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A Kingdom for the Taking: Colonial Self-Imagining and Contemporary Responses to Swaziland

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A Kingdom for the Taking: Colonial Self-Imagining and Contemporary Responses to Swaziland

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In the introduction to their *Companion to Travel Writing* (2004. Cambridge: CUP) Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs observe that 'travel writing is best considered as a broad and ever-shifting genre, with a complex history which has yet to be properly studied' (p. 10). Their general conclusion applies specifically to a country like Swaziland, whose literary archive has remained outside of any extensive scrutiny, despite its varied (and largely neglected) record of colonial travel writing. This article examines various rhetorical strategies deployed by Edward Fox in one chapter of his relatively recent travel narrative, *Obscure Kingdoms* (1993. London: Penguin), to show how it carries strong traces of earlier accounts of the country. As well, despite the protean form of travel writing, or more properly because of it, other kinds of writings find features within form that they are able to adapt and exploit for their own purposes. Along with accounts like Fox's narrative, other contemporary responses to Swaziland include local and global media representations of the country's customs and traditions, which also employ conventions established in colonial travel writing. A marked feature of much of this writing is the assumption of a kind of entitlement that appears in varying degrees between a muted nostalgia and a kind of superior petulance or ridicule, perhaps best exemplified by the crass racism of Jas Cavanagh's *Adventures of an Insurance Salesman* (1924. Connecticut: Juta), where the main character is proclaimed the 'Duke of Swaziland' by 'King Buno.'

Key words: colonialism; imperial romance; media; publishing; Swaziland; travel writing

In his book, *Southern African Literatures*, Michael Chapman draws on the theories of Huntington and Brzezinski, whose emphasis on stories as a means of understanding cultures 'remind[s] us of Anderson's insights in *Imagined Communities* that the power holding individuals together in the community of the nation is at bottom narrative: that the story is the most intense and comprehensive expression of the culture, or the site where sensibility is both mirrored and actively shaped' (Chapman 1996, 86). Yet

Chapman's account of the literatures of Southern Africa barely makes mention of Swaziland. Even in Dorothy Driver's fairly comprehensive anthology, *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, the literature of Swaziland is represented by only one text: an important speech by Queen Regent Labotsibeni which she delivered in 1921. A quick perusal of an online annotated bibliography of Swazi culture compiled by two librarians at the University of Swaziland in 2003 and which includes poetry, short stories, novels, and drama, lists only about 13 English texts and 60 siSwati texts, with the majority of these being published (mainly for the primary and secondary school market) by the only large publisher in Swaziland: MacMillan. Alternatively, the reading public must depend chiefly on a local print and electronic media that operates either as an organ for or in opposition to the monarchy, or on a global media that often represents Swaziland as a parochial backwater, or an exotic curiosity. Certainly a good part of what Swaziland is today, both in terms of its culture and geography, was shaped by a colonial past, just as the *idea* of Swaziland mirrored a colonial self-imagining that appeared in a discourse that continues into the present, and which, without the creation of other stories that might engage with and contest early colonial images and modern Western versions, as well as simply reflect something of the lived reality of the present, continue to influence local and global perceptions of the country.¹

The favoured forms for much of this genealogy of white writing on Swaziland were broad variations on what might most usefully be identified as travel literature, as Glen Hooper and Tim Youngs (2004, 3) understand the term. They write,

One of the most persistent observations regarding travel writing . . . is its absorption of differing narrative styles and genres, the manner in which it effortlessly shape-shifts and blends any number of imaginative encounters, and its potential for interaction with a broad range of historical periods, disciplines and perspectives. In much the same way that travel itself can be seen as a somewhat fluid experience, so too can travel writing be regarded as a relatively open-ended and versatile form . . .

This article examines various rhetorical strategies deployed by Edward Fox in one chapter of his relatively recent travel narrative, *Obscure Kingdoms* (1993) to show how it carries strong traces of earlier accounts of the country. As well, despite the protean form of travel writing, or more properly because of it, other kinds of writings find features within this accommodating genre that they are able to adapt and exploit for their own purposes. Along with accounts like Fox's narrative, other contemporary responses to Swaziland include local and global media representations of the country's customs and traditions, which inherit the prejudices established in colonial travel writing. A marked feature of much of this writing is the assumption of a kind of entitlement that hinges on the representation of the country as primitive and in need of development, and appears in varying degrees between a muted nostalgia and a kind of superior petulance or ridicule, perhaps best exemplified by the crass racism of Jas Cavanagh's *Adventures of an Insurance Salesman* (1924), an early twentieth century text recounting the travels of its author through Natal, as well as Swaziland, where the author describes some of the confusion of the concession boom and has his character devise a scheme to fool 'King

