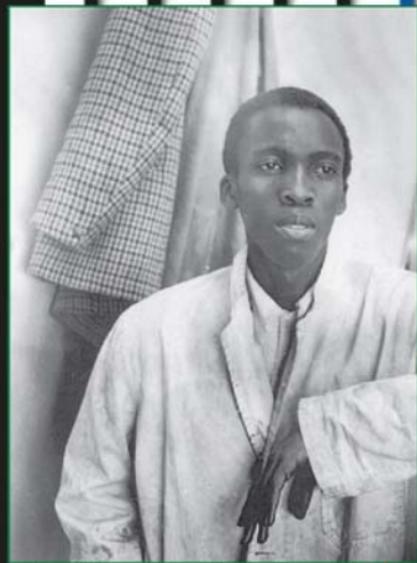


Cross/Cultures 81

Still Beating the Drum
Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi



Edited by

Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner

Still Beating the Drum

Cross
cultures

Readings in the Post / Colonial
Literatures in English

81

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Still Beating the Drum

Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi

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Preface

THE IMPETUS BEHIND THIS BOOK for the editors was to focus a full-length study on Lewis Nkosi, the South African writer exiled from South Africa for thirty years. One of the few surviving *Drum* journalists of Sophiatown of the 1950s, Nkosi has been a constant, if faintly heard, voice in literary discussions, both in South Africa and abroad. As a writer, he has achieved that brave crossover from critical to creative writing, the results of which then stand to be judged by his own exacting standards. His oeuvre is unusually diverse, including as it does plays, novels, short stories, critical essays and reviews, poetry, and even a libretto. For these individual reasons, combined with a sense that there is at present in South Africa a nostalgic mood that harks back to the *Drum* days, and even the Sophiatown days (witness the recent film on this era, plus Lionel Rogosin's book on the making of *Come Back Africa*, a film whose script was co-written by Nkosi), it appears that Lewis Nkosi's time might finally have arrived locally.

In an attempt to provide both a critical perspective on Nkosi and a source-book useful to researchers, the present volume contains both commissioned chapters by academics currently engaged with Nkosi's work and a section that reprints important critical essays by Nkosi, together with an extensive bibliography and timeline for this writer. These last two sections gather together, as in a jigsaw puzzle, pieces of Nkosi's prolific writing-output; given the scattered and ephemeral nature of many of his publications over four decades and as many continents, this has been a daunting yet rewarding task.

Still Beating the Drum is not proffered as the definitive conspectus on Lewis Nkosi, but as a first step in assessing the importance of his writing over a good number of years against the tectonic shifts in South African political history – his is a voice that has been critical and criticized; it has not always been an easy one to listen to, but the fact that it has endured and continues to speak gives the literary critic ample scope for a timely consideration of what he has had to say to us collectively.



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Introduction

Lewis Nkosi – Inscriptions

THE FACT THAT THIS VOLUME of essays on Lewis Nkosi will appear shortly after a proposed grand reunion of *Drum* writers in Johannesburg is partly coincidental. Our aim is not to produce a commemorative volume, nor to honour a senior member of South African letters. Rather, what we hope to do in this collection is to draw attention to a distinctive, dissonant but always acutely perceptive critic and creative writer, who has been largely heard only in brief ‘soundbites’ – for instance, the trenchant shebeen voice in Rogosin’s *Come Back Africa*, and the sharp caveat on “Fiction by Black South Africans” in his early collection of essays (1965); his short stories scattered like an archipelago across numerous journals, his hard-to-find poems, his work as a radio interviewer buried in archives, and his letters, which remain uncollected. This volume is the first work to gather together commissioned articles along with selections from Nkosi’s literary criticism, previously unpublished interviews, and a bibliography of his writings. Our intention is to provide both a resource and a critical intervention, another inscription on the emergent reworking of what constitutes South African letters, such as that evident in the recent collection of essays in *Poetics Today* (2001).

Critical Voices

A feature of the South African literary scene has long been its fragmented nature – because of the long history of censorship, of political oppression leading to exile, and the centrifugal and diverse energies of a linguistically and culturally plural set of traditions. The weight of the recent history of apartheid has smothered any possibility of a unified South African voice. Among a plethora of voices, nevertheless, Lewis Nkosi’s voice has always been distinctive. A direct approach, sometimes painfully direct, has been part of that voice – in the essay by Nkosi mentioned above (“Fiction by Black South Africans”), for example, his uncompromising comments show his

loyalty to form and to the stringent demands of a modernist conception of art in which sloppiness and a shortage of imagination had no part:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa [...] To put it bluntly nothing stands behind the fiction of black South Africans – no tradition, whether indigenous, such as energises *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* or alien, such as is most significantly at work in the latest fiction by Camara Laye [...] black South Africans write, of course, as though Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce had never lived. Is it not possible, without sounding either superior or unpatriotic, to ask how a fiction written by people conversant with the history of the development of modern fiction can reveal no awareness of the existence of *Notes from Underground*, *Ulysses* or such similar works? For make no mistake about this, it is not an instance of writers who have assimilated so well the lessons of the masters that they are able to conceal what they have learned; rather it is an example of a group of writers operating blindly in a vacuum.¹

The young Nkosi's comments on art are quoted at length because they show what was to become his characteristic style: he does not bow to the contingent, neither is he unmindful of the challenges to the world of letters posed by the apartheid state. Nkosi's harsh remarks predate the debate on the limitations of black South African writing which Njabulo Ndebele and then Albie Sachs returned to in 1984 and 1990. Nkosi's early comments were long remembered as being in some way disloyal to the black cause, as Don Mattera points out in a brief, caustic article in *New Nation* on the 1991 *New Nation* Writers Conference, termed, ironically, "At the Feet of the Nomad Gods." Shava's aside in his book *A People's Voice* (1989), that while "Nkosi is concerned with the problem of how to write, a great number of black South African writers are concerned with what to write about,"² is in the same vein. Almost thirty years later after Nkosi's seminal essay was published, his stance at the 1991 *New Nation* conference reveals his continuing commitment to the – for him – vital issues of form and the landscape of the imagination. On what he calls "the stranglehold of naturalism" in which black South African writing was still caught in the early 1990s he offers the following:

¹ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965): 131.

² Piniel Viriri Shava, *A People's Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Zed, 1989): 152.

The answer may lie in all the things we don't want to talk about: a poor and distorted literary education, a political criticism which favours mediocrity over quality, and exclusion from all those cultural and social amenities which fertilise the mind and promote confidence and control over literary skills.³

Nkosi's love affair with the work of Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce and high modernism meant that he was able to some extent to withstand the crippling pressures of the consciousness of 'Otherness', what Achille Mbembe calls "the burden of the metaphysics of difference (*nativism*)."⁴ Likewise, he has always been wary, in his critical work, of the other "dead-end," termed by Mbembe "*Afro-radicalism*, with its baggage of instrumentalism and political opportunism."⁵ Nkosi has positioned himself, somewhat iconoclastically, outside both these positions; and he has not embraced the position of the nationalist. As an outsider figure, he is not by inclination a party follower. In a recent paper "The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic" (reprinted in this volume), he runs through various definitions of 'nation' and the concomitant links with a 'national culture' and notes: "Whether or not it is desirable for literary texts to be asked to fulfil such a programme, our literature has never performed this function."⁶ Nationalism, especially "an exclusive nationalism that is alternately cosy and corseted,"⁷ is a doubtful entity in Nkosi's writing, one to be questioned carefully. He questions the possibility of ever reaching a unified notion of 'nation' in South Africa:

The absence of any signified that could correspond to the idea of the nation is our almost generic condition, our particular affliction, bequeathed to us by an *insolite* history of racial division and racial oppression.⁸

While Nkosi, then, does not espouse a nationalist position, he is adept at illustrating the national South African condition, particularly in his creative writing – see, for example, his 1964 play, *The Rhythm of Violence*, which deals with inter-racial infatuation and revolution in Johannesburg during

³ Lewis Nkosi, "Land – Metaphor for literary culture," *New Nation* (13 December 1991): 8.

⁴ Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 240.

⁵ Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," 240.

⁶ Lewis Nkosi, "The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic," *Journal of Literary Studies* 18.3–4 (2002): 246.

⁷ Nkosi, "The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic," 252.

⁸ "The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic," 251.

apartheid, and forty years later his 2002 novel *Underground People*, which looks wryly at the double dealings of those involved in the national struggle.

At times appearing to relish controversy, Lewis Nkosi's influence as both a literary critic and a writer of fiction has been profound, as numerous reviews, references to his work and interchanges with his contemporaries confirm. After his departure from South Africa and his time at Harvard, he was able to gain access to a world of letters and a public outside the country. This, together with his critical opinions of South African literary creativity, has perhaps been the reason for the imbalance between his critical recognition within the country as opposed to beyond the country's borders, including the rest of the continent (see Lucy Graham's essay in this volume). Within South Africa, whatever critical notice Nkosi has received has been generally cautious; scattered, not sustained.

He has, however, found mention in most important critical analyses of South African literature to have emerged since the 1980s, as the following examples indicate. His opinion that, in black South African writing, "autobiography is on the whole better than fiction" is mentioned alongside James Olney's pronouncements on autobiography.⁹ Mbulelo Mzamane, in a paper given at the important conference on Literature and Society in South Africa at the University of York in 1981, cites Nkosi as a writer who, along with Can Themba, Casey Motsisi and others, uses both "traditional and Western literary forms of composition."¹⁰ He is listed by Njabulo Ndebele, in an address at the 1987 CASA conference in Amsterdam, as having been one of the South African writers in exile to have produced "outstanding scholarly works."¹¹ David Attwell refers to Nkosi's frequently quoted essay "Fiction by Black South African Writers," noting that the argument it raises predates by almost twenty years Ndebele's reprise of the debate in 1994; and, further, that it prompted one of J.M. Coetzee's essays on Alex La Guma, "written in response to Nkosi."¹² In the same essay, Attwell accuses Nkosi of making "a red-eyed remark" (118) on one of Gordimer's novels with which he disagrees

⁹ Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings & Don MacLennan, *Perspectives on South African Fiction* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1980): 122.

