

From Manenberg to Soweto: Race and Coloured Identity in the Black Consciousness Poetry of James Matthews

Mohamed Adhikari

University of Cape Town

The Black Consciousness¹ poetry of James Matthews, internationally recognised Coloured writer from the Cape Flats, reflects the growing popularisation amongst politicised Coloured people during the 1970s of the idea that racial distinctions in general, and Coloured identity in particular, had historically been used by the white supremacist establishment to divide and rule the black majority. This insight, by no means novel, provided the main thrust to the popular rejection of Coloured identity in the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s. Coloured rejectionism had, however, originated within a small section of the Coloured intelligentsia, in particular amongst those active within the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) in the early 1960s (Adhikari 2002: 186–87, 213–14, 243–48)² and grew into a significant movement by the time it peaked at the end of the 1980s. Though confined to a politicised minority within the Coloured community itself, and observed mainly in public discourse or for pragmatic reasons,³ the disavowal of Coloured identity had by the early 1980s nevertheless become a politically correct orthodoxy within the anti-apartheid movement, especially in the Western Cape. In response to the overt racism of apartheid, the democratic movement embraced non-racism as a cornerstone of its philosophy and any recognition of Coloured identity was condemned as a concession to apartheid thinking. This tendency was, however, reversed during the four-year transition to democratic rule as radical changes to the political landscape in the first half of the 1990s once again made the espousal of Coloured identity acceptable in left-wing and “progressive” circles (Adhikari 2000: 349; 2002: 23–24, 281–87).

Matthews’ poetry of the first half of the 1970s is emblematic of a new consciousness of defiance and black solidarity within particular sectors of the Coloured population.⁴ In the Coloured community Black Consciousness ideology, with its stress on black unity and self-determination, appealed especially to the better educated, urbanised groups outside of the NEUM’s sphere of influence, which by that time was restricted to a narrow constituency within the upper echelons of the Coloured middle classes. It was particularly in the wake

of the 1976 revolt that Black Consciousness took popular root within the Coloured community and was taken up by the increasingly politicised student population.

James Matthews was born on the 25 May 1929 in a run-down tenement in the predominantly Coloured working class neighbourhood of Bo-Kaap, along the lower slopes of Signal Hill bordering Cape Town's central business district. Matthews was forced to end his schooling at Trafalgar High School while in standard VIII to supplement the family income. He held a series of menial jobs which included selling newspapers on street corners, running office errands and working as night telephonist and clerk at the *Cape Times*. He then pursued a career as a reporter at the *Golden City Post* and the *Muslim News* during the 1960s and 1970s (Clarke and Matthews 2000: 41–41; Willemse 2000b: 7, 12–13).

Besides an acute personal sense of grievance at the injustices suffered by black South Africans, Matthews' political awareness matured through his exposure to Communist Party teachings during the latter half of the 1950s. He remembers Communist Party activist Wolfie Kodesh's "talks" to clusters of locals on street corners whilst selling *New Age*⁵ in his neighbourhood as being particularly influential in "crystallising... my political awareness". Matthews, however, resisted joining the Communist Party or any other political organisation because he felt the need, both as writer and independent thinker, to maintain a personal autonomy free from the constraints that came with such allegiances (Matthews 2000: 104). Matthews claims to have developed the ideas of black pride and solidarity expressed in his writing independently of the local Black Consciousness Movement and to have been influenced mainly by the philosophy of the Black Panthers in the United States and the ideas of Negritude in the writings of Léopold Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop and Aimé Césaire (Matthews 2002). The closest he came to direct political affiliation to any particular organisation was serving on the executive of the Black Consciousness inspired Union of Black Journalists formed in January, 1973 (Mzamane and Howarth 2000: 186; van Kessel 2000: 324).

In the meanwhile, having published his first piece of fiction in the *Sun* newspaper at the age of seventeen, Matthews made a name for himself as a short story writer from the mid-1950s onwards. He confirms that he started writing less out of any ambition to become an author than as a form of catharsis, "just to get a lot of shit out of my head" (Matthews 1988: 1).⁶ His stories were published in a range of newspapers and magazines including the *Cape Times*, *Cape Argus*, *Drum*, *Hi-Note*, *Africa South*, *Transition* and *New African* as well as in several anthologies of South African prose.⁷ Two stories in particular, *Azikwelwa* first published in 1958 and *The park* in 1962, both of which had strong anti-apartheid and black solidarity themes, gained international recognition. It was particularly in Sweden, West Germany and Holland that he gained a following.⁸ In 1973 Matthews started his own publishing house BLAC — the