Buno' and gain a concession that proclaims him the 'Duke of Swaziland'. Fox employs techniques and makes pronouncements that repeatedly place his text within a continuum of colonial or imperialist rhetoric, and, taking the cue from his narrative, which weaves back and forth from the indeterminate present to the written past, this article recalls earlier travel narratives and echoes of other texts reverberating in his book, and then looks briefly at contemporary variations in the local and global print media.²

In his introduction to *Obscure Kingdoms*, Edward Fox self-consciously signals his sensitivity to the sovereign 'gaze' of the tourist or travel writer by quoting from Clifford Geertz's *Local Knowledge*, and declaring, 'The approach I adopted was to aim to demolish all my cultural reference points, to disorient myself completely in the world' (Fox 1993, 2). Yet his 'programme of cultural disorientation' (*ibid.*) depends also on the adjective in the title that he uses to describe the kingdoms he visits. He quotes the OED's definition of 'obscure' as meaning 'of a place, not readily seen or discovered; hidden, retired, secret; remote from observation . . . (p. 5), in effect locating his quest within the romance of the unknown, while at the same time attempting to unearth its secrets. Even as he presents himself in a casual, self-deprecating manner as an outsider in a Brooks Brothers suit, 'a professional white man, looking in at non-Western societies from the outside, immersing himself in them as deeply as possible, but always with a return air ticket in his pocket' (p. 6), his account repeatedly assumes an authority that exoticizes the culture, while at the same time it recycles images that domesticate the nation and its people.

The aura of mystery and romance suggested by Fox's book title, *Obscure Kingdoms*, and then again the chapter title, 'Invisible Kingdom—Swaziland', implicitly reinforces an image of Swaziland that devalues the present in favour of an idealized landscape or a storied past. Early in his narrative, he telescopes the primitive and the modern when he writes:

The Queen Mother's kraal was located in the middle of an area called Ezulwini, the sacred valley of Swazi kingship, a beautiful setting overlooking a serene green plain with hills a darker shade of green in the distance. In 1820 Sobhuza I chose the site of Ezulwini as his capital when he was retreating from the enemy Ndandwe tribe . . . Besides the sacred valley of Swazi kingship, it is also the metropolitan area's main drag, the centre of the white tourist trade, with hotels and casinos and roadside stands selling kitschy handicrafts. (p. 152)

Fox's judgment of modern Swaziland here relies in part on his conjuring 'a beautiful setting,' a 'sacred valley,' immediately before hand, followed by the romance of battle, and then mundane modernity. In this, his desire to conjure a landscape unsullied by global capitalism is not unlike that of the romance writer and colonial agent, H. Rider Haggard, who approximately one century earlier had lamented, 'Where . . . will the romance writers of future generations find a safe and secret place, unknown to the pestilent accuracy of the geographer, in which to lay their plots' (Brantlinger 1988, 239). In turn, Fox's influence can be felt when his dissatisfaction with contemporary reality is repeated in a more recent text by Jayne Galassi, a South African writer whose fictional account, *Ezulwini: Place of Heaven* (2006), takes the form of a memoir in

which the writer decries the gross reality of the present and grieves for a lost innocence. The narrator, describing her return to the colonial Swaziland of her childhood, gathers together oppositions between past and present; romance and reality; nature and commerce within the first few pages. Travelling by bus from Ermelo, she describes her first impressions of urban Swaziland:

Once slow and lazy, cradled in the heart of a wilderness shadowed by the Dlangeni Mountains, Mbabane now shines in Western drag, neon, glass and glare, a plastic valley— Surf: Bright like New, Bright like You. Banners and billboards are bright with pleas. Virginity is a good word, teach it to your children. Trust Condoms. Men can make a difference.

The town has evolved into something foreign and I am on the periphery, a traveller, seeing it with new eyes. Coming back has transformed the past into fiction. What I remember is a story that seems to hang by itself in a timeless space like so many other stories that must have begun here, a few caught and collected like anecdotes. (p. 3)

This quotation captures various preoccupations found in Fox's narrative, such as the disorientation of the traveller figure on the periphery and strategies used to gain mastery; the ambivalence felt towards modernity; and the notion of Swaziland as an indeterminate space. The narrator's longing for a 'heart of wilderness' reproduces a form of what Renato Rosaldo identifies as 'imperialist nostalgia', which describes a 'prevalent, commodified mode of elegiac perception through which Western people are given to sentimentalize the former relationship between the Empire and its colonies' (quoted in Holland and Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters* 2000, 29). For his part, Fox's favouring of the past at the expense of the present arises from an overriding frustration with his apparent inability to impose order and to be recognized and therefore validated. He writes, 'Everywhere I went in Swaziland, meaning seemed to evaporate as soon as I approached it. It glittered only from a distance, like a mirage' (p. 180).