¹⁰ Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, "The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature," in *Literature and Society in South Africa*, ed. Landeg White & Tim Couzens (Pinelands, S.A.: Maskew Miller Longman, 1984): 147.

¹¹ Njabulo Ndebele, "The Challenges of the Written Word," in *Culture in Another South Africa*, ed. Willem Campschreur & Joost Divendal (London: Zed, 1989): 26.

¹² David Attwell, "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee," in *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*, ed. Martin Trump (Braamfontein, S.A.: Ravan, 1990): 97.

but whose partial relevance he acknowledges. Michael Chapman's influential *Southern African Literatures* (1996) draws on Nkosi a few times. He recalls Nkosi's forthright opinion of the character of the Revd Khumalo in Paton's classic; and he contrasts Nkosi's *Home and Exile* (1965) and *Tasks and Masks* (1981) with Mphahlele's *The African Image* (1962) and *Voices in the Whirlwind* (1968), judging the latter's work to be developing a "broader cultural project" as opposed to Nkosi's more subjective and fragmentary style.¹³ Nkosi's essay on postmodernism appears in Jolly and Attridge's important collection *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995* (1998).

Generally speaking, beyond South Africa Nkosi's reception has been more enthusiastic and sustained, though at times it also has been mixed. Neil Lazarus, for example, writing in the *Southern Review*, has defined Nkosi's writing on Negritude as remaining "reconstructive and empirical in temper, never speculative," unable to engage with "the domain of the *phenomenological*" and thus become "genuinely interpretive."¹⁴ Nkosi's interpretation of Negritude is, in our view, nothing if not 'speculative'. Grasping the notion of the irrational, as embedded in Negritude, Nkosi links it to the early modern artist's desire to encounter, through the works of Freud and Jung, the world of the unconscious which provided access to "the authentic personality behind the careful surfaces of civilised life."¹⁵ Nkosi draws an analogy "between the riotous excesses of these movements at the beginning of the century and the equally turbulent birth of negritude as a gesture of rebellion against the stranglehold of Western culture."¹⁶ Similarly, Louise Bethlehem, writing in the issue of *Poetics Today* already referred to, reads Nkosi too narrowly in our view: she argues that despite Nkosi's critique of the kind of realism employed by Richard Rive, he shows a "conflictual adherence [...] to crucial presuppositions of the naïve realism he deplors."¹⁷ Nkosi is unfailingly critical of what he takes to be bad writing, not necessarily realism *per se* – hence his critique of Rive, yet approval of the early work of Alex La Guma, marred

¹³ Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1996): 245.

¹⁴ Neil Lazarus, "Measure and Unmeasure: The Antinomies of Lewis Nkosi," *Southern Review* 23.1 (1987): 113.

¹⁵ Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981): 20.

¹⁶ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 20.

¹⁷ Louise Bethlehem, "'A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger': The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture Under Apartheid," *Poetics Today* 22.2 (2001): 372.

only, according to Nkosi, by his persistent choice of the restrictive canvas of the short story.

Where Nkosi has attracted some of the sharpest criticism has been for what a few critics have called his sexism, even racial sexism. This allegation is primarily levelled at his fictional works, particularly *Mating Birds* (1986). Lazarus maintains that it is “undermined by [...] a virulent and structuring sexism.”¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., while complimenting the same novel for “confront[ing] boldly and imaginatively the strange interplay of bondage, desire and torture inherent in inter-racial sexual relationships within the South African prison house of apartheid,” nevertheless criticises the black protagonist’s slavish sexual obsession which detracts from any political critique within the novel.¹⁹ For Josephine Dodd, the work “reeks strongly of sweaty old male fantasy masquerading as literary sophistication.”²⁰ André Brink’s angry critique of *Mating Birds* maintains that the book is undermined by Nkosi’s “private pathology.”²¹ However, others have read this novel quite differently: Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) read *Mating Birds* as a struggle over the power of the word and pen in the apartheid world; Brian Worsfold (1996) interprets the novel as having at its heart “the sad state of European spirituality”;²² Lucy Graham (see her essay in this volume) finds Brink guilty in his own writing of some of the accusations he levels against Nkosi, and offers a reading of the novel as a modernist text which yields a complex symbolic enmeshment between race and sex. Nkosi, in the preface to the new edition of the novel in 2004, dismisses these critics by saying that “South African reviewers seemed disappointed that they were not getting another ‘township’ novel” of surfaces – rather, what he had wanted in *Mating Birds* was “the critique of the accursed doctrine [of apartheid] to emerge automatically out of the objective social relations between two individuals.”²³ In vintage style, Nkosi answers the critics who accuse him of being preoccupied

¹⁸ Neil Lazarus, “Measure and Unmeasure,” 116.

¹⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Power of Her Sex, the Power of Her Race,” *New York Times Book Review* (4 May 1986): 3.

²⁰ Josephine Dodd, “The South African Literary Establishment and the Textual Production of ‘Woman’: J.M. Coetzee and Lewis Nkosi,” *Current Writing* 2 (1990): 125–26.

²¹ André Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics: Lewis Nkosi’s *Mating Birds*,” *English in Africa* 19.1 (1992): 9.

²² Brian Worsfold, “Lewis Nkosi,” in *Twentieth Century Caribbean and Black African Writers: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Bernth Lindfors & Reinhard Sander (Detroit MI: Gale Research, 1996): 249.

²³ Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds* (1983; Cape Town: Kwela, 2004): 6.

with interracial sex by throwing out a defiant “why not?” (8). Whatever the case, the variety and range of possible interpretations speaks well for the complexity of *Mating Birds*, listed in the *New York Times* as one of the best 100 books published in 1986, and winner of the Macmillan International Silver Pen Prize (Macmillan/PEN Award) in 1987.

Beginnings

Despite the short time Lewis Nkosi spent at *Drum*, it remains a defining moment, a touchstone to which commentators return. The *Drum* era may have been, as Nick Visser termed it, a “renaissance that failed”;²⁴ nevertheless, it represents a time of intense production, and a flowering of a truly local black urban culture. Sophiatown was, as Ulf Hannerz reminds us, a conduit of energies that were both local and transatlantic; Sophiatown was a “global ecumene”²⁵ – interpreting American popular culture in a local idiom and in turn circulating the music of *King Kong* onto the stages of the London West End and thereby signalling it to the musical aficionados of New York. Nkosi takes with him from his *Drum* period the courage, the wit and the panache that marked the group.

What is frequently overlooked, however, is the apprenticeship of his earlier schooling in Eshowe and the brief period of his journalistic apprenticeship at *Ilanga lase Natal* [*Natal Sun*], where his mentors were the Dhlomo brothers, Herbert (1903–56) and Rolfes (1906–71), both editors of the paper at the time. The intellectual tradition that *Ilanga* itself represented sprang from J.L. Dube’s belief in the resistant and proactive power of the print media, expressed through an African language. Nkosi’s admiration for H.I.E. Dhlomo in particular is evident in the poem he wrote on the occasion of H.I.E.’s death (see the commentary piece on Lewis Nkosi’s poetry in Part One below) – recently, Nkosi reminisced, “When I was at high school everybody who knew H.I.E. Dhlomo called him simply ‘H.I.E.’. He was so iconic!”²⁶ What is clear from this formative period is that Nkosi could see himself as already existing within a strong regional tradition of black intellectuals, including the versatile Dhlomo brothers – who were both journalists and creative writers, shapers of public opinion – and the giant figure of the poet Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906–47). It is this time that also provides him with a

²⁴ Nick Visser, “South Africa: The Renaissance That Failed,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 9.1 (1976): 42–57.

²⁵ Ulf Hannerz, “Sophiatown: The View From Afar,” in *Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Barber (Oxford: James Currey, 1997): 166.

²⁶ Lewis Nkosi, email communication, 23 March 2004.

confident awareness of the imaginative and aesthetic strengths of forms such as praise poetry (*izibongo*) and other oral genres. Such an awareness enables him to appreciate the strengths of Amos Tutuola, writing in “the best tradition of the African oral idiom”²⁷ at a time when many of his African – in particular Nigerian – readers found his style embarrassing. This deep appreciation of the imaginative and aesthetic landscape of the genres of orality in the African and South African context, and his familiarity with modern texts (such as the poetry of B.W. Vilakazi) in his mother tongue of isiZulu, is what enables him to identify what he sees as “the only major weakness” in J.M. Coetzee’s seminal text *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988). As he puts it,

There is no way, for example, in which Coetzee can find answers to some of the questions he has been asking except by drawing upon the evidence of traditional oral literatures and contemporary writing of the indigenous populations – questions such as: Is the African landscape readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language?²⁸

Home and Exile

Paul Gilroy has claimed that

the problem of weighing the claims of national identity against other contrasting varieties of subjectivity and identification has a special place in the intellectual history of blacks in the west.²⁹

Lewis Nkosi, together with his fellow *Drum* writers, Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane and Arthur Maimane, can be said to exemplify this tension in the South African context. They took this desire to be part of a wider intellectual world with them into exile, a desire already apparent in Can Themba’s declamations of Shakespeare on the street corners of Sophiatown, Modisane’s playing of Brahms in his room in Gerty Street and Nkosi’s love of jazz and his early interest in modernism. All of the above were nourished, perhaps, by cosmopolitan Johannesburg of the 1950s and its bookshops (such as Vanguard), with their links to London, Moscow and New York. The excitement, energy and confidence in their own intellectual strengths and the

²⁷ Lewis Nkosi, “African Writers of Today,” *The Classic* 1.4 (1965): 57.

²⁸ Lewis Nkosi, “White Writing,” *Third World Quarterly* 11.1 (January 1989): 160. (Reprinted in this volume.)

²⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993): 30.

mark they were going to make on the world is caught in the exchange of letters between Nat Nakasa and Nkosi, as Nakasa (at that point in 1963 still based in Johannesburg) wrestled with the early issues of the magazine *The Classic*, while Nkosi corresponded with him from various points around the globe. Nkosi, based in London at the Transcription Centre in Norfolk Street, wrote to Nakasa telling him of his forthcoming schedules and planned interviews in various parts of Africa:

Dear Nat,

I should have written to you sooner, but things here are a bit hectic at the moment. The shipping line has only sent me a letter this week notifying me of the arrival of the *Classic*. Next week I should be in Paris on the first leg of a trip to several African countries where I am to do television interviews for National (American) Educational Television: these are to be with leading African writers and we start with Zeke and Senghor in Paris next week; then Kampala, Uganda, Nyasaland between August 14 and 15, and then Nigeria and Ghana. We should be in Nigeria and Ghana until the end of September.³⁰

Captured in this extract is the seed of Nkosi's sense of himself as a writer of Africa among other writers of the African continent, both anglophone and francophone. Nkosi, based, at this point in his career, with Dennis Duerden at the Transcription Centre, was able to carry through a crucial role as link and mediator with a variety of African writers and critics. The commitment to Nakasa and *The Classic* remained firm. In the same letter he tells Nakasa:

As for the distribution of the *Classic* I have arranged with two bookshops to take some copies – Better Books and Colletts. They are the best bookshops in town for avant-garde taste and off-beat writing which may include the *Classic* by definition.³¹

The sense of himself as primarily a South African writer is set within a widening circle of continental and global identity. The historic African Writers Conference at the University of Makerere, Kampala, in 1962 which Nkosi attended marked a new configuration of pan-African literary presence on the continent. Language issues were hammered out in the paper by Obi Wala, and the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo wrestled with the question of the writer's commitment to art versus political activism. At least one of Nkosi's interventions at this conference had to do with the role of the writer

³⁰ Lewis Nkosi, letter to Nat Nakasa. File 2, Nakasa Papers, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, 23 July 1963.

³¹ Lewis Nkosi, letter to Nat Nakasa, 1963.

(see the essay by Chris Wanjala in this volume) – his position urges an untrammelled role for the writer, which nevertheless is not without its seriousness. He is not in favour of icons, nor a regimentation of what is expected.

Nkosi's multiple loyalties took him in a number of directions simultaneously. Since he wrote from his London base for, among other publications, *Transition*, *The New African*, *The Guardian*, *Présence africaine*, *The New Statesman*, *Black Orpheus*, *The Spectator*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *New Society*, he was never able (or allowed, perhaps) to forget that he was a “native son.”³² But he did not allow that sense of a narrowly South African identity to prescribe his wider sense of himself as a writer and critic, loyal to language, not place – “for a writer language is everything,” he wrote in his preface to *The Transplanted Heart*.³³

Exile has, then, been a double-edged sword for Nkosi: though cut off physically from South Africa, he has had to make himself ‘at home’ in exile, make movement and displacement his friends – even sources of inspiration. Without this he might not have been the prolific writer he has proved to be. In a recent essay on the subject of “Exile as Fetish,” he acknowledges that this is the path he has had to tread:

In the rhetoric of exile discourse more is known about its traumas than about its pleasures, more about its physical anguish than its precarious rewards [...] there is a grey area of ambiguity where an insecure knot is tied between pleasure and unpleasure. This is a complex process of avowal and disavowal in which a fetish as substitute and compensation for an object feared lost is paralleled in the discourses of exile by an individual's attempt to find consolation in the pleasures afforded by *asylum* as the twin term and alternative of *mothercountry*.³⁴

Part of the ‘pleasure’ of exile for Nkosi has surely been the opportunities to engage with fellow African writers and critics, and with people of letters from a variety of literary milieux and locales. An early example of this can be seen in the series of interviews and talks which he conducted with the newly published writer Amos Tutuola; the founder of Penguin Books, Walter Allen; and Ulli Beier, editor of the Ibadan journal *Black Orpheus*. On one occasion, at the University of Ife, Nigeria, he and the young Wole Soyinka engaged the Ghanaian philosopher William Abraham on the subject of “the artistic obliga-

³² Lewis Nkosi, *The Transplanted Heart* (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope, 1975): vii.

³³ Nkosi, *The Transplanted Heart*, viii.

³⁴ Lewis Nkosi, “The Wandering Subject: Exile as ‘Fetish,’” in *Exile and Homecoming*, ed. Susan Arndt et al. (Berlin: Humboldt University, 2005).

tions of African authors.”³⁵ This early vigorous engagement with writers and critics – Nkosi’s name, for example, is rightly linked with that of James Baldwin, the black American writer with whom he had a strong relationship and held in high regard³⁶ – has become an established pattern. He has never become an isolated recluse, hugging exile. Rather, the eclectic links established soon after his *Drum* period have continued. He has on many occasions been a sought-after figure invited to speak at colloquia and conferences, valued as an astute critic of South African letters in particular. In recent years in Europe, to cite some examples, he has been invited to discuss South African literature on a panel organized by the Bibliothèque Nationale at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (2002), to do a reading of his work at the Humboldt University in Berlin (2003), and to give a paper at the “Exiles and Emigrés: South African Writers Writing Abroad” Festival in Cambridge, UK (2004). Moreover, the sense of Nkosi as a respected critic and writer confident within the domain of modern African writing has been sustained: he is more and more frequently asked to speak in South Africa – as, for example, in 2003 at the Durban “Time of the Writer” Festival, where he shared a platform with the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah, chaired by the Cameroonian critic and philosopher Achille Mbembe (see Section 14.2 in this volume for an edited transcript of this discussion).

A decade into the post-apartheid era, Nkosi remains based in Europe but visits South Africa frequently, a cosmopolitan figure, primarily at home in his writing. Even in a generation of exiles, in which movement (and sometimes debilitating stasis) became the norm, Nkosi’s trajectory has been remarkable: from its start in South Africa, it has included his stint as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard in 1960–61; London and the United Kingdom, his base for a decade as broadcaster, editor and writer; his subsequent academic career, which took him to Zambia, Poland and the USA; and currently his sojourn in active ‘retirement’ in Europe. Since the 1990s this trajectory has increasingly brought him back to South Africa for lecture visits, besides the frequent European and British engagements. Despite this nomadic existence, throughout a period of over forty years, Nkosi has maintained a steady and varied output. This has covered political journalism, drama, literary criticism, poetry, script-writing and fiction published in a variety of places, from established publishing houses like Longmans to little-known African publishers like Ethiope in Benin City; and in journals both narrowly literary and broadly political all

³⁵ Nkosi, “African Writers of Today,” 63.

³⁶ Ntongela Masilela, “The ‘Black Atlantic’ and African Modernity in South Africa,” *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1999): 94.

over the world. What has emerged, we argue, is the profile of a literary figure with accumulated critical gravitas.

As mentioned earlier, his long absence from South Africa during the apartheid years and the literary myopia imposed by the apartheid state on its citizens have meant that until recently he has been less known within South Africa than he is in other parts of Africa and Europe, his current home – an interesting example to cite in support of this point is that in the 1970s Nkosi's *Rhythm of Violence* was a set work in Nigerian schools, his critical and political essays were published there, and in East Africa his reputation as a key black intellectual was assured, whereas within South Africa his was a muted voice. Now, however, in the new millennium, his standing in his old home is strengthened with the publication of his novel *Underground People* (2002), a re-issue of his 1986 novel *Mating Birds* by Kwela (2004), and an anticipated third novel, *Mandela's Ego*, to be published in 2005. Together with his ongoing occasional critical pieces published locally (see "The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic" reproduced as Section 15.6 of this volume), Nkosi can be understood as a writer who has consistently written both creatively and critically. In an era when South Africa is positioned in a global and continental arena, Nkosi's chosen cosmopolitanism can now be viewed as normative, as opposed to wayward or idiosyncratic. His consistently independent stance, coupled with his demonstrable desire to publish and be a voice within South Africa at this time, should be a dynamic force in the ongoing shaping of literature and letters in the new era. The purpose of this book, then, is, in a sense, to reintroduce Lewis Nkosi, in all his facets, to academic scrutiny.



This book is divided into two parts, each containing a number of sections. Part One comprises academic pieces on Lewis Nkosi's work in various genres: The first section contains critical essays on Nkosi's work as a literary critic. This is followed by a section of essays on Nkosi as dramatist for the stage and radio, together with an introduction to his small corpus of poetry. The third section focuses on Nkosi as novelist and is accompanied by the South African Censors' Report on *Mating Birds*. Part Two is intended to serve as a resource for ongoing scholarship on Nkosi and is entitled "Lewis Nkosi in His Own Voice"; it contains a section with two hitherto unpublished recent interviews with Nkosi, and another with careful, re-edited selections from his seminal critical works – pieces chosen because we regard them as representative of the past and ongoing Nkosi oeuvre. Part Three contains a complete primary bibliography of his work, bringing together hitherto scat-

tered and ephemeral pieces across different media. This is a valuable resource, as a complete bibliography on Nkosi has not recently been attempted; in fact, Nkosi's peripatetic life together with his generosity in writing for many sources has scattered his more ephemeral columns and reviews like so many leaves in the wind. We have also, for those interested in tracing Nkosi's literary influence, included selected references to critical work on Nkosi. In an effort to trace the road travelled both physically and artistically by Nkosi, which, again given his extraordinary movement across the globe in his lifetime, has been a winding one, we have constructed a timeline which pulls together place, time and work.

The geographical range of the writers whose essays are included in this volume indicates the spread of interest in Nkosi scholarship at present, both in South Africa and abroad. Our intent in compiling this book is to foster yet more critical interest in one of South Africa's most talented thinkers and writers.



