions. We can't provide at present a meeting place for writers though that can be nice to do, to have an environment to nourish writing. Unfortunately everything costs and writing and books didn't feature strongly in the RDP.

AF: Do you think *Kotaz* is a challenge to the publishing industry in any way?

MN: My own mind doesn't work like that. Fortunately. I'm not bothered with commerce, with any industry. What the people inside do. I'm not worried about things like those. If *Kotaz* is challenging anyone then it's misdirected. It's wasting its energies.

AF: But what are you trying to do, when you publish *Kotaz*?

MN: I can't move away from this, that writing must remember that something always happens. All the time. To always remember this, that something has just happened. A poem tries to capture a watery history – a transient memory. What makes the load heavy for many is this seamless vacuity, the emptiness of life – and the ceaseless lies. Literature grinds down this vacuous history to manageable forms. Something that even the guy on the street can dig and begin to understand. This life full of wretchedness and lies.

AF: Why print? Why not community radio, for instance?

MN: I just love books. I would hate to be linked with anything else, especially the popular media like tv and radio. The popular media is a vehicle of the highest mischief and works to foil creative thinking.

AF: You are soon going to be publishing your 10 year retrospective of the magazine. Do you think *Kotaz* has achieved what it set out to do?

MN: As an idea, yes the magazine has moved some people forward culturally and in some other important ways. Because in many ways *Kotaz* is still an idea. It's not an institution or a place. It's an idea about culture, also and especially about the new South African writing that is beginning to make its mark.

AF: You're a poet. You publish poetry in *Kotaz*. Do you think poetry has a specific role to play in South Africa today?

MN: Poetry holds a special place in the true development of people. The most afflicted people will always hold the dearest poetry. There's a beautiful and intact relationship between affliction and the ability to speak the truth – to write a good story or poem.

Poetry will always have some role to play – to create light, to fight for consistency; to discover and make meaning. Poetry has done this wonderfully also in our society in the past. Poetry doesn't even have to triumph over injustices, against a corrupt government. The bigger injustice in my own understanding is to push poetry to be accessible.

AF: There has been a lot of talk in the media about the role of the black intellectual. Do you consider yourself a public intellectual?

MN: I'm someone who's been unhappy for a very long time. I am still unhappy. The way things are we are all just hanging on to pieces of meaning. We don't see the bigger picture yet. When we see clearly we'll all be caught off-guard.

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