acronym standing for Black Literature, Art and Culture — which he used to publish his own work and that of other township artists (Clarke and Matthews 2000: 40; Willemse 2000b: 13,16).⁹ Matthews' writing career was stunted by the apartheid state's refusal to grant him a passport. This not only cut him off from international contacts and a large part of his readership but also prevented him from taking up numerous opportunities to present his work overseas and to widen his artistic experiences. It was only through the intervention of the West German government in 1980 that Matthews obtained a passport to allow him to attend the Frankfurt Book Fair. The passport was valid for five years, so he was able to travel abroad and returned to Germany in 1984 to receive the freedom of the towns of Nürnberg and Lehrte. The apartheid government, however, refused to renew the passport after it had expired (Jaffer 2000: 117; Matthews 2000: 107; Matthews 2002; Willemse 2000b 13).

All of Matthews' work prior to the 1990s, although not necessarily always overtly political, in one way or another commented on the experience of black people under apartheid. While his stories described the squalor, degradation and humiliation of the apartheid oppressed, it also testified to their anger, defiance and, above all, their humanity. Drawing on his own rich experience of Cape Town's working class life, which included the male street corner culture of drinking, gambling, smoking marijuana and petty gangsterism¹⁰ — he was a member of the Cluster Buster gang (Matthews 2000: 102; Willemse 2000b: 14–15) — Matthews' writing mediates the harsh realities of life in the city's townships and inner-city localities. Despite indulging in the decidedly middle class pursuits of journalism and literary production, Matthews remained fiercely loyal to his working class roots. Recalling their first meeting in the mid-1950s, long-standing friend and fellow-author Richard Rive testified that Matthews looked "ostentatiously working class" and "I realised immediately he saw in me everything he despised. I not only looked Coloured middle class, but I spoke Coloured middle class and behaved Coloured middle class" (Rive 1981: 11). In a 1988 interview Matthews with characteristic self-effacement dismissed himself as "just another ghetto writer" and today still revels in this description (Matthews 1988: 3; Matthews 2002).

Starting in 1970 Matthews, for a variety of reasons, switched to poetry as his main form of artistic expression. Firstly, it had become increasingly difficult to find publishers for his short stories because their political content or implications offended the white establishment and because many liberal publishers, especially the English-language press, were cowed into self-censorship by the apartheid state (Clarke and Matthews 2000: 39; Willemse 2000a: 15). Secondly, he was being harassed by security police. Fearing for his safety and the welfare of his three young children should he "suddenly disappear after a mid-night visit from them (the security police)" (Matthews 2000: 105), Matthews felt that it made better sense for him to write poetry that could be read and distributed at small gatherings rather than to produce short stories disseminated through the mass

media. Although he admitted that at first "... I chickened out. I got shit scared" (Matthews 1988: 5), there was no question that he would desist from writing for as he confirmed, "I could not contain my anger at the injustice of racial laws" (Matthews 2000: 106). He attested that it was this anger that "catapulted" him into writing his first volume of poetry in which he described himself as "a man of no account who refuse(s) to remain silent at all the injustices done to blacks" (Matthews and Thomas 1972: Introduction).

Matthews, in addition, found the idea of writing poetry that could be read directly to the people he wanted to communicate with most — township inhabitants, many of whom were illiterate or semi-literate — attractive as he was becoming increasingly exasperated that his work was being consumed mainly by an overseas readership and a small elite at home. He also realised that poetry as oral performance was a most effective way of grabbing peoples' attention and conscientising them (Matthews 1988: 6). Through the 1970s and 1980s he thus took to reading his poetry at gatherings ranging from mass protest rallies and literary get-togethers to youth club meetings and shebeens. Very importantly, poetry was a more intense medium that allowed him to give vent to his outrage and frustration (Jaffer 2000: 119; Matthews 2002; Messina 1995b: 131; Willemse 2000b 16).

Lest this description appear to romanticise Matthews' role as poet and cultural activist, it needs to be pointed out that the popular impact of his poetry was limited. Most of his work was banned and Matthews simply did not have the resources to distribute his writing or BLAC publications widely. Also, poetry had limited appeal to the working class audience he wanted to conscientise. That he chose to write in English rather than the Afrikaans vernacular, his home language as well as that of the overwhelming majority of working class Coloured people, further reduced its relevance to this constituency and suggests that literary production and personal expression rather than conscientising a semi-literate working class audience were his primary motivations.