The first section of "Writing on Lewis Nkosi" explores his contribution as a literary critic. What emerges very clearly from each of the three essays in this section by Gagiano, Wanjala and Owomoyela is the range and the temporal sweep of his astute and erudite contributions to the changing debates that have raged from the late 1950s to the early years of the new millennium, and the selection from Nkosi's writing near the end of the volume attempts to provide some access to his long critical reach, and to what Annie Gagiano calls his "enduring contemporaneity" as a literary critic. Gagiano's essay explores, first, the consequences of exile for Nkosi's critical writing and argues that the early period of exile enabled him to establish a rich network of links with other African and African-American writers. She concludes that a key part of his critical role in exile was that he was able to embed South African and African literature within a wider, mainly English-speaking literary sphere. The second part of her essay is a robust discussion of Nkosi's major literary-critical contribution in terms of the literature of the continent, and in terms of South African literature. Here she is quite prepared to point out when Nkosi did not 'get it right' – for instance, when he dismissed Bessie Head's work and Modikwe Dikobe's *Marabi Dance*. She notes that his comments on Athol Fugard are both "sharp and devastatingly convincing" and, turning to his later work, points to his "marvellous sureness of touch" in his piece on Robinson Crusoe, in which he touches on the ability of the canonical texts of the colonizing culture to illuminate the perspectives of the colonized – something that he does quite some time before this became a major interest

of postcolonial theorists. Chris Wanjala's essay on Nkosi's early criticism, which is both critical and admiring, explores his tendency to despair of much of the writing of his fellow South Africans in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as witness, in particular, his harsh words on the writing of Richard Rive. Perhaps, Wanjala suggests, he was too eager to give African literature an identity "mapped by European societies." Nevertheless, Nkosi saw the need for both commitment and art, and for Wanjala this is an enduring and major contribution to the criticism of literature in Africa. Oyokan Owomoyela, like Wanjala, notes Nkosi's ironic stance and his ability to give his readers a devastatingly honest view of a particular gathering. Thus his comment on the historic 1962 Kampala Writers Conference was that they were, especially the younger writers, "a company of literary cut throats," and fiercely competitive. Owomoyola, while alerting the reader to Nkosi's regard for the francophone Negritude movement (see the essay in Part Two), is critical of other aspects of his writing such as his inability to understand Mphahlele's decision to return home to South Africa in 1990, which for Owomoyola was not an evasion but, rather, the logical outcome of the fact that he was "always thinking of those stuck at home." Nevertheless, Owomoyola points out, the article in the *Southern African Review of Books* (to which Nkosi contributed extensively in the 1990s) on Es'kia Mphahlele at 70 is yet another reminder of Nkosi's vitality as a critic through the latter decades of the last century and into the millennium.

The second section of the first part of the volume pulls together a number of essays on Nkosi as dramatist and poet. While S'khumbuzo Mngadi's focus is mainly on the best-known of Nkosi's plays, *The Rhythm of Violence*, Liz Gunner writes on Nkosi's contribution as dramatist to the BBC, with his play "We Can't All be Martin Luther King"; essays by Astrid Starck-Adler and Therese Steffen discuss his unpublished play "The Black Psychiatrist," and Nkosi's small but interesting creative output as a poet is brought to our attention by Litzi Lombardozi. Gunner's piece, in common with other of the earlier contributions on Nkosi's criticism, highlights the energy and productivity of Nkosi's London years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which included his radio work at Dennis Duerden's Transcription Centre. The little-known radio play by Nkosi is a witty and important contribution to debates on race and identity in the fraught racial politics of that period in Britain; moreover, the encompassing of transatlantic identity politics in the play's ambit demonstrates once again Nkosi's truly cosmopolitan and transnational grasp of questions of African identity and the African diaspora. Mngadi, in a careful and nuanced analysis of *The Rhythm of Violence*, concludes, somewhat controversially, that it is an attack not so much on apartheid as on the class-based power that accrues to a small group of inter-racial protagonists.

The essays by Starck–Adler and Steffen, in their focus on the “The Black Psychiatrist,” take somewhat different approaches. Starck–Adler, whose essay combines a study of the play with comments on his novel *Mating Birds*, concludes that both works show the power of language as counter-discourse. Both works, she claims, open up to “somewhere else”; what is created is, as it were, a foreign language which leads to a re-creation of the past and a new way of apprehending reality. Thus, Starck–Adler argues, both works compel a redefinition and re-creation of the difficult areas of social life – race, sex, repression, violation – with which the works so powerfully engage. Whereas Starck–Adler, in her discussion of *Mating Birds*, points to the role of memory as liberation, even if it is “a compartmentalised, fragmented memory,” Steffen’s essay on “The Black Psychiatrist” foregrounds memory somewhat differently. In her analysis – and she draws on the ideas of Stuart Hall in his work on cultural identity and diaspora – the play provides a glimpse into the continuing ‘production’ of identity, one grounded not “in the archaeology but in the re-telling of the past.” The double standards of the slyly seductive Gloria, in fact, enable the black psychiatrist to reassert his personal and professional authority. Steffen concludes that the phantasm of the past that belongs to both protagonists “turns ‘The Black Psychiatrist’ into a parable of remembering and ‘disremembering’.” Lombardozi’s recovering of Nkosi’s poetic output is largely of interest as a valuable exercise in retrieval which allows us to enlarge our sense of his many-sided engagement with making words work; also, we have a clearer sense of the multiplicity of cultural and linguistic influences that shaped him. Of particular interest, perhaps, is his poem in honour of the writer H.I.E. Dhlomo at his death in 1955. As indicated earlier, Dhlomo, one of Nkosi’s foundational heroes and models, was an editor of *Ilanga laseNatal* (the *Natal Sun*) in the brief period when Nkosi was employed there before moving to Johannesburg.

The focus of discussion falls squarely on Nkosi’s fiction in the third section of Part One. Essays by Lucy Graham, Lindy Stiebel, Andries Oliphant and Raffaella Vancini tease out and debate the possible meanings and value of his two fictional works to date, *Mating Birds* and the recent *Underground People*. Set between the essays on *Mating Birds* is the censor’s report on the novel, a chilling reminder of the extent of state control over the minds of its subjects in the apartheid era as late as the mid- to late 1980s. Lucy Graham’s comprehensive and subtly argued essay takes to task a range of reviewers of and commentators on *Mating Birds*. She chides the South African reviewers of the novel for reading it, yet again, as another realist novel by a black writer, so underscoring the critical tendency to assume that white writers can be modernist and postmodernist, but black writers are realist. After giving the reader a vivid sense of the novel’s reception history and of the flawed re-

sponses to it, and offering her own reading, Graham asks: what does the novel hold for the post-apartheid reader? She maintains that its reception history poses questions yet to be answered by the South African literary establishment, concluding that the novel's "transgressive discursive strategies and its subtle reckoning with the mind of apartheid" show a rare literary engagement with the cultural imaginary. Challengingly, she claims that although bonded to sexual obsession the novel is also associated with a yearning for liberation, of which a just future for human relationships forms a key part. Space, time and apartheid in relation to *Mating Birds* form the frame of Stiebel's interesting exploration of place in the novel. In a trans-temporal discussion that moves from analysis of the novel to pacing the beaches and streets of the free present with the author, Stiebel notes the way in which *Mating Birds* is "predicated on spaces regulated by the apartheid state." Her study challenges us to see the writer in history as well as in the world of fiction. She also points us to the trope of the locked gaze of the two 'lovers', and cites Homi Bhabha's reading of Fanon as showing the black man wanting the objectifying confrontation with otherness; yet, Stiebel remarks, there is also, in Ndi Sibiyi, the desire to possess Veronica's identity and refusing, Fanonically, to be a 'native' and wishing to assimilate with the colonizer. She is thus suggesting an area of deep ambivalence in the novel itself.

Andries Oliphant and Raffaella Vaccini concur on the centrality of irony to Nkosi's novel *Underground People*, "a novel of ironic laughter," as Oliphant calls it. The latter calls our attention to the way in which the text covers two recent periods in South African history simultaneously, the crisis of the 1960s and that of the 1980s. Also, he points to the doubleness of its narrative, its range of oppositions based on the trope of deceit, the play between appearance and reality. The two key protagonists of the novel, the eccentric Molapo and the expatriate South African Ferguson, who returns to the country to search for Molapo, are, Oliphant claims, "tossed about by the demonic irony of the world they find themselves in." There is no stable order of meaning, only "the shifting verbal play of ideology, theories, fantasies and deceptions." Raffaella Vaccini's essay provides useful details on the genesis of the novel, on how it was sketched in rough while Nkosi was studying at the University of Sussex in 1978, and outlines the tussles and contradictions between the nationalist and socialist wings of the South African liberation movement – factors that can be said to feed into the ironic treatment of ideology in the fictional world of the novel. She directs us, too, to the hidden and intimate views of character that are to be found in the folds of the irony, its layered observations of people caught in situations beyond their control.

Part Two of *Still Beating the Drum*, “Lewis Nkosi in His Own Voice,” provides readers with the opportunity to ‘hear’ the voice of this complex and resilient man in two recent interviews recorded in his old home of Durban. The first interview is more of a private affair, with Nkosi speaking to a single interviewer, Zoë Molver, in a session filmed by David Basckin and forming part of an exciting project, funded by the National Research Foundation, on the recording of the literary history of KwaZulu–Natal. The second interview, from the *Time of the Writer* Festival, in 2003, held at the (then) University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu–Natal), was a more public occasion. Here, Lewis Nkosi speaks to – and at moments, spars with – his fellow-writer Nuruddin Farah, with the philosopher Achille Mbembe playing the role of benign ringmaster. In the first interview, Nkosi speaks movingly of how he began to think of himself as a writer, a creator. He recalls seeing a young praise-poet or *imbongi* perform and then weep as he finishes praising, overcome with the sense of his own creative power. Nkosi himself then began to seek models for his own path as a creator in words, and found such works as Peter Abrahams’ *Tell Freedom*. But, he states, “my real ancestor [is] William Faulkner.” Nkosi responds interestingly, and honestly, to Molver’s question about the effect living in Europe has had on his writing. He admits that you have to readjust your perspective “without diminishing your concerns about your own local situation.” And again, giving the reader a glimpse of how he has in one way thrived and grown in exile, Nkosi speaks warmly of the fellowship of writers; the way in which exile “releases you into a wider world where you discover new communities, new alignments and therefore you construct new identities.” His words, in a way highly topical for the present time, thus position the writer both in a specific locale and in a wider transnational flow of emergent identities. Nkosi returns, in the more public interview of March 2003, to the topic of ancestors and writers, and once more states his great love for William Faulkner. Besides models, however, Nkosi is also adamant about the need to have a sense of audience. Returning to another figure whom he greatly admires, the poet–politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, Nkosi considers that the latter’s early poetry has been insufficiently recognized for its powerful rendering of the encounter between Africa and Europe. In sum, Nkosi, discussing his work as creative writer rather than as critic, speaks with candour of his own interest in the motives of his characters, and his interest in the psychoanalytical. And, provocatively, he dismisses the idea of a single South African nation, of any shared space that one could “remotely call a nation.” He is, he claims, interested in the broader canvas of history: “What happened to us” and “Why did we become what we are?”