One of the ways Fox attempts to give substance to this mirage is by switching to a version of the ethnographic present. At one point in particular, the movement from a frustration with concrete reality to an escape into the world of dream, and then a return to the present with a renewed sense of control forms a pattern that recurs elsewhere. The moment begins with Fox describing the King's cattle, how they are—not 'seem' or 'appear'—'innumerable', and how '[t]he big dark spots on their hides were like continents on a map of an imaginary world . . .' (p. 153). A shift to the ethnographic present follows: 'It's hard to think of anything more important to the Swazis than cattle: they are life and death and everything in between that matters—namely wealth and prestige. The whole country exists for their sake . . .' (*ibid.*) With this renewed sense of mastery he is able to offer more pronouncements, such as 'The Swazis despise sheep. If a member of the Dlamini clan . . . eats a black sheep, he will go mad' (*ibid.*). Later, his attempts to seek an audience with the king again frustrated, he declares: 'The Swazis were the Japanese of Africa, inscrutable, and their court impenetrable.' (p. 158)

Whereas much within Jayne Galassi's later narrative unselfconsciously duplicates Fox's earlier representation of Swaziland, it seems hard to imagine that Fox himself was

not aware of former travel narratives that offer the requisite ethnographic observations. For instance, in *The Gold Fields Revisited* Edward Mathers dedicates part a chapter to the ‘manners and customs’ of the Swazis he observes, making such statements as, ‘With respect to Swazie customs, I may mention that a man may not look on the face of his wife’s mother’ (1887, 219). Or, in 1929 Owen O’Neil can pause in his wildly unlikely narrative called *Adventures in Swaziland*, to comment: ‘Now the Swazi, from the highest to the lowest, sells his women. Women are the ‘pound sterling’ among all the savage tribes, and the unit of value is five cows for an average maid who is young, sound in limb and wind, and trained to the primitive duties of her race.’ (1920, 296 297). Even by 1937 Mary Jobe Akeley the wife of well-known traveller and naturalist Carl Akeley, and an explorer in her own right, can pronounce: ‘The Swazi law governs all matters pertaining to birth, marriage, and death . . . Marriage between near blood relations is forbidden, and in consequence the race is healthy and virile. I did not see in all Swaziland a puny or a deformed child.’ (*Restless Jungle*, 239) While Akeley’s narrative owes much to the *National Geographic* tradition, in the same year the insidious condescension of South African writer, Carel Birkby in his *Zulu Journey* shows that imperialist assumptions and activities carried on well beyond the so-called high imperialism of the turn of the century, spanning instead the period between 1889 and 1950. He (1937, 102) writes of Swaziland,

In this twentieth century of Christianity it comes as something of a shock to hear of, human sacrifice under the British flag, although it is practised in the wilds of Swaziland . . . Thus the black arts of ancient Africa still smoulder under the veneer of civilization. We are too often reminded that the weird fiction of Rider Haggard is surpassed by reality.

Whereas for Galassi, returning may have transformed the past into fiction, for Birkby, Swazi reality is even more bloody and violent than the Africa evoked by Haggard in his imperial romances.

In her book on Victorian travel writing and violence, Laura Franey acknowledges other critics’ awareness of the function of the Victorian romance as a response to industrialization, but also posits a link between the growth of the romance and the attempt to deflect attention from ‘the actual increase in organized violence following the post-Berlin Conference scramble for territory and sovereignty’ (2003, 75). The Swaziland version of this ‘scramble,’ though less official and organized than suggested by Franey, was the extraordinary greed and opportunism associated with the rash, bewildering, yet also cunning granting of concessions by King Mbandine from about 1885 to 1889, which Allister Miller, an early settler described as ‘the orgy of the concession boom’ (*California 1907*, 18). The accounts of this period often depict a gin-sodden erratic and sometimes violent king, and convey a grasping sense of entitlement, a kind of haughty, tolerant scorn, or a kind of parodic ridiculing of the king, such as in that of an American writer who, as suggested earlier, describes in his book, *Adventures of an Insurance Agent*, how King Bhunu, the successor to Mbandine, granted him the concession of holding the title, the Duke of Swaziland (Cavanagh 1924, 83 85). Though certainly more

thoughtful and sophisticated, Fox's description of King Mswati III, and his account of an attempt to gain an audience with the king are equally irreverent, and arise, at least in part, from a frustrated sense of devalued entitlement: 'He reads little and prefers oral summaries. He believes strongly in his own magical powers and that he rules by divine right and that he is richer than he actually is. Having people crawl on all fours before him influences a boy's development.' (p. 175)