Matthews was nevertheless at the forefront of a new wave of black protest poetry that emerged in the early 1970s that primarily addressed a black readership rather than a general audience or the white or Western conscience as earlier protest poetry had tended to do (Cornwell 1982: 184). Wally Serote acknowledged Matthews as its leading exponent: "At the head of this group was James Matthews, who set the standards of how we were going to deal with things around us" (Serote 1976: 25) and Mbulelo Mzamane made it clear that "Matthews was an influence on, and not influenced by, Black Consciousness" (Mzamane 1991: 68). He is also generally recognised as the angriest of the Black Consciousness poets who wrote before the 1976 uprising, being described by Hein Willemse as a "despatcher of raging Black Consciousness poetry" (Willemse 2000b: 7).¹¹

The bulk of Matthews' poetry of this genre is to be found in the aptly titled *Cry Rage!* which appeared in 1972 and also contains a collection of poems by Gladys Thomas, a long-standing friend. Other poems of similar complexion appeared in the 1974 anthology *Black Voices Shout!*¹², edited by Matthews, while a few more were published individually in newspapers and magazines. (See Willemse 2000a: 134 for a list of such poems.) In his Black Consciousness poetry Matthews not only gave voice to the anger that many Coloured people felt but also to the as yet embryonic feeling of solidarity with Africans that was to grow significantly after the Soweto revolt and the death of Steve Biko. Matthews was ahead of his time in these respects in that very few people, particularly within the Coloured community, were as outspoken as he was in *Cry Rage!*, which he claims to have the distinction of being the first volume of poetry to be banned by the National Party government (Clarke and Matthews 2000: 40; Matthews 2000: 106). Secondly, it was only after the Soweto revolt that Black Consciousness sentiment flourished in the Coloured community and that the public expression of outrage became more common.

In the opening poem of the *Cry Rage!* compilation Matthews makes it clear that

I am no minstrel
who sings of joy ...
but the words I write
are of pain and of rage ...
my heart drowned in bitterness
with the agony of what white man's law has done.

He denied that what he wrote should be labelled poetry. According to Gareth Cornwell, Matthews preferred to call these poems "protest songs" because of his intention that they perform a popular conscientising function and because the urgency of his message did not allow for indulgence in the luxury of "literariness" (Cornwell 1982: 184). Matthews himself has on several occasions referred to his poetry as "gatherings" or "expressions of feelings".¹³ In the closing poem of the *Cry Rage!* collection he writes:

To label my utterings poetry
and myself a poet
would be as self-deluding
as the planners of parallel development (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 70).

In line with Black Consciousness thinking Matthews sought to transcend his personal identity and his classification by the apartheid state as Coloured by taking pride in his blackness. In a memorable section of verse he affirmed this broader identity:

I am Black
my Blackness fills me to the brim
like a beaker of well-seasoned wine
that sends my senses reeling with pride (Matthews 1974: 64).

Pride in his blackness kindled within Matthews a sense of fellowship with Africans in the rest of South Africa,

Our pain has linked us
from Manenberg to Soweto (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 12).

as well as with black people globally,

I share the pain of my black brother
and a mother in a Harlem ghetto
with that of a soul brother in Notting Hill (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 12).

At times Matthews pushed his identification with the suffering of Africans to the point of imagining that he personally experienced their oppression, such as when, writing about influx control, he rhetorically asked of "the white man":

can he feel my pain when his laws
tear my wife and child from my side
and I am forced to work a thousand miles away?...

is he with me in the loneliness
of my bed in the bachelor barracks (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 9).

In Matthews' Black Consciousness poetry there is a clear-cut opposition between black and white — of oppressor versus oppressed and persecutors against the dispossessed. He continually contrasts black poverty, suffering and rightlessness with white opulence, hypocrisy and lack of compassion, at one point describing South Africa as

... my fair land a'dying of the stench
of valleys of plenty (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 7; see also Matthews and Thomas 1972: 20, 21 and 29 for examples of explicit contrasts being made.)

Although he mainly focused on anti-apartheid themes such as the human toll of influx control, forced removals, immorality legislation, police brutality, deaths in detention and the iniquitous effects of "sad, sick segregation" (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 55), Matthews also wrote of colonial dispossession and economic exploitation:

the fields that were ours
our cattle can no longer graze
and like the cattle we are herded
to starve on barren soil

we die in the earth's depth
to fill his coffer with gold
his lust for shiny pebbles
outweighs his concern for our lives (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 5).

Matthews lashed out at whites in general, at one point crying out in anguish:

White South Africa
you are mutilating my soul (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 40).