Debating ‘home’

A further section in this part of the book which records Lewis Nkosi ‘in his own voice’ reprints important articles from various periods of his career as a literary critic.³⁷ First comes the seminal article “Fiction by Black South Africans” from *Home and Exile* (1965; enlarged as *Home and Exile and Other Selections*) in which Nkosi laments the lack of imagination and insufficient technique in what was called ‘protest’ writing of the time in South Africa. This is probably Nkosi’s most-cited article, as the number of chapters in this book which mention this piece confirms. In “Alex La Guma: The Man and His Work” from *The Transplanted Heart: Essays on South Africa* (1975), Nkosi compliments La Guma, and his novel *A Walk in the Night*, as an example of a South African writer who escapes the critique levelled in the previous reprinted piece in this book – he is a writer who combines “stunning precision” with a “bare-limbed economy” in his prose. From *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (1981), the present book reprints “Negritude: New and Old Perspectives.” This essay has been chosen for the way in which it indicates how Nkosi’s critical range extends beyond South Africa to encompass African literature more generally – reviewing various earlier approaches to Negritude (including a tough dismissal of Mphahlele’s version), Nkosi proposes his own, new perspective, which posits Negritude as part of “an old, legitimate, even respectable intellectual tradition which goes back to Kant and the *Critique of Pure Reason*.”



Of his more contemporary writings, which urgently need collecting into a single volume, three have been selected for the different perspectives they provide on South African literature and literary criticism. The first is a review essay (1989) which comments on two works by white South African writers – J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing* and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Essential Gesture*. In each of these, Nkosi questions whether a single national consciousness can be forged in a racially divided society. He also fearlessly tackles points about Coetzee’s study which strike him as inadequate. He writes, for instance, that “there is no way Coetzee can find answers to some of the questions he has

³⁷ It should be pointed out that, in order to fit the presentation of these republished pieces into the house style of the present volume, Nkosi’s essays and articles have been thoroughly re-edited. The results include changes in layout, occasional corrections, more precise documentation within footnotes supplied in the original texts, and a large number of supplementary notes aimed at clarifying the literary-critical situation for the present-day reader.

been asking except by drawing upon the evidence of traditional oral literatures and contemporary writing of the indigenous populations.” He remarks that landscape poetry is indeed present both in the vernacular languages and in oral poetry. And, he asks, might the prose works of writers using the African languages “give us just as valid a description of African landscape as filtered through an African consciousness?” The second piece chosen is a review (1990) of the reissue of Bloke Modisane’s *Blame Me On History*, a gesture Nkosi describes as not only “an act of homage but [also] of conversion.” He recalls in his introduction the *Drum* days with Modisane, life in Sophiatown, and the “secret and not so secret dreams of the black intelligentsia during the naughty 1950s.” The last piece looks at what Nkosi calls “The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic” (2002), and provides a stocktaking of what this writer sees happening in South African literature post-apartheid – divisions still in place in terms of themes and approach, with it being too early, however, to distinguish a ‘national’ literature.

Part Three: Sources for Lewis Nkosi

The last two sections are intended to provide the reader with useful resources on Nkosi: Section 16 is an extensive bibliography which constitutes the fullest record to date of Nkosi’s published books, articles, occasional columns, numerous articles and interviews – a resource of value in that much of Nkosi’s prodigious literary output is scattered through many obscure (and also many well-known) journals and newspapers. Similarly, the Timeline constructed in section 17 attempts to pull together the threads of Nkosi’s loosely woven life, which has shifted from South Africa to the USA, on to the UK, back to Africa (Zambia), then to Europe (Warsaw), back to the USA (Boston), and on to Europe (Basel) again; not to mention his recent trips back to South Africa post-1991. The Timeline, in coordinating the first and subsequent appearance of his works, both major and minor, with the stages in his life, confirms how constantly productive Nkosi has been, despite his never-quite-exiled navigation through a world away from ‘home’.

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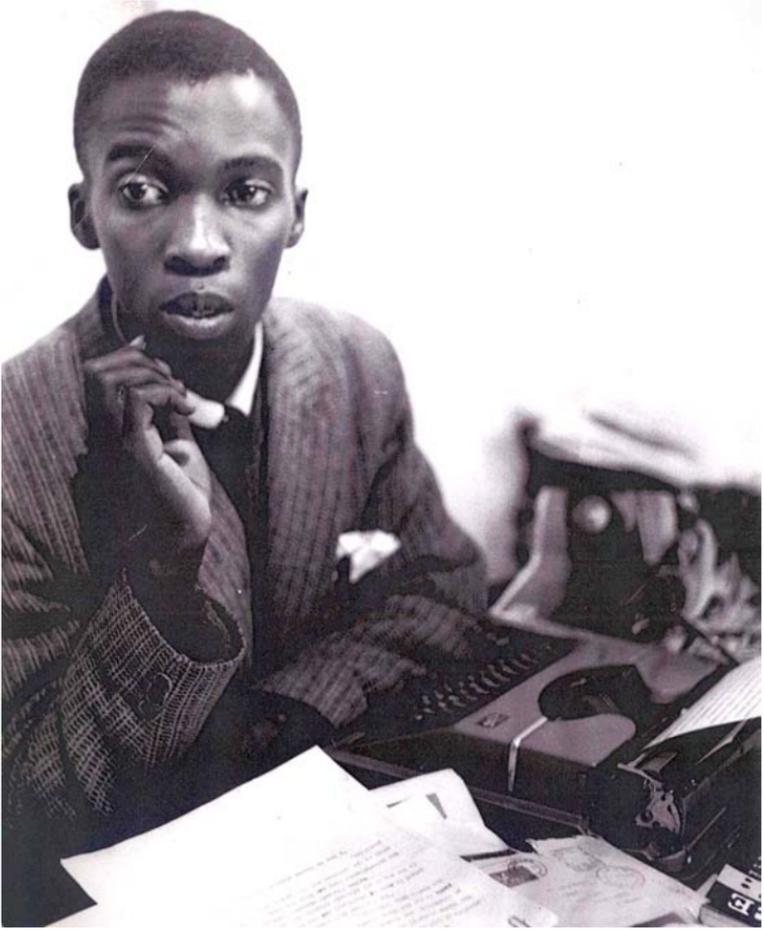
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PART ONE: WRITING ON LEWIS NKOSI



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8 THE LITERARY CRITIC



1 *Drum* days with typewriter, Johannesburg (Lewis Nkosi)

1 Lewis Nkosi as Literary Critic

ANNIE GAGIANO

FOR ME, THREE ASPECTS of Lewis Nkosi's work as literary critic stand out: first, his position as a 'migrant exile' (writing from Britain, the USA, continental Europe, or elsewhere in Africa); secondly, his sustained commitment to Africa and South Africa and to the literature produced from here; thirdly, the unmistakably exacting quality of most of the criticism – its seriousness, its trenchant ('non-nepotistic') tone, its prescience, and its constant evolution or expansion. Nevertheless, in surveying the more than three decades of Nkosi's critical writing, while one has to take cognizance of his well-established stature as a literary commentator, a merely eulogizing approach to this body of work would be inappropriate and unworthy of him. In examining the two main collections of criticism – chiefly the reissued *Home and Exile [and Other Selections]* (1983) and *Tasks and Masks* (1981) – as well as a few other uncollected pieces, my approach will be evaluative, selective and intermittently chronological, speaking from my own perspective and experience as an academic working in English studies with a strong focus on African writing in English.

In all his critical writing, judicious and far-sighted as it mainly is, Nkosi remains a unique and candid personality – never adopting the grey cloak of academic 'objectivity'. As Shakespeare several times reminds us, *cucullis non facit monachem*,¹ by contrast, Nkosi is always open, if often controversial and sometimes pugnacious. Though he speaks with the authority of both great knowledge of and full commitment to his subject, he is the very opposite of the aloof, anonymous commentator – he *involves* his reader,

¹ Literally, 'The habit does not make the monk'; metaphorically, 'Wearing the costume does not mean one can fulfil the role / be the real thing'; cf. Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* V.i. 261, and *Henry V* III III.i.23.

demanding (always) a thoughtful response, whether one agrees or disagrees with the point/s he articulates.²

And he *is* articulate: one of my favourite quotations from the collected criticism is Nkosi's description of himself, newly arrived in Johannesburg from (what is now) KwaZulu–Natal, "with new English words clicking like coins in the pockets of [his] mind."³ There is also, I think, a quality of energy and even urgency, often, in his writing – something of the excitement of the young man tasking himself to 'tell it like it is' (which characterized his early years as a *Drum* journalist) never seems to have left him, even as his sophistication as a citizen of the world and his range of reference increased. The range of adjectives and phrases Nkosi himself uses to illustrate the mood and mode of the *Drum* reporters – "urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash" – as well as the description of "eliminat[ing] the thinnest traces of self-pity [... yet remaining full of] gaiety, lust and bravery"⁴ illustrates the quality I refer to, although as he aged this tone became tempered with more irony and perhaps a drier wit or wryness.