Fox also renders Swaziland as a dark, exotic landscape when he describes how Mfanasibili, a leading member of the state council and pretender to the throne following the death of Sobhuza II, was 'shot while trying to break into the tomb of King Sobhuza, attempting, it was said, to steal the late King's arm. Eating a part of the King would give him some of the King's power, and help him become King in turn' (p. 169). While Fox narrates this incident with a poker face, his brief earlier account of a young man he befriended, hoping that he might help Fox gain access to the King is much more ominous: The acquaintance, named Validlela,

had a friend with him, and they both got into the car. His friend was carrying in two hands a large bundle wrapped in newspaper. The paper was stained red with wet, glistening blood. He sat in the back seat with this grisly parcel; it dripped blood on the upholstery . . . After a while I realized that Validlela couldn't really bring me to the King. He was wasting my time and my money, and he made me nervous. It was hard to get him out of the car. I cut my next appointment with him. I saw him later . . . and he walked right by me as if I were someone else, as if he were invisible. (pp. 162–63)

The taut atmosphere of potential threat here lingers and destabilizes the self-assured more urbane later account of Mfanasibili's escapades.

Fox neatly deflects his discomfort over his acquaintance's failure to recognize or acknowledge him, projecting a fear of his *own* invisibility onto the other. His account of Swaziland becomes an effort to inscribe meaning, which he literally attempts to do in a number of instances, as he tries to mask his anxiety with humour. At one moment, he describes a brief meeting with an old man, who 'spoke to me in an eccentric, mock-archaic English' (p. 160), and then goes on to transcribe the conversation: "'Art thou a practitioner of the photographic art, sir," he said. "Sometimes," I said. "Dost thou have the permission of the appropriate authorities?" I said I didn't.' (*ibid.*) And so on. As early as 1898, Allister Miller had published in serial form in his newspaper, the *Times of Swazieland*, what he claimed to be a transcription of the words of an elderly man named Mamisa: 'We have been requested to publish a series of verbal communications which have been addressed to us by a prominent Swazi chief, and which have been reduced to writing, and translated.' (5 February) Published in 1933 as *Mamisa the Swazi Warrior*, the novel carried the following laudatory remarks by Alan Paton on its dust jacket: 'The author, a white man, attempts to portray the life and the thoughts of a Swazi. To my mind, his attempt succeeds as none ever has done before . . . This book cannot help be one of our classics.'³ By acting as a transcriber of Swazi oral tradition, Miller sought to represent it as being in need of Western progress, but the novel also signals an

ambivalence that is marked by the tension between the sheer length of the narrative, an effort that would have forced Miller to inhabit his subject, and the more conventional elements common to other colonial ethnographic fictions of the day that objectify the subject, even as they signal its untranslatability. In comparison, Fox's transcription seems trite.

At another moment, Fox overtly turns to fiction in his attempt to maintain mastery. He imagines 'the memoirs of a hypothetical tutor, charged with teaching the boy-king the lessons of history' (p. 175). For instance: 'The King never listened to anything I said. Sometimes I would give him a page of a book to read. I would hand the book to him and wait while he read it. It was the only way I could be sure of getting him to read anything. I would glance over at him as he struggled with the text, moving his lips as he read.' (*ibid.*) His fictional fantasy that reduces Mswati to a semi-literate, spoiled brat and situates himself in the tradition of royal colonial tutor may be good fun, but a kind of parallel in reverse can be drawn with Owen O'Neil's *Adventures in Swaziland*, where the author incorporates actual photographs into his fictional narrative. The caption underneath a photograph of Labotsobeni is supposed to be a quotation from the Queen Regent herself: 'The white man's little black box is very wonderful!' (1920, 197). He then claims that it was the only photograph ever taken of her. Owen's belittling and racist treatment of his subject may be a product of a particular time and place, but though long out of print, many of the book's strategies stubbornly appear in other guises.