And he made no apology for his heavy-handed excoriation of white South Africa, stating in the introduction to *Cry Rage!* that it was his intention to "show contempt for white man's two-faced morality" (Matthews and Thomas 1972: Introduction, 14). He thus had little compunction cursing them,

Goddam them!
They know what they've done (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 28)

passing judgements of the sort that

the word of the white man
has the value of dirt (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 5)

or dismissing whites with contempt:

... and white man
should you die
i won't even
laugh or cry ...
to waste on
you as much
as a sigh (Matthews 1974: 19).

He even threatened whites with violent revenge:

rage as sharp as a blade
to cut and slash
and spill blood
for only blood can appease
the blood spilled
over three hundred years (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 65).

Some of Matthews' choicest invective was reserved for liberal whites whom he had no hesitation in lumping with the broader racist establishment. In one angry outburst he wrote:

... the hypocrisy of your pious double-talk
of sharing my pain and plight sickens me
white man
get lost and go screw yourself
you have long-gone lost your soul (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 64; see also
Matthews and Thomas 1972: 6, 7, 50 and "Liberal Student Crap!", 33 for the
expression of similar sentiments.).

In these instances, Matthews' anger, it needs to be pointed out, was directed at those liberal whites who wanted the best of both worlds, of dissociating themselves from apartheid yet continuing to benefit from it. He does salute that tiny minority of white people who were prepared to make personal sacrifices in their stand against apartheid. He thus paid homage to the reverend Bernard Wrankmore:

that priest upon the hill
who fasted for freedom (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 31)¹⁴

and to the University of Cape Town students who were beaten by police when they protested against apartheid education on the steps of the St. Georges Cathedral in the centre of Cape Town in 1972 (Matthews and Thomas, 1972: 35).

In accordance with Black Consciousness principles Matthews was scathing not only of black opportunists and collaborators who sought to profit from apartheid, but also of black — and by implication especially Coloured peoples' — assimilationist aspirations which he saw as a betrayal of their black heritage:

white syphilisation
taints blacks
makes them
carbon copies ...
the women
faces smeared
skin bleached
hair straightened

wake up
black fools! (Matthews 1974: 29; see also Matthews and Thomas 1972: 48).

In the same vein he decried what he regarded as subservient behaviour on the part of black people. On the only occasion he used the term "Coloured" in a normative sense in his poetry, Matthews upbraided participants in the coon carnival:

Coloured folks garish in coon garb
Sing and dance in the hot sun
Their faces smeared a fool's mask
Happy New Year, my baas, a drunken shout
To whites who applaud and approve
Their annual act of debasement (Matthews and Thomas, 1972: 51).

This represents a significant about-face for Matthews who had been co-owner of the prominent coon troupe, the Ragtime Millionaires during the 1960s (Willemsse 2000b 15).¹⁵

Because of his stress on black unity, in only three instances did Matthews make explicit racial distinctions between black people in this poetry. (See Matthews and Thomas 1972: 52 for the one occasion where he used "black and brown" and *ibid.* 51, 59 for the two instances in which he used the term Coloured.) He, however, freely made such distinctions indirectly, through the use of place names or by mentioning the different forms of oppression apartheid visited upon different sectors of the black population. References to the people of Illinge, Dimbaza, Sada and Limehill¹⁶ or to suffering inflicted by the pass laws signalled that he was writing about Africans (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 6, 7, 8, 9, 58) whereas Manenberg, Heideveld and Lavistown and urban forced removals were signifiers for the Coloured community (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 16, 17, 18,

19, 23, 24). On the second of the two occasions in which he used the term "Coloured", it was with reference to the race classification system and he put the word in capitals to indicate that this was not his wording but official terminology (Matthews and Thomas 1972: 59).

Although Black Consciousness ideology strongly tended toward a Manichean view of South African society, it nevertheless recognised the existence of racial and ethnic differences within the black population, most notably through its definition of the black community as consisting of Africans, Coloureds and Indians (Biko 1978: 35–38, 52; Fatton 1986: 32; Pityana *et al.* 1991: 104). The editorial of the September 1970 issue of *SASO Newsletter*, explaining the movement's understanding of the term "black" and urging solidarity amongst all those racially discriminated against, proclaimed:

By all means be proud of your Indian heritage or your African culture but make sure that in looking around for somebody to kick at, you choose the fellow who is sitting on your neck. He may not be as easily accessible as your black brother but he *is* the source of your discomfort.

Being a member of a minority group that was generally characterised as occupying an intermediate position in the South African racial hierarchy and in which racial characteristics were an important determinant of social status, Matthews was sensitive to these differences. While he at no point in his poetry tried to explain or deconstruct his own identity as Coloured or even made explicit reference to it, Matthews all his life nevertheless regarded himself as Coloured and his adherence to Black Consciousness did not cause him to reject this identification (Matthews 2002).

