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# An Interview with Rustum Kozain

Hedley  
Twidle

*Rustum Kozain was born in 1966 in Paarl, South Africa. He studied for several years at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and spent ten months (1994–1995) in the United States of America on a Fulbright Scholarship. He returned to South Africa and lectured in the Department of English at UCT from 1998 to 2004, teaching in the fields of literature, film and popular culture. Kozain has published his poetry in local and international journals; his debut volume, This Carting Life, was published in 2005 by Kwela/Snailpress.*

*Kozain's numerous awards include: being joint winner of the 1989 Nelson Mandela Poetry Prize administered by the University of Cape Town; the 1997 Philip Stein Poetry Award for a poem published in 1996 in New Contrast; the 2003 Thomas Pringle Award from the English Academy of Southern Africa for individual poems published in journals in South Africa; the 2006 Ingrid Jonker Prize for This Carting Life (awarded for debut work); and the 2007 Olive Schreiner Prize for This Carting Life (awarded by the English Academy of Southern Africa for debut work).*

*The following conversation took place on 31 July 2015 at Rustum Kozain's flat in Tamboerskloof, Cape Town. Prior to my arrival, Rustum had prepared a chicken balti with cabbage according to a recipe from Birmingham, and also a cauliflower and potato curry. During our discussion (lasting one and a half hours, condensed and lightly edited here) he occasionally got up to check on the dishes — which we ate afterwards with freshly prepared sambals.*

**Hedley Twidle** Rustum, you wrote an article for *Wasafiri* twenty-one years ago (issue 19, Summer 1994) in which you discuss the reception of Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetry. There you were sceptical of South African critics who were lauding his work and its techniques of oral performance as if these things had never happened before. You suggested that if one looks at Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ), there is an equally established and perhaps more skilful tradition of this in another part of the world. My response after reading the article — because you take issue with several critics of poetry — my response was: 'Well, at least people were

*discussing South African poetry.'* I can't think of a similarly invested debate around the craft of poetry going on now. Or am I not seeing it?

**Rustum Kozain** That's an interesting question, especially as so many people now seem to consider poetry as this casual activity, which is dispiriting. There isn't a discussion of, to use the basic terms, whether a poem is a good poem or whether it is a terrible poem. My sense is that we talk about poetry, and literature more generally, simply in terms of its content or its thematic concerns. Some of the controversy around the Franschhoek Literary Festival — or one of the points raised by younger black writers — was that they (the writers) are treated as anthropological informants. They link it specifically to a history of apartheid and racism in South Africa where the black author is there to answer questions about what life is like for a black person, to a mainly white audience. But I think it goes beyond race. In general, literary criticism has kind of regressed into simply summarising a content that is readily available. Part of the reason I think poetry disappeared off syllabuses in South Africa towards the late 1980s and early 1990s is that fewer and fewer teachers at university were prepared for or knew how to engage with teaching poetry beyond analysing its contents.

I had been listening to Linton Kwesi Johnson since I was a teenager, so when Mzwakhe Mbuli exploded onto the scene in South Africa and people were hailing him as someone who had revolutionised English poetics, I thought: 'These people must be talking crap; have they not heard Linton Kwesi Johnson who was doing it ten years before and in a much better way?' So my argument was partly about how people are evaluating literature and it was clear that Mzwakhe Mbuli was hailed also because his politics were seemingly progressive and he was on the side of the anti-apartheid struggle. That wasn't enough for me to want to listen or read his poetry again and again — one wanted to talk about the aesthetics of his poetry.

**HT** I suppose we're getting closer now to the thematic of the issue which is about poetic craft at a time of cultural

contestation. You've mentioned Linton Kwesi Johnson and you're often referring to musicians in your poetry; obviously you are drawing a great deal from an auditory response or imagination, but your poetry is not like LKJ's at all. In fact, I read it as quite a written form of poetry; I think Kelwyn Sole had a nice phrase for it. He said it has a 'deliberative sonority' — which I like because even that phrase sort of slows you down and I find that your poetry slows a reader down. I wonder if you could speak a bit about the fact that you're in some senses devoted to the sonic, auditory, to sound, to jazz. I think Charles Mingus was playing when I arrived — you've written poems about him — and yet there's quite a disciplined — I want to say almost modernist restraint — to a lot of your poetry.