In particular, contemporary local and global images of Swaziland are largely produced through the electronic and print media, both of which are complicit in adapting features of colonial discourse, a habit especially evident in their reportage of the country's central ritual, *Incwala*, as well as the *Umhlanga*, or Reed Dance. While some reporters, such as the Kenyan writer, Peter Kagwanja, writing only incidentally on the Reed Dance, may offer a cynical critique of the country's use of tradition, pronouncing, 'The present monarchy. . . combines the worst excesses of colonial authoritarian government, with a thin veneer of traditional customs' (*The Nation*, 28 April 2006), more often local writers perpetuate an image of exotic mystery through such purportedly objective information as that offered by Vuyisile Hlatshwayo: 'Pundits of Swazi culture and tradition say . . . the king, senior royalty and elders perform certain secret rituals, culminating in the king doing the "invisible dance." During this dance, it is believed, the king becomes the mystical embodiment of the whole Swazi nation . . . [And] if he fails to finish the dance, he should commit suicide.' (*PanAfrican News Agency*) This kind of nonsense is adapted by the international media, who carelessly confuse the two rituals, at times reporting that the *Umhlanga* is 'Swaziland's most sacred kingship rite' (Masuku, AllAfrica.com.27 August 2001), or 'the highlight of Swaziland's traditional calendar' (Blair, *National Post*, 30 August, 2005). Blair's article begins with the following lampoon: 'Portly and beaming in a leopard-skin loincloth, King Mswati III of Swaziland basked in the adoration of more than 50.000 topless virgins yesterday when the flower of his country's

girlhood paraded before him, vying to become his new queen,' and further on provides this vision: 'King Mswati, reclining on a throne placed under a golden awning, smiled broadly at the display. He has already amassed 12 wives, one fiancée and 27 children' (Blair).⁴ Such disregard for the facts may signal a critique of the nation's exploitation of tradition, but when it appears in national newspapers such as Canada's conservative *National Post* or England's *The Daily Telegraph*, it simply perpetuates stereotypes initiated by colonial writings and early travel narratives.

Hooper and Youngs, describing humour in one strain of contemporary cosmopolitan travel writing, warn that 'such self-deprecation is the smile of the supremely confident. Humour carries authority; it does not displace it. That which is ironized is often upheld rather than challenged' (*Perspectives on Travel Writing* 2004, 9). Edward Fox, the slightly self-conscious visitor in a Brooks Brothers suit, belongs to this breed of traveller, a breed whose provenance goes back at least as far as the American pretender to a Dukedom, Jas Cavanagh. These writers, however, wield humour as a means to delegitimize royal authority, even as their fascination with titles of nobility and with the monarchy is a symptom which simultaneously betrays a wilful belief in their prior right to privilege and an unsettling and unspoken fear of or envy for the very objects of their ridicule. In his book, Edward Fox relates a well-known anecdote on how King Sobhuza I, before ever having seen a white man, was said to have had a dream in which 'white-skinned people "with hair like tassels of cattle" . . . came bringing with them two things. One was a book . . . ; the other was money. They should accept the book, but be careful about taking the money' (p. 165). Fox notes that later King Mbandeni 'did not heed Sobhuza's warning about the white man's money, and sold most of the country to foreign concessionaires' (*ibid.*). Perhaps, though, Sobhuza's great grandson, Mswati, the pampered, semi-literate boy-king, overturned that stricture of the dream and chose not to entertain the presence of the book, or at least that of a writer of what was to become a travel book that extends a colonial discourse into the present. But that may be attributing more insight than is really the case. For instance, in its 2003 report, the Media Institute of Southern Africa noted that 'The media law audit identified over 30 pieces of legislation that were found to restrict media freedom in Swaziland' (p. 15). Along with such proscriptions against the media, Swaziland has largely failed to offer adequate resources that might support prospective writers and advance the production of stories that would participate in narrating the nation, thereby allowing what is an overwhelmingly young, literate population to reflect on fresher, more relevant versions of itself.

Notes

1 A grant from the Acadia University Research Fund in 2007 enabled me to travel to Durban to conduct research for portions of this article.

2 I make a similar point in a paper presented at the 33rd Annual African Literature Association Conference held March 14–18, 2007, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia. A revised version of the article, entitled ‘Reduced by Writing: Imperial Discourse, Oral Culture, and Contemporary Media in Swaziland’, was published in *JALA* 1 (2) 2007, 140–149.

3 This quotation is also included in my paper cited in Note 2 above.

4 This quotation also appears in the *JALA* article mentioned in Note 2 above.

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