In Matthews' strongly autobiographical novel, *The Party is Over* — written largely in the 1960s, published in German in 1986, then in English in South Africa only in 1997 and described by Hein Willemsse as "reality disguised as fiction" — the central character, David Patterson, struggles with the frustrations of being a Coloured writer and the expectations placed on black artists.¹⁷ At one point Patterson declares, "I can't really be classified as a Black African writer." When asked, "Why not?" he replies:

Let me put it this way: I don't come from a tribal background, neither do I speak an indigenous language. I'm not white, but I am not African either." David fell silent. It would be a waste of time to explain to these misguided people that he sometimes felt that the Coloureds had become the new lost tribe of Israel (Matthews 1997: 62).

In an earlier draft published in the mid-1980s Matthews added the following passage to Patterson's explanation:

I can't truthfully say that my soul is one with that of Africa. There is a gulf between me and the (African) ... Culturally my outlook is most certainly European ... Racially, it's the African who pushes me aside, labelling me as Ama-Bushman (Matthews 1985: 7).

Interviewed in 1999 Matthews made it clear that "I have no problem being Coloured, but it is not an issue, unless its taken in a bantustan approach ... We shouldn't be treated differently." (Matthews 2000: 45) For Matthews there was no real inconsistency in him embracing Black Consciousness yet regarding himself as Coloured. In a 1998 newspaper article in which he reflected on the nature of Coloured identity as well as the history and aspirations of this community, he explains that

For those who have absorbed the policy of Black Consciousness, the acceptance of being coloured and black is not as contradictory as it might appear, because being black does not mean rejecting being coloured. Being black is part of their political stance — a stance they still feel necessary now — and does not exclude them from their place in coloured ranks. (*Cape Argus*, 16 February 1998).

It is clear that Matthews, in consonance with the assumptions that informed both Black Consciousness thinking as well as the world view of the working class community with which he identified, held an essentialised notion of race and Coloured identity. Though clearly racial, this outlook was not racist and was ameliorated by a pragmatic approach to racial identity in the sphere of politics.

It is ironic that at the point that one would have expected his most wrathful and anguished outburst — during and immediately after the 1976 revolt when the anger of black South Africans reached unprecedented heights — Matthews' next offering consisted of a collection of pensive, introspective poems. The incongruously titled *Pass Me a Meatball, Jones*¹⁸ was written during his detention in solitary confinement in Victor Verster prison in Paarl between September and December 1976. In this volume there is no explicit social commentary and no ranting against the system but an intensely personal evocation of the loneliness, fear and despair that Matthews experienced during his imprisonment. Dominated by a list of poem titles of the sort, "the day has died on me", "death dew is settling upon me" and "greyness infiltrated my being" (Matthews 1977: 1, 5, 35)¹⁹ and confirming his despondency,

my spirit is shredded as a
wind-ripped cloud (Matthews 1977: 39),

this sombre collection is concerned with Matthews' desolate prison experience as the following typical extracts demonstrate:

death pitched camp
in my heart
its coldness coursing veins
freezes every orifice ...
fear, a snake
wrapped around my throat
make my eyes cockroach
at the blocking of breath ...
foetus-fold i lay
fearful of night's
torn twisted thoughts (Matthews 1977: 11, 37, 41).²⁰

By the time of the appearance in 1981 of his next volume of poetry *No Time for Dreams*, which does contain social and political commentary, Matthews' "raging" had subsided considerably and was replaced by a more controlled, and at times suppressed, anger.²¹ Also, the emphasis on black solidarity was supplanted by an inclusive, non-racial outlook more accommodating of progressive whites. This more mellow and considered stance shines through most clearly in the final poem of this collection in which Matthews appears to disavow Black Consciousness ideology:

Freedom is not the colour of my
black skin ...
freedom coloured by blackness is
a dream
There is no time for dreams (Matthews 1981: 62).

He was prepared to acknowledge that

the blood that will bring
about freedom
is an offering from the bodies
of the many freedom fighters
believers in the togetherness of people
and not the colour of their skin (Matthews 1981: 62).