Nkosi as critic never sees literature in isolation from the social context of its production, and Achebe's dictum, that "art is, and was always, in the service of man"⁵ is a vision he shares, I believe. In recognizing the social context as the source of the work of art, as well as the authority or reality to which it is accountable, Nkosi in his criticism appears particularly conscious of power-structures and agencies of control as the parameters within which writers function – but he never takes the sentimental and ultimately condescending view that (what he sees as) weak or naive writing can be condoned because of political constraints or a concern for African solidarity *per se*.

In this consistently held position he can occasionally be excessively harsh in his strictures or almost stridently dismissive, but Nkosi cannot (on the other

² Cf. D.H. Lawrence's well-known words:

A critic must be able to *feel* the impact of a work of art in all its complexity and its force. To do so, he must be a man of force and complexity himself, which few critics are. A man with a paltry, impudent nature will never write anything but paltry, impudent criticism. And a man who is *emotionally* educated is rare as a phoenix. The more scholastically educated a man is generally, the more he is an emotional boor.

Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Heinemann, 1967): 118.

³ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London & New York: Longman, 1983): 7.

⁴ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 8, 9.

⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet On Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1975): 19.

hand) be caught with an ideological or party political thumb on the scale. Occasionally he *is* injudicious (as I shall illustrate below), but not for the above-mentioned kind of base reason. As he requires both social relevance (or concern) and intellectual skill from the authors and their works that he assesses, he evidently expects no less of himself, as critic, in his descriptions and analyses of those works and authors.

Examples of occasions where Nkosi underrates or misjudges texts are few, but would include, for instance, his failure to see the promise in Lauretta Ngcobo's admittedly flawed first novel, *Cross of Gold* (1981) – a text in which there are glimpses of the talent that would blossom in the later, unforgettable novel *And They Didn't Die* (1990)⁶ – and his dismissal of Mongane Wally Serote's magisterial *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) as “too chaotic, too dispersed, to offer anything more solid than mere moments.”⁷ One may argue that Mphahlele's *The Wanderers* (1972) has its faults, but, very amusing *and* persuasive as Nkosi is in his forcefully articulated criticism of this novel, he seems to verge on malice in some comments⁸ on this text. I believe, too, that some of Nkosi's (*otherwise* fairly generous and just) observations on Bessie Head – such as labelling her “politically ignorant” and saying “She has *only* this moral fluency of an intelligent, intensely lonely individual”⁹ – are shortsighted, underestimating the greater reach of Head's writing, inclusive of, but also extending ‘beyond’ politics.

To establish the pattern of my discussion at this point, I shall first address the issue of exile as it can be seen to impinge on Nkosi's literary criticism textually, by discussing initially the broad issue along with the (brief) relevant excerpts from the reissued 1983 *Home and Exile* collection, the first of which occurs in the Introduction to that volume. Here, Nkosi refers (in a quotation) to the “complex fate” of exile, indicating that it was by emerging from South Africa that he “discover[ed]” the “passions [...] preoccupations and [...] [literary] ideals” that he shared with other African writers.¹⁰ This aspect of Nkosi's particular, fairly benign experience of exile – being taken from the embeddedness of a life at ‘home’ yet encountering a larger African solidarity

⁶ Nkosi, “South African Writers at the Barricades,” *Third World Book Review* 2.1–2 (1986): 43.

⁷ “South African Writers at the Barricades,” 45.

⁸ See, for example, the cutting remark that the personal vindictiveness Nkosi imputes to Mphahlele's writing strategy (in *The Wanderers*) appears “designed to massage an ego that swells visibly with every self-manipulation”; Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (London: Longman, 1981): 98.

⁹ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 99 (my emphasis).

¹⁰ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, ix.

and even a formerly undiscovered “self”¹¹ in the process – can be contrasted with his own recorded impression that “to most Negro [ie African-American] poets severance from Africa has not only meant exile from ‘the scenes his father loved’ but has also meant a bitter and anguished exile from the self” (104). On the whole, Nkosi’s exile seems to have been experienced, rather, as an escape from the many constraints and *containments* imposed by the white nationalist regime of the early 1960s in South Africa; a freedom that could be embraced and explored intellectually as well as socially and politically.¹² My impression, from reading Nkosi’s essays, is that living abroad and frequenting mostly avant-garde intellectual gatherings (as he did) intensified his critical confidence – it equipped him for, and provided him with, more occasions for more varied intellectual debate; richer reading opportunities; as well as academic employment and experience.¹³ Exile also recontextualized South and continental-African literature for him through the wider, fuller and closer contact it gave him with metropolitan literatures. Nkosi did not ghettoize South/African literatures, but contextualized them by means of these personal opportunities. It is also likely, I venture to suggest, that the critically maturing effect of exile *within* the intellectually privileged spheres in which he moved intensified his resolve not to eulogize South/African texts or authors he deemed unworthy. He may (in any case) never have been inclined to mere politeness or political correctness, but exile surely strengthened the astringency, authority and scrupulousness of Nkosi’s literary criticism.

If exile is an inevitable loss, then – as Nkosi acknowledges – his sense of also gaining by it was strong. He acknowledged this very frankly by declaring that “homesickness is not an emotion I frequently experience”; he likens it to “boredom.”¹⁴ Trinh T Minh-ha compares the role of the exile who remains committed to her or his original culture while being open to the new cultural context (and the opportunities for ‘spreading’ the original culture) – as Nkosi was and is – to that of a ‘translator’ from the one to the other: “Translations,”

¹¹ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, ix.

¹² The liveliness of the ‘autobiographical’ essays in *Home and Exile* (which I mostly omit from my discussion of Nkosi’s literary-critical writing in this essay) makes one hope that he could be persuaded to write a full-length autobiography.

¹³ Compare Edward Said’s description: “As every situation is a new one, you start out each day anew”; Said, “The Voice of a Palestinian in Exile,” *Third Text* 3–4 (1988): 48, and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s reference to language as the “site of return [...] of memory,” but *also* as “a site of change, an evershifting ground” for the exile; Minh-ha, “Other than myself/my other self,” in *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. George Robertson et al. (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 10.

¹⁴ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 94.

she writes, “mark the continuation of the original culture’s life. [...] The original is bound to undergo a change in its afterlife.”¹⁵

It may be with more of a feeling for other exiled writers than from any predominance of personal anguish, then, that Nkosi acknowledges both the pain and the danger of being cut off from ‘one’s people’: “a writer [...] needs his people,” he writes, “in order that they should corroborate [his] vision [...] or at least [...] dispute [his] statements” about them.¹⁶ He knows that, in prolonged exile, “memory can no longer bear the burden of immediacy”; the writer’s “messages” to his people “begin to assume a strange unreality, if not features of a lunacy” (94, 93). Aside from “the pleasures of exile” (to appropriate George Lamming’s title, 1984), its pains are in Nkosi’s case felt to be endurable, *because* involving an enduring *duty*: although (he says) “any writer living in exile begins to wonder just whom he is addressing,” he expresses a solemn sense of writers having a “national duty” to those left behind, to be performed “by embodying the unspoken thoughts and emotions of their people.”¹⁷ His awareness of his own responsibility, “to preserve for the world the memory of [the] millions [he] left behind in South Africa” (95), is reminiscent of his compatriot and fellow-exile Arthur Nortje’s famous words: “for some of us must storm the castles / some define the happening.”¹⁸ Nortje was eventually overwhelmed, it is widely believed, by the way in which he *suffered* exile; by contrast, Nkosi (as long ago as 1980) robustly foresaw the post-liberation period when “writers [who] share[d] a community of interest with the vanguard party and the people” would (he then imagined) be seen as “making the unwarranted intervention between the government

¹⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Other than myself/my other self,” 18.

¹⁶ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 93.

¹⁷ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 94. Cf. “as writers we must continue to be the unsilenced voice of the repressed millions of South Africa” (95). Unfortunately, Nkosi’s collection of essays titled *The Transplanted Heart* (1975) was unavailable when this essay was being written; among the literary figures it deals with are Can Themba (in an obituary) as well as La Guma and Herman Charles Bosman. *Home and Exile* does, however, reprint a number of the essays from the 1975 text.

¹⁸ Arthur Nortje, *Anatomy of the Dark: Collected Poems*, ed. Dirk Klopffer (Pretoria: U of South Africa P, 2000): 361. It would be a fascinating study to compare the careers in exile of Nkosi (who may be said to have flourished) and of Nortje (who declined to the point of – probable – suicide), or of Nat Nakasa (who jumped to his death in New York).

and the people”¹⁹ – a point resembling Fanon’s warning against the post-liberation “Pitfalls of National Consciousness.”²⁰

Trinh Minh-ha’s poetic evocation/analysis of exile’s complexities can serve to conclude this section of my essay. Of the exile’s journey, she says (in words deeply applicable to Nkosi’s role outside South Africa):

Every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic. The departure, the cross-over, the fall, the wandering, the discovery, the return, the transformation. [...] The complex experience of self and other (the all-other within me and without me) is bound to forms that belong but are subject neither to ‘home’, nor to ‘abroad’; and it is through them and through the cultural configurations they gather that the universe over there and over here can be named, accounted for, and become narrative.²¹

Nkosi, I believe, through the particular way(s) in which he responded to the conditions of his exile – in what he *made of it* – played an important part in linking South/African literature into the larger (mainly English-speaking) literary sphere.



In the next section of this essay, I wish to discuss how and to what extent Nkosi can be seen as having succeeded, in his literary-critical contributions, in combining “the ideals of creating a literature for the continent that would be judged on its own terms,”²² with the aim of “preserving the best from [his people’s, or South/African] tradition *and* absorbing the best from outside.”²³ As the above quotations indicate, I shall in this section be drawing mainly on the essays collected as *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (dated 1983, though it contains a number of essays that were written from the 1960s on) *and* the more cohesive text that I shall be considering, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (1981).

The forceful style and forthright tone that will remain hallmarks of Nkosi’s critical writing are evident already in his early essays. He describes Alan Paton’s then almost universally celebrated novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) as “a powerful, if sentimental, plea for racial justice and peace” –

¹⁹ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 162.