**RK** I think a large part, if not the largest part, of my influences would be modernist and what comes after modernism. I studied at university in the 1980s when modernism was still a significant part of the English literary syllabus at the University of Cape Town, so that is a part of me. But even before I enrolled for English, an older friend introduced me to 'Prufrock' [by T S Eliot]. And I thought this poem was remarkable because it was something completely different from what we were used to at school, which were typically a few Shakespeare sonnets, some Victorian poetry, I don't think any of the Romantics.

The idea of sonority — I have to agree with you. I do have a thing for the sound of words. So the sound of a word often plays a large part in its choice in a line or a poem. Why don't I sound like Linton Kwesi Johnson? That's one of my greatest frustrations in life [laughs] — that I can't write like LKJ in any believable way. Part of that is because I don't have a Caribbean background. A large part of Johnson's charm has got to do with the language he is using, which is tied so closely to drum rhythms in the Caribbean. He has a gift but he also has that legacy or that inheritance that he can work with. I've tried writing parodic poems in [my reggae-sourced] Jamaican Creole, but it's rubbish. I've tried writing hip hop as well, but there is a particular skill in composing for oral performance that I don't have.

**HT** I was raising the question of slowness, but certainly not as a lack. Because, in a sense, what I find when reading poetry nowadays is the need to remind myself to slow down. I think we're all programmed to read so fast now — online and on screens — to read instrumentally and for content. So I sense the kind of syntactical mechanisms you put in place to ensure a certain productive slowness.

**RZ** There are two things that definitely lie behind the slowness in much of my poetry. The one thing is that I feel myself to be a frustrated filmmaker, so my poems are often visual and it's often as if a camera were panning across a scene. The other thing that lies behind this kind of slowness was something Kelwyn Sole said — or someone said in a blurb on one of his books — it has to do with his poetry looking at the quiet or the silent moments and trying to unpick what goes on in those

moments; to think about what happens on the edges of normal events.

**HT** At the end of your essay 'Dagga', you talk about the question of nostalgia, around which there have been a lot of debates recently, especially following from Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* in which he reminisces about growing up in Katlehong outside Johannesburg. He begins the work with quite a complex rhetorical position, he asks: 'What does it mean to remember elements of a childhood under apartheid with fondness?' It's a question that was often taken up by reviewers (some of whom refused to read the book at all) as evidence that his book should be filed in the 'apartheid wasn't that bad' genre, that he was pining for bad old days. I don't think you've ever been accused of that in any way; but I wonder if you can talk a bit about the perils of nostalgia in our cultural moment, in which certain forms of subjectivity and expression are being policed in some ways?

**RK** It is an interesting and, for me, a very central question. At times I get despondent about what I'm doing because I think that it could just be dismissed as exercises in nostalgia. I think we tend towards nostalgia as we grow older. Whether nostalgia in general is a pathology or whether it's something positive, I don't know. For me the moment we are living in in South Africa is a nightmare moment. So part of my looking back is also to try and deal with this weird and perverse relationship we have between the present — which is a nightmare — and the past — which was a nightmare, but during which we had this hope or this dream of an escape from a nightmare. The thing we looked forward to, *that* added something to our lives. But that added value is nowhere to be found in the present moment. When I write in 'Dagga' about growing up in Paarl, yes it is partly the nostalgia of a man turning fifty and it's a nostalgia for a place partly because of biographical migrations away from that place and away from the social relations of that place as well. So those are two properly nostalgic impulses. Part of this — and I've come across this idea in many writers, most prominently in Mandelstam — is the desire to freeze time. For me that's what I try almost every time I write a poem, to freeze time in the non-fiction, in the prose — to freeze time at that time when there was still hope, in a way, that's part of it.

**HT** So why is the present a nightmare?

**RK** Do you have to ask? I never studied politics or sociology or political economy so I'm very reticent to talk politics as such. That's probably why I write poetry, because in poetry you can get away with associative meanings. You don't have to be completely rational, analytic, precise, so you can make political statements under the cover of the associative meanings that poetry allows you. I'm happy to expose myself in my poetry because, I think, there I can say things — maybe it's a lack of courage, but there I can say things that people can't challenge me with, with the whole locomotive and carriages of expert knowledge. So I'm reticent to talk about politics straight up, but South Africa is



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not the place that we imagined in the seventies and eighties that we were going to create. On the one hand conservatives and reactionaries can laugh at us and say ‘Well, what did you expect? What did you expect from a liberation movement that was communist inspired?’ and all that nonsense. But at the same time we had a dream and we lost a dream. What do we do now?