It is apparent that by the early 1980s Matthews had moved beyond Black Consciousness thinking and embraced a more inclusive ideology that, amongst other things, recognised the valuable role that progressive whites could play in the struggle for freedom. *No Time for Dreams* reflected the internal resistance movement's swing away from the binarism of Black Consciousness, after the movement had been crushed by a spate of bannings and arrests in the aftermath of the Soweto revolt, towards the non-racial democratic ethos of the 1980s. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the re-emergence of grassroots organisation, a burgeoning labour movement, an intermittent urban guerrilla campaign, sustained popular protest and the revival of the African National Congress' (ANC) influence in the internal opposition to apartheid. A growing number of former Black Consciousness adherents turned their backs on the philosophy of black assertiveness and embraced the non-racial position of the ANC enshrined in the Freedom Charter adopted in 1955. This nascent mass movement was driven by a new generation of younger, energetic political activists, many of whom regarded themselves as Marxists. And in accordance with Marxist principles they eschewed ethnic or racial identifications in favour of class solidarity and sought to mobilise the masses against both racial and capitalist oppression. Matthews was influenced by this ideological reorientation and participated in it, serving as he did on the first editorial board of *Grassroots*²², a community newspaper emblematic of this new outlook (van Kessel 2000: 324).

The significance of Matthews' Black Consciousness poetry is that it heralded the growing acceptance of ideas of black solidarity within the Coloured community

during the latter part of the 1970s and helped to coax this tendency on its way. It was also a harbinger of the popular fury of the post-Soweto era that periodically boiled over into mass protests and rioting. While the number of Black Consciousness activists in the Coloured community remained small, its ideological impact, on the youth in particular, was considerable (Hirson 1979: 221–22; Messina 1995b: 124–25, 130–31). Much of the political turmoil in Coloured townships and educational institutions during the second half of the 1970s was informed by Black Consciousness thinking, albeit usually in inchoate, rudimentary ways. For many Coloured people, especially amongst the younger, newly politicised cohorts that provided the main impetus behind the protest movement, exposure to Black Consciousness philosophy, even at the simplest level of sloganeering that “Black is Beautiful”, raised questions about Coloured identity, its significance, legitimacy and the implications of espousing it.

But as the example of Matthews demonstrates, for most at the time embracing Black Consciousness did not necessarily entail the rejection of Coloured identity. For the majority during the 1970s Colouredness was as yet too solid a social reality to be dismissed as a mere white, ruling class invention, although its use as a means of dividing the black population was clearly recognised. Accepting the tenets of Black Consciousness did, however, mean consciously displacing Colouredness from its pedestal as their sole or primary social identity to a secondary status, if only in the arena of politics or for symbolic reasons. For many politicised Coloured people, most notably those who were to become active in the mass democratic movement of the 1980s, this was a step towards the renunciation of all racial affiliations and the embracement of national, class-based or universalist ideologies. The idealistic denial of the existence of racial identities amongst the majority of black South Africans and the Coloured rejectionism to which this trend gave rise, however, flew in the face of social reality. As *South* columnist Sylvia Vollenhoven commented on contemplating the charade of non-racism in the democratic movement of the 1980s: “I heard so much talk of non-racialism and saw so little evidence Through it all there has always been a part of me that felt like the child in the crowd who saw no new clothes, only a fat, foolish, naked emperor.” (*South* 13 June 1991) Although Matthews was influenced by the non-racial ethos of the 1980s anti-apartheid movement, his refusal to renounce his identity as Coloured speaks of a pragmatism and a rootedness in Coloured working class life that would not allow him to ignore the salience of race in the daily experience of South Africans, and Coloured people in particular.

Notes

1. There is an extensive literature on the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. Useful sources include Gerhart 1978; Fatton 1986; Pityana *et al.* 1991; Lodge 1983: 321–62; Marx 1992: 32–105. See also Biko 1978.
2. The earliest example of a purist non-racial stance within the Coloured community is that exhibited in the early 1950s by a handful of ultra-left Trotskyist intellectuals grouped within

- the Forum Club, a remnant of the Fourth International Organisation of South Africa (Adhikari 2002: 194–95; Alexander 1979: 112–13).
3. As one astute observer remarked, “The politics of a relatively quiet Mitchell’s Plain is not the politics of a burning Spine Road” (*South* 13 June, 1991). Spine Road, one of the main thoroughfares in Mitchell’s Plain, a sprawling set of Coloured working class housing estates of more than half a million people, was a favoured place for activists to erect barricades of burning tyres. For an example of a façade of Coloured rejectionism being maintained for pragmatic political reasons see Adhikari 2000: 352–53.
 4. For studies of the Black Consciousness movement in the Coloured community see Messina 1995a and 1995b: 115–40.
 5. *New Age*, published between 1954 and 1962, was the successor to the *Guardian*. It was the unofficial mouthpiece of the Congress Movement and of the banned Communist Party. For further information on *New Age* see Zug, 2000: 129–39, 153–57.
 6. A transcript of this interview is available in the African Studies Library, University of Cape Town.
 7. The main anthologies of the 1960s and 1970s include Rive 1963; Rive 1964; Komey and Mphahlele 1964; Moore 1971; Gray 1974; Marquard 1978.
 8. *Azikwelwa* was first published in 1958 in *Africa South*, 3(1): 118–123 and *The park* in 1962 in *Presence Africaine*, 16(44): 95–105. These and other works have been translated into Swedish, German and Dutch. For a comprehensive list of Matthews’ outputs see Willemse 2000a: 133–137. See also Matthews, J. 1983 for these and other short stories.
 9. Matthews attests that by the mid-1980s “All in all BLAC produced nine books and three broadsheets before it was forced to close because of lack of funds brought about by pressure from the state” (Matthews 2000: 107).
 10. In 1974 Matthews reflected on this past:

could i forget my past
 where violence sprouted wild as weeds
 and the blades of grass we pluck
 to stab and jab, cut and slash ...
 i chewed the weed of violence
 washed it down with wine. (Matthews 1974: 45).
 11. Writing in 1982 Cornwell still regarded Matthews’ Black Consciousness poetry as “yet unmatched in polemical intensity” (1982: 184).
 12. *Black Voices Shout!* was banned within three weeks of its appearance, leaving the straightened Matthews with a large printer’s account and no means of recouping his outlay. The volume was republished under the same title by Troubadour Books, Austin in 1975.
 13. Matthews used this as the sub-title of his next volume of poetry (Matthews 1977). See also Matthews 1988: 6; Matthews 1981: back cover; and Jaffer 2000: 114.
 14. On 19 August 1971 Wrankmore, an Anglican chaplain, started a forty day fast at the Muslim shrine, or kramat, on Signal Hill to publicise his call for a judicial enquiry into the death in detention of Imam Haron two years earlier. By the time he broke his fast sixty-seven days later the National Party government still refused to consider his request but Wrankmore had succeeded in attracting international attention to the abuse and torture of political prisoners in South African jails. For further detail on Wrankmore see *Cape Times*, 15 February 2002.
 15. Matthews explains that he had in the meantime become much more politicised (Matthews 2002).
 16. These were rural resettlement camps set up by the apartheid government for those Africans “endorsed out” of white South Africa. Lacking any opportunities for economic activity or the most basic social services, and filled by those people whose labour was not needed in the formal economy — women, children and the elderly — these were places of despair infamous for their high infant mortality rates. In *Cry Rage!*: 8, Matthews wrote:

The people of Limehill and Dimbaza
like those of Sada and Illinge
are harvesting crops of crosses
the only fruit the land will bear
with the fields of their village
fertilised by the bodies of children
and the bones of the ancient ones.

17. Hein Willemse's characterisation is clearly justified and Matthews admits that "the writing of it was a form of catharsis". Even more central to the novel than the issues of personal and social identity discussed here is Patterson and Matthews' attempts to come to terms with their broken marriages (Clarke and Matthews 2000: 47; Jaffer 2000: 122; Willemse 2000b: 14).
18. Unlike his other collections of poems where the title echoes one or other significant line from the book, this collection contains no allusion, literal or figurative, to a meatball or Jones. The title derives from an "in-joke" between Matthews and fellow detainee, Peter Jones. Inmates, who had recently won a legal battle for the right to buy foodstuff from outside, pooled their money to purchase essentials. Jones used this opportunity to indulge his predilection for meatballs (Matthews 2002). This volume was republished in 2001 as *Poems from a Prison Cell*, Cape Town: Realities.
19. For other poems describing his arrest and incarceration see "Hot pot" issued in Cape Town in 1979 by the Community Arts Project. This pamphlet is available at the African Studies Library, University of Cape Town.
20. Lest this description create a false impression, it needs to be said that some of the poems testify to Matthews' resilience under adversity. See Jeremy Cronin's "Foreword" in Matthews, 2001: 7-8.
21. In one of the poems in this collection Matthews writes of his struggle to contain his anger:

i close my eyes
as my rage flares inside
and murmurs softly; ...
the calmness of my voice covers
my pain. (Matthews 1981: 18).
22. Published throughout the 1980s in the Western Cape and aimed at both Coloured and African readers, *Grassroots* was a community newspaper that not only pioneered a new brand of media activism but was also integral to the regeneration of the anti-apartheid movement in the region.