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961; tr. 1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967): 119–65.

²¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Other than myself/my other self,” 21–22.

²² Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, ix.

²³ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, third page of unpaginated Preface.

instead of a “revelation of the workings of the human heart.”²⁴ The comment is sharp, but the distinction is clear and valid and the judgement is not crude – it sees the earnest idealism in the text, but baulks at the lack of social and psychological (let alone political) veracity in its depiction of South African circumstances, and the argument is lucidly and strongly validated. Long before Homi Bhabha came to identify the “sly civility” of the colonized towards the colonialists,²⁵ Nkosi outlined “the ever-present irony beneath the mock humility” of most black South Africans – in contrast to Paton’s pious, ever-courteous Stephen Kumalo (5).

Nkosi’s engagement with South African texts, unsurprisingly, features prominently in his criticism. It is predictable that he should discuss Es’kia Mphahlele’s work as extensively as he does, both because of Mphahlele’s prominence on the South African cultural scene and because he had got to know him so well when they were fellow-reporters on *Drum*. It is equally clear, even though Nkosi’s analysis of the Mphahlele phenomenon is generally highly interesting and enlightening, that there is something like a disjuncture of personalities between these two influential presences on the ‘international African stage’. Even so, in the earlier references to Mphahlele’s writing (in Nkosi’s criticism), he accords him a great deal of respect, setting Mphahlele off, for instance, from “the other black South African writers” in his recognition that the local racial-political scenario, far from being a “gift” (as ideal subject-matter) to aspiring authors, presented very tricky material indeed (133). He pays tribute to Mphahlele for “saying something positive about black experience in South Africa” instead of presenting black citizens as mere victims of oppression (133). He recognizes that Mphahlele is doing interesting things, *linguistically*, in the way he uses English to reflect the black voice and vocabulary in his short stories, although these developments are contrasted (by Nkosi) with what he judges to have been rather dull and turgid earlier writing by Mphahlele; what Mphahlele is developing by the late 1960s, in Nkosi’s estimation, amounts to successful resistance to the “melodramatic [nature of the] situation” in which black South Africans find themselves (135).

The tone Nkosi adopts in early comments on Mphahlele’s cultural-philosophical position (dating from 1962) combines empathy – “to be a black South African is to be both unspeakably rich and incredibly poor; and also [...] to live in perpetual exile from oneself” – with acerbic irony: he refers, for instance, to Mphahlele’s “sometimes *too joyous* [...] affirmation [...] that

²⁴ Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 5. Further page references in the main text.

²⁵ Bhabha, “Sly Civility,” *October* 34 (1985): 71–80.

[the African] image has been fragmented almost beyond recognition” (129; my emphasis). In *Tasks and Masks*, Nkosi includes a much fuller account (in the chapter “Negritude: New and Old Perspectives”²⁶) of Mphahlele’s arguments with the proponents (mostly but not exclusively from West Africa) of the philosophy of Negritude. Acknowledging that explaining its central ideas is an “onerous” task, Nkosi does so with telling wryness – it “require[s],” he says, “an amount of patience, fairness and impartiality that is often beyond the capacity of any one critic” (10). The essay, I would say, comes close to achieving those qualities and is a fine embodiment of Nkosi the *urbane* (but non-condescending) cultural critic; this essay has that quality of “worldliness” that Said advises the critic to aim at,²⁷ but is also ‘worldly-wise’ in its sophistication and balance. He suggests, for instance, that “Mphahlele’s difficulties with the more fervent adherents of Negritude, and they with him, are as much the result of emotional entanglements as they are the consequences of genuine intellectual disagreements” (16). Nkosi distinguishes between the validity of Mphahlele’s literary criticisms of art committed to the expression of the Negritude philosophy and what he sees as the political and intellectual shallowness of some of Mphahlele’s other strictures against this movement (17–18). In contrast to his compatriot, Nkosi hence asserts (in his conclusion) that Negritude “must continue to provide an area of legitimate interest for any student of African Literature” (27).²⁸ It is clear that history has borne him out.

In his assessment of Mphahlele’s *The Wanderers* (1972), Nkosi says some of the harshest things he has penned as a literary critic. Painfully ‘personal’ as some of the points made are, and although one may not agree that this novel is anything like as poor as Nkosi makes it out to be, the way the text is panned cannot be dismissed as the result of a mere private ‘anti-Mphahlele’ animus. Indeed, one of the earliest points made here is that, despite what Nkosi feels to be its overtly, thinly disguised autobiographical qualities, he measures *The Wanderers* against Mphahlele’s actual, earlier autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1971) – generously and aptly described as a “splendid” work.²⁹ Nkosi validates his fiercely dismissive comments in lucid and convincing ways. I would nevertheless suggest that the commentary on the novel *is* intermingled with and (perhaps inevitably) also does express feelings of personal dislike, such as the sneer at Mphahlele as “the entrepreneur of Afri-

²⁶ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 10–29. Further page references in the main text.

²⁷ Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1983): 3.

²⁸ Mphahlele, of course, somewhat ‘softened’ and adapted his own position on Negritude in the period between the two editions of *The African Image* (1962 and 1974).

²⁹ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 91.

can culture” (91), while Nkosi’s reference to “the querulous tone of this novel” reflects back on his own description of it as “a prolonged bout of self-justification and self-worship [... in] this turgidly voluminous prose-work [...] the deadest tomb of self-love” (94). Hence, partly convinced as one may be at the end of this account that the novel is “in many ways” (as outlined in full detail by Nkosi) “a distressing work,” the commentary is itself, in a word, somewhat distressing.³⁰

One of Nkosi’s best-known essays is the piece “Fiction by Black South Africans” that appeared in collections in 1967 and 1973 before being printed in *Home and Exile* (131–38), with its arresting opening declaration:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa. (131)

It is easy to see how annoying and ‘disloyal’ many would have considered this astonishingly forthright admission, or accusation, for providing grist to the mill of those already all too inclined to denigrate the achievements of black South Africans, coming (incontrovertibly) from the pen of a prominent black South African writer and cultural critic.³¹ As the essay proceeds, Nkosi does single out Alex La Guma’s writing for praise, however – as he distinguishes between achievements in the autobiographical and short-story genres and general failures in novel-writing. Here, Nkosi “pay[s] tribute” to Alex La Guma’s “impressive short novel” *A Walk in the Night* (1967), praising the writer as “a true novelist” with “the artist’s eye for the interesting detail” and notes “the suggestive power of his prose” (137–38). Another aspect of this essay that ensures its enduring relevance and importance is the way it fore-stalls points that Njabulo Ndebele would later make, most famously in the

³⁰ Compare Nkosi’s 1986 reference to *Afrika, My Music* (1984) as “Mphahlele’s self-serving apologia for returning to South Africa and (is it unwittingly?) collaborating with the merchants of apartheid”; Nkosi, “South African Writers at the Barricades,” 45, a remark which comes close to slander. To be contrasted with this is his generous yet critically balanced retrospective essay on Mphahlele as a public and literary figure: Nkosi, “Es’kia Mphahlele at 70,” *Southern African Review of Books* 3.3–4 (1990): 32–34.

³¹ Indeed, J.M. Coetzee, in two of his early essays, quoted Nkosi’s paragraph to ‘speak for’ him: see “Alex La Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer,” *Journal of the New African Literature and the Arts* 9–10: (1971): 3, and “Man’s Fate in the Novels of Alex La Guma,” *Studies in Black Literature* 5 (1975): 11 – while assessing La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* (1967) very differently from the way Nkosi does.

essays “Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction” and “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa.”³² Where Ndebele would caution against what he refers to as depiction of the “spectacular” aspects of the apartheid situation and the reliance on stereotypes of (black) victimhood and (white) oppression,³³ Nkosi warns against “the over-melodramatic nature of the political situation,” and denounces “the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature.”³⁴ Nkosi makes a point that is closely comparable to Ndebele’s later insistence on the literary recognition of “positive” aspects of “black experience in South Africa.”³⁵ He has nothing “positive” to say, however, about Richard Rive’s *Emergency* (1970), which he dismisses rather too emphatically as “wholly unimaginative, totally uninspired and exceedingly clumsy in construction.”³⁶

In the later *Tasks and Masks* chapter called “Southern Africa: Protest and Commitment” (76–106), he acknowledges, however, that “South African literature has always been a literature of protest and social commitment in whose mirror the nation hopes to catch glimpses of its face” (76) – even though, he adds, what are then perceived as distorted images are so often subsequently denounced. Nkosi here links up with his earlier essay (referred to above) by saying that his “complaints” about literature by black South Africans were never a dismissal of the legitimacy of protest, but that “how well, and how significantly, it utters that protest” (79) was the point at issue for him. He now adds a further recognition: the much harsher and nearly irreversible erasure of “a usable [African] tradition” in the South (as contrasted with the continental) African context, resulting in its “peculiar insecurities and rootlessness” (79–80). In what follows, Nkosi rejects Modikwe Dikobe’s *The Marabi Dance* (1973), a work which has proved to be of more enduring interest than he foresaw, while he has strong but qualified praise for *Golden City*, a 1970 text by Enver Carim that has been all but forgotten. Nkosi also has some praise (albeit more criticism) for another work by Carim, but by comparison (and

³² Both in Njabulo S. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991).

³³ Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 46.

³⁴ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 133, 132.

³⁵ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 133. This is what Ndebele phrases as “the rediscovery of the ordinary” (*Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 37). Compare Nkosi’s critical reference elsewhere to “stereotyped figures of protest and oppression” (*Home and Exile*, 125). Nkosi also anticipated (as he himself points out) Albie Sachs’s 1989 “exhortations” that culture should not be confined to the role of a weapon of political struggle; Nkosi, “Sole and the Symptoms of Nervous Breakdown,” *Current Writing* 6.2 (1994): 55, 58.