**HT** A poem that really struck me when reading across your work was ‘February Moon’, Cape Town, 1993. I was quite taken aback when I saw the date because at the time it must have seemed pessimistic. But now this kind of discourse and this kind of dissatisfaction is gaining ground; in a sense it has become our daily bread. So my question then is about rhetorical exhaustion. Because how can you, on the one hand, ‘make it new’ in the Poundian sense; but, on the other hand, how do you (any ‘you’ that is politically aware) keep saying the same thing for years and years and years? There’s a line from Arundhati Roy that I often think of at the end of her essay ‘The End of Imagination’ — which is about India and its nuclear programme. She says

Let’s pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes and speak our second-hand lines in this sad second-hand play. But let’s not forget that the stakes we’re playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. (Roy 122)

How does one deal with or ward off a kind of exhaustion about having to say the same things which, in a sense, is what politically astute people have had to do for over two decades now?

**RK** If you find yourself repeating yourself, what do you do? For me there is an exhaustion, but not of the imagination. Much of my poetry is not written from the imagination — I

don’t imagine scenarios and portray characters in a particular scenario or events. My poetry is directly about a certain reality, my reality or something I see out there, but I understand what Roy means by an exhaustion of imagination and I think our state, our government, our civil servants, the service industry, the way people interact with each other, the advertising industry, representations of South Africa in the media, by our own media, how we see ourselves and how we understand our relationship with each other — there’s no imagination, there’s no vision, there’s no forethought. So my surroundings, my context, my circumstances exhaust me. Especially if they cohere around certain ideas of the nation and what has happened politically in South Africa — that I would have touched on in previous poetry. So you just sit there and you go: ‘Why does no one read my poetry?’ [laughs] It is not just me. This has been one of Kelwyn’s hobby horses; that when you read South African poetry, there has been a constant and continuous fatigue since the early nineties about the new South Africa running through our poetry. But since no one reads poetry, no one’s hearing the poets and no one’s listening to the poets.

At the moment I’m in a kind of trough where it concerns my own writing because a lot of my poetry now has a wider focus; it’s not only about South Africa, it’s about other things as well. And they’re difficult subjects, it’s difficult to treat these subjects with the kind of gravitas that they require and to resolve that treatment in the poetry. And it is not only South Africa; the rest of the world seems to have lost that foresight, vision, imagination in the way global politics and economics are run. My exhaustion is globally inspired, though it may only have a local impact [laughs].

**HT** You’ve talked about being from Paarl but I read a review of *Groundwork* where one critic was grouping you as part of a ‘Cape Town school’ — I didn’t think of you as a Cape Town poet. But then I started reading your poetry and there are a lot of poems about the city of Cape Town, a lot of them written from balconies, often in winter [both laughing]. We live quite near each other, I walked to get here. My sense of Cape Town — the city bowl that we’re in and the side along the Atlantic seaboard — is that it is a city that has been groomed for the one per cent. It’s presenting itself as a ‘world class city’ and it’s putting in a series of mechanisms to ensure that extraordinarily wealthy people will be able to drop in and out of it. I have a sense of evacuation of the reality that’s going on in the centre on a day-to-day basis. Of course there are the usual debates about gentrification, but there’s a certain scale to it here: how big the uninhabited houses are; the relentlessness of the inequality; there’s a certain local quality to it. So I wonder — what’s your local routine, how do you live in this city as a poet?

**RK** I generally stay at home [laughs]. I imagine myself on my submarine and there I go. Sometimes I have to venture out and it is always stressful. I don’t want to fall into the trap of the tropes about Cape Town versus Johannesburg. I don’t think it is as simple as that but I also have a tangential relationship with Cape Town. Many of my friends

make fun of me for coming from Paarl, so I've always had a sense that I'm not Capetonian, although I've lived here since 1986 or 1989 — more than half of my life. At the same time there's something about Capetonians that doesn't always fit with me. So, I'm not as loyal to Cape Town as a native Capetonian might be. What always surprises me, of course, is that I know a very limited part of Cape Town, but I know that I know Cape Town better than most Capetonians know Paarl, for instance. Part of it is understandable — again the periphery and the centre. Why would people in the centre need to care about what's happening out in Paarl?