References

- Adhikari, M. 2000. "'You have the right to know': *South*, 1987-1994" in Switzer and Adhikari, 2000.
- Adhikari, M. 2002. "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa". Doctoral thesis, University of Cape Town.
- Alexander, N. 1979. *One Azania One Nation: The National Question in South Africa*. London: Zed Press.
- Biko, S. 1978. *I Write What I Like*. London: Bowerdean Press.
- Clarke, P. and Matthews, J. 2000. "Living Through a Chunk of the Century: Peter Clarke and James Matthews in Conversation with Kayzuran Jaffer and Hein Willemse, 2/5/1999", in Willemse (ed) 2000a.

- Cornwell, G. 1982. "James Matthews' 'Protest Songs': The Problem of Evaluation", in Chapman, M. (ed), *Soweto Poetry*. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill.
- Fatton, R. 1986. *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gerhart, G. 1978. *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gray, S. (ed). 1974. *On the Edge of the World: Southern African Stories of the Seventies*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker.
- Hirson, B. 1979. *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?* London: Zed Press.
- Jaffer, K. 2000. "'Being Coloured is a State of Mind' or the Complexities of Identity, Selfhood and Freedom in the Writing of James Matthews", in Willemse (ed) 2000a.
- Komey E. and Mphahlele, E. (eds). 1964. *Modern African Stories*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Lodge, T. 1983. *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Marquard, J. (ed). 1978. *A Century of South African Short Stories*, Johannesburg: Ad Donker.
- Matthews J. and Thomas, G. 1972. *Cry Rage!* Johannesburg: Spro-cas Publications.
- Matthews, J. (ed). 1974. *Black Voices Shout!: An Anthology of Poetry*. Cape Town: BLAC.
- Matthews, J. 1977. *Pass Me a Meatball, Jones: A Gathering of Feelings*. Cape Town: BLAC.
- Matthews, J. 1981. *No Time for Dreams*. Cape Town: BLAC.
- Matthews, J. 1983. *The Park and Other Stories*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Matthews, J. 1985. "An Autumn Afternoon: An Excerpt from an Unpublished Novel", in *Realities*. Cape Town: BLAC.
- Matthews, J. 1997. *The Party is Over*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- Matthews, J. 2000. "The Pictures Swirling in my Mind", in Willemse (ed) 2000a.
- Matthews, J. 2001. *Poems from a Prison Cell*. Cape Town: Realities.
- Marx, A. 1992. *Lessons of Struggle: South African Internal Opposition, 1960-1990*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Messina, E. 1995a. "Swartbewustheid in die Wes-Kaap, 1970-1984". Doctoral thesis, University of the Western Cape.
- Messina, E. 1995b. "Kleurlinge is ook Swart: Swartbewustheid in die Wes-Kaap tot 1977". *Kronos* 15: 115-40.
- Moore, J. (ed). 1971. *Cry Sorrow, Cry Joy!: Selections from Contemporary African Writers*. New York: Friendship Press.

Mzamane, M. 1991. "Cultivating a People's Voice in the Criticism of South African Literature". *Staffrider*, 9(3).

Mzamane M. and Howarth, D. 2000. "Representing Blackness: Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement". in Switzer and Adhikari (eds), 2000.

Pityana, B., Ramphela, M., Mpumlwana, M. and Wilson, L. (eds). 1991. *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, Cape Town: David Philip.

Rive, R. (ed). 1963. *Quartet: New Voices from South Africa*. New York: Crown.

Rive, R. (ed). 1964. *Modern African Prose: An Anthology*. London: Heinemann.

Rive, R. 1981. *Writing Black*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Serote, M. 1976. "Panel on Contemporary South African poetry". *Issue* 6(1).

Switzer L. and Adhikari, M. (eds). 2000. *South Africa's Resistance Press: Alternative Voices in the Last Generation under Apartheid*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

van Kessel, I. "Grassroots: From Washing Lines to Utopia", in Switzer and Adhikari (eds). 2000.

Willemse, H. (ed). 2000a. *More than Brothers: Peter Clarke and James Matthews at Seventy*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Willemse, 2000b. "More than Brothers: Peter Clarke and James Matthews at Seventy", in Willemse (ed). 2000a.

Zug, J. 2000. "'Far from Dead': The Final Years of the *Guardian*, 1960-1963", in Switzer and Adhikari (eds), 2000.

Newspapers and periodicals

Cape Argus 16 February 1998

SASO Newsletter September 1970

South 13 June 1991

Interviews

Matthews, J. 1988. Interviewed by Paul Boobyer, 8 November 1988.

Matthews, J. 2002. Interviewed by Mohamed Adhikari, 18 June 2002.

Copyright of African Studies is the property of Carfax Publishing Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.