And, of course, when you come from a small town you want to come to the big city. I'm never comfortable anywhere — I'm always a little bit on the outside. I think that's biographical as well, it's got to do with the fact that my family life was Muslim on the one hand — in a very South African, Western Cape type of way — then it was also Anglican in another way, because my mother was a convert from Christianity, from a middle-class, anglophile family, whereas my father was working class, Afrikaans speaking. So there has always been that awareness of two sides of a particular path or life. I've never felt completely at home in Islam, for instance, because my early childhood wasn't along the path of the typical Muslim kid in the Western Cape. When I went, at the age of ten, to another school, for instance, where the majority of the kids were Muslim and I didn't know all the myriad of little things that you should know as a Muslim kid to be a proper Muslim kid, there was a bit of an ill-match. Then coming to Cape Town from Paarl and Capetonians joking, 'Oh, country bumpkin, and what did you do in Paarl this weekend? Did you watch the traffic light change?' Those kinds of jokes. And sometimes they rub me up the wrong way, because I know more about your town than you know about my town. But yes, Cape Town is a bizarre city, but it is normal in the South African sense. Houses stand empty, what can one do?

**HT** One of your poems is about reading Seamus Heaney and it seems to me that there's a similar sort of linguistic digging or archaeology within your own poetic universe, particularly the excavation of a 'word-hoard' that you husband and explore. So can you speak a bit about the linguistic confluences that feed into your poetic voice?

**RK** One of the things that struck me about Seamus Heaney, and which I have often tried to emulate, is the 'earthiness' there is to his poetry. What he does in his poems, especially about rural Ireland, has the effect of being something elemental. So you get a sense of the elemental rock in the green grass. Then there is something about the aural qualities of his poetry that also strike me. I'm generally a curious person, so if something arouses my curiosity I want to know a bit more. Sometimes when I read Seamus Heaney's poetry there's a vocabulary there that I don't know or I learn a new word and often these words strike me first in the ear and it is a sound thing, so that influence would then find an expression when I'm trying to make a similar pre-Saussurean connection between the word and the thing that it refers to. That's a drive for me,

but it's part of the idea of recreating the world around me. It's a realist impulse — let's not skirt around that issue — it's a realist impulse; I want a reader to feel or experience or see the very thing that I have seen or am seeing or experiencing.

**HT** I remember Heaney talking about every word being both an 'etymological event' and a 'pure vocable'. I always remember that way of framing the tension between semantic and sonic elements of language, or what Kristeva calls the symbolic and semiotic. You write about Malayo-Afrikaans and Arabic vocabularies and there's a great sense of linguistic felicity to some of these poems.

**RK** That is in my language in general. I code switch often. I don't think code switching is such a terrible thing as people make it out to be — like you're pretending to be someone you are not. I think code switching is a skill; linguists recognise it as such and those codes are not only in one language. There's a limited Arabic vocabulary that I know through Afrikaans — as a kind of first language for me — and then the mixture of English and Afrikaans in informal dialects — of both languages — so that's another code. And then, of course, there are the default codes of age and vocation and professional registers etc. The impulse to employ vocabulary from different languages and from different codes comes from Derek Walcott. When I discovered Walcott and how he fuses Caribbean speech patterns into some of his poetry, I thought: 'English and Afrikaans'. That fit isn't as smooth as, for instance, Caribbean dialects with Standard English and the pentameter in Derek Walcott, but I will try and use a word from Afrikaans or from Arabic when it comes to me in the act of writing, as I may in speech with friends — code switch or use different vocabulary. It's not at all what Derek Walcott did, for instance, with 'The Schooner Flight', but I find a justification for doing that in his poetry.

**HT** Anyone who reads your poetry is going to find that it addresses many different kinds of father. I'm thinking particularly of 'Kingdom of Rain' and then also a very affecting part of 'Dagga' where you talk about ... let me just read it. Here you talk about South Africa or the Boland as:

That strange country of my father's heart — his own, yet not his own, or, differently, not his own but which he tried to make his own, through all the strange, twisted logic and heartbreak of this heartbreaking country. (16)

That is interesting to me again because the syntax is slowing us in that sentence. You go on:

My father, in winter, somewhere along a steep side of Bainskloof outside Wellington; my father who loved the natural world, tugging at an obstinate King Protea which he would himself stubbornly plant in his garden in New Orleans, where it would wither and die, again and again; my father, who would say; 'Protected. Conserved. For whom? This is God's earth,



it belongs to me too.’ It is for him that I arrive now at this paragraph, crying as I write this, for which I am not ashamed, for which I forgive myself, knowing that in myself crouches something of that mangled masculinity my brother and I inherited from him. Here we are, the heirs of apartheid. (ibid)

There’s a lot in that passage for me and it comes back in the poem ‘Kingdom of Rain’, with its vision of the nature reserve or the protected area — and what one does with that space as a poet in South Africa. Because the game park or the nature reserve has an extraordinarily problematic and tainted history in this country. What speaks to me in the work is that clearly you know the critical literature which demystifies Romantic and colonial rhapsodies to the natural world — I’m thinking of J M Coetzee’s *White Writing*, for example. You’ve imbibed all that, but nonetheless your writing stages these scenes of an intense affective relation to the natural environment in the Cape. Then there is also this idea of a mangled masculinity which apartheid produced and the quite complex investigation of masculinity throughout your poems.

**RK** That particular paragraph I feel still doesn’t say exactly what it is that I want to say. One of the obvious things for me writing as a South African — and we are forced to talk in racial terms in South Africa even though we don’t want to — my writing somewhere has to make the assertion: ‘Here I am.’ That’s the fundamental urge for almost every writer. Then the layer on top of that is — sometimes consciously, deliberately, sometimes not, most of the times not — is to say that I had a rich life as a kid growing up in Paarl. As a so-called coloured kid under apartheid, we nevertheless managed to have full lives. You can’t escape apartheid, but at the same time our lives weren’t at every moment determined by apartheid. I know that people get into trouble for saying things like that, but that’s the truth. Part of my writing is to give a literary representation to that fullness.

Part of the fullness of that life, which I think I work on deliberately, is a counter to stereotypes about black South Africans’ relationship with the landscape and with nature. That is one of the driving forces behind that. The impulse came to me about twenty years ago when I was on a fiction workshop with Dennis Hirson and one of the other participants, a Capetonian [laughs], was moaning about how for her there is no relationship with nature, she can’t understand when people write about the landscape and about the natural world because, as far as she is concerned, she has no idea what that is. I thought that was a little bit incredible because she was older than I was, which means that she must have remembered a period, first of all, before the Group Areas Act; secondly, from stories I’ve heard from people of her age, it was difficult to get around, but you could still enter wild spaces that weren’t necessarily segregated. The spot where we used to swim, it was state property, it wasn’t a formal picnic spot or whatever, but we had free access to it. It was a private spot, my father found it on his explorations and there we were. So there was no structural impediment to engage or develop

a relationship with the landscape. Part of my writing about landscape is also just to say that black people do have a relationship with landscape and with the natural environment, in the sense that people normally talk about those things. I don’t want to get into complex conversations about what nature is, but you know what I mean — going for a walk on the mountain, going to swim in a mountain river, those kinds of interactions that establish relationships. So that is something I got from my father. That love for the landscape comes from my father. That’s part of what I’m trying to deal with. It’s the barb in the nostalgia.

**HT** Do you know how much your latest volume costs? 199 Rand. I did the maths and I don’t mean this in any way as a personal slight, but it works out at about 2.50 Rand a page or 6.50 Rand a poem. Perhaps that isn’t so bad! It’s stingy but you get a lot more bang for your buck for your first collection. Anyway, I get to buy this on a university research account but it is still a huge hit for me. As someone who probably knows a lot more about the publishing industry than me (and I know this debate goes on and on), can you explain why books are so roguishly expensive in this country? Is there any way that it’s going to change?

**RK** Unless executives and shareholders are happy with less, it’s not going to change, no matter what people say about the cost of paper etc. Publishers, in general, outsource most of the work that publishers used to do as a matter of default. A freelancer has to evaluate a manuscript; the design and the layout, the cover design — all that is outsourced. So the publishers are ending up paying less for the product because the people who do the work are paid a pittance and they’re not on the company payroll. When people say there’s no money in publishing, look at the executives, the managers etc, how much they earn — why do they have to earn that much? We all know why they have to earn that much. They have to earn that much to be able to lead a lifestyle at this very southern point of South Africa that is comparable to a publishing exec in New York or London or Paris. We want to drive a fancy Peugeot or BMW or Benz, we want two cars, we want the swimming pool etc. That’s one of the big problems in South Africa — our upper echelons of the middle class lead lives which are based on the importation of the most expensive things. That’s why books are expensive, that’s why my royalty cheque earlier this year for my poetry books was 163 rand. That’s less than the book costs! I couldn’t even buy my own book! People ask me for complimentary copies and I say I’m sorry, I can’t even afford my own book.

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