³⁶ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 136 (my emphases).

somewhat surprisingly, from the vantage-point of the twenty-first century) here damns Alex La Guma's writing with faint praise – ascribing to it merely “an honourable, if dull proficiency” (86). It is also noticeable how little Nkosi writes here about La Guma, by contrast with the length of his engagement with Carim's writing, *even when* he is sharply critical of it – one of Nkosi's (few) lapses of critical judgement, in my estimation.

A later essay, not forming part of the pieces collected in the 1981 and 1983 compilations I mainly deal with here, is Nkosi's reassessment of Bloke Modisane's reissued autobiography *Blame Me On History* (1990), an excellent essay in Nkosi's most elegant and assured manner, imbued with sardonic candour and a kind of hidden compassion. The article becomes a meditation on the notable achievements of black South African authors in the autobiographical genre: “the single area of ‘lived’ experience,” Nkosi writes, where “the true voice of the black majority remains paramount.” He comments here on the “immense” range of ‘black’ autobiographical writing, adding that this “constitute[s] the most significant source of what knowledge we have regarding the feel and texture of black life in South Africa.”³⁷ It is a memorable and finely wrought piece, an example of Nkosi's best criticism.

Nkosi provides interesting perspectives on some white South African authors, both personally (Breytenbach; Fugard) and critically (Fugard; Gordimer; Paton). I strongly agree with Nkosi's assessment of Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) as a much more accomplished novel than *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). He refers with warm enthusiasm to *Phalarope* as “still [...] the best embodiment of those confused and troubled emotions which exist sexually between black and white South Africans.”³⁸ (Compare his assessment, cited earlier in this essay, of *Cry, the Beloved Country*.) Yet Nkosi now acknowledges that “there was, after all, something more than a lofty moral tone in that first novel (*Cry, the Beloved Country*) that compelled attention.” He still maintains, nevertheless (in the later essay), that the evident “urgent moral purpose” of the text acted as the screen to its “flaws” (159, both quotations).

Nkosi speaks with respect of Nadine Gordimer's work, referring, for instance, to its “passion and precision” (163). He also quotes her as a critic worth listening to and lists “Gordimer, Paton, Jacobson, Breytenbach” as the authors “who remind the white public” of things they'd prefer to forget.³⁹ His review of *July's People* opens with the memorable (and frequently quoted) statement: “In South Africa everyone dreams about revolution; that is, every-

³⁷ “Bloke Modisane,” *Southern African Review of Books* 3.3–4 (1990): 12.

³⁸ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 38.

³⁹ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 78, 77.

one, black and white, speculates about it – about the nature of its coming, about the extent and the limit of the eventual horror, and [...] about the outcome.”⁴⁰ Nkosi (here, in 1981) names Gordimer as “our finest white novelist,”⁴¹ one of whose characteristics is her *avoidance* of “melodrama,” though in this case Nkosi accuses her of overdoing the low-key note: he refers to the text as “sometimes too subtle and oblique for its own good” and he is dismissive of its lack of “believability.”⁴²

He has a similar problem with Fugard – his assessments of *July's People* and of *The Blood Knot* are both linked with his general sense that it is when white authors attempt to evoke the inwardness of black South Africans' lives that they struggle to convince. Here one can compare his general impression, elsewhere expressed, of white authors' “inability to see and underline the fantastic ambiguity, the deliberate self-deception, the ever-present irony beneath the mock humility and moderation of speech” of black South Africans.⁴³ While Nkosi has warm personal recollections of the eccentric Fugard, his readings of the quality of the playwright's portrayal of the fabric of black social life are sharp and devastatingly convincing. He exposes, for instance, Fugard's misrepresentation of the moral poles of black life as lying between white ‘law and order’ and black gangster rule: “both forces were evil and the choice was an illusion” (141). He also notes (about the play *Nongogo*) that Fugard “could not and really did not know anything about the life of an African prostitute” (142). Nkosi's criticism of Fugard's *The Blood Knot* is astute: he makes the point that the racial schematization of the play results in an essentializing, reductive (stereo)typification of black (and white) South Africans along all too familiar apartheid-type lines. Nkosi, overall, balances his assessment of the latter play convincingly – on the one hand, suggesting that it contains something “dangerous” because it “passes as ‘liberal’” while *not* challenging fundamental racial stereotypes and, on the other, presenting it as a vivid evocation of “the South African situation,” a depiction that he finds “enormously truthful and exciting” (144–45).

Nkosi recognizes that African-American poets also struggle to achieve authenticity. One of his essays is called “Africa in Negro American Poetry” and in it he says sardonically: “after all mangoes are only mangoes and much too much mango is bound to be cloying even to a virile Negro menaced by the neon American night” (105). In this essay, Nkosi identifies a primary

⁴⁰ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 157.

⁴¹ La Guma, at this point, he considers “our finest black novelist”; Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 157.

⁴² Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 157, 158.

⁴³ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 5.

source of agony for “the sensitive American Negro searching for identity in America today” as their having “always [...] this desire for acceptance into, as well as a desire to remain apart from, American society” (104). Although the essay placed next in the reissued *Home and Exile* is one in which a “strained gestural embrace of American Black Power rhetoric” evidently embarrassed the older, more urbane Nkosi (whose voice we hear in the Preface referring to the above-mentioned text), it strikes a different note, which in the Preface is identified as that of (presumably ambivalence-free) “separatist black nationalism.”⁴⁴ As usual, though, even in the “Black Power” essay Nkosi acknowledges his conjoint desire to belong to the world-wide aristocracy of letters *and* to retain an African solidarity (107). He expresses his belief, nevertheless, that “the New Africans” can “mov[e] easily between the old and the new worlds” and that they “are the only ones who can bridge the gulf between the old [presumably African] culture and the new technological civilisation” (111). To some extent acknowledging the centrifugal pull of these different loyalties, Nkosi offers a ‘solution’, in this uncharacteristically rambling piece, that is somewhat vague and mystical: it is, he says here, “the function of literature [...] to provide an atmosphere of love” and to communicate “all those sentiments which bind us to one another in a great compassionate humanity” – writers need “to proclaim the primal value of Life over the Idea” (116–17). In a later (1971) essay, he reverts to the idea of a cultural dichotomy, especially in the work of African-American poets – “an underlying conflict between the steady, studied measures of classical English verse and the sweeping chaos of black American life, with its angry orgiastic rhythms” (147). When Nkosi’s style becomes rhetorical, as in the above example, it is usually (I suggest) a sign of some tension between something he feels compelled to say⁴⁵ and his own natural impulses: he laments, for instance, the “most extreme” aspects of “the black nationalist movement” demanding the “utter renunciation” of white standards of beauty, as this includes “white women,” and notes the shortage of self-reflexive irony and of “‘love’” in the ‘new’ [African-American] poetry.”⁴⁶

In *Tasks and Masks*, Nkosi includes two major essays on the development of “Modern African Poetry,” concentrating on its “themes and styles.”⁴⁷ While this survey of his is, of course, not as inclusive as the title promises – besides some attention to Zulu and Xhosa poets, he is not in a position to write about poetry in the other indigenous languages of the continent, nor can

⁴⁴ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, xi.

⁴⁵ As acknowledged in the Preface to *Home and Exile*, :xi.

⁴⁶ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 150.

⁴⁷ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 107–25, 126–72.

he cover Arabic writing or all of lusophone African poetry – it does make an impressively wide sweep and is, in general, interesting and informative as well as lucidly argued and vividly illustrated. (The Preface to *Tasks and Masks* indicates why this collection of essays is more cohesive than those in *Home and Exile*: they are the result of a request made to Nkosi that he should record and publish a series of lectures that he gave in America, at the University of California at Irvine.)

It is worth reiterating Nkosi's own well placed caution here – he writes:

It can never be [...] emphasised often enough that African poetry does not [...] begin with the training of native speakers in the use of the European tongues. [...] poetry in Africa [...] is as old as organised society itself: the African languages [...] are repositories of some of the finest verse in epic form as well as in the shorter lyric ...⁴⁸

Here, too (as in his comments on African-American poetry), Nkosi recognizes the cultural tension between the “essential identity” of the African poet and “the constricting measures of another tongue” (108). Starting with references to European poetry written by African slaves, Nkosi moves (somewhat erratically) to South Africa and its pioneer poets Vilakazi, H.I.E. Dhlomo and Jolobe, noting their struggles to express their ideas and cultural values in the European language. Particularly poignant is the poem (quoted by Nkosi) in which a Sudanese poet mourns the loss of his ancestors' own “tunes”; those powerful songs “That took away / The treach'rous pang / Of desert Thirst, / Or kept the lion / In bloody lair.”⁴⁹ But Nkosi does also note the mere “meretriciousness” of some ‘poetical’ effusions. The work of two Ghanaian poets, Dei-Anang and Armattoo, are extensively and entertainingly described. One cannot help feeling, though, that Nkosi's outline of the pioneers of modern poetry from the African continent is somewhat sketchy, and the selection of poets on the arbitrary side.

The second essay is the better of the two, and one feels that here Nkosi is on surer ground from the outset, when he points to the innovative ways in which Kofi Awoonor (of Ghana), Okot p'Bitek (of Uganda) and Mazisi Kunene (of South Africa) write ‘traditional’ poetry as poets in the modern context. Nkosi is also one of the few critics who can with some authority compare francophone African with Anglo-African poetry.⁵⁰ Among the more consciously and successfully modernist poets of Africa, Nkosi makes reference first to Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe's friend who died tragically

⁴⁸ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 107.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 119.

⁵⁰ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 126.

young in the Biafran War when he had just begun to fulfil his promise. Next he describes several Malagassy poets, particularly the strange but accomplished poet Rabéarivelo.⁵¹ The moving image of the poet/speaker feeling himself to be like “a child left by its companions, / and playing with dust all alone” comes from the section on the latter poet’s work. It is perhaps this poet’s sense of ‘exile’ and cultural exclusion, astonishingly, *from France*, that so fascinates Nkosi – as a writer who did, by contrast, successfully migrate to the ‘European centre’.

A subsequent section is devoted to the leading francophone poets of the continent: Léopold Sédar Senghor and Birago Diop of Senegal as well as David Diop, half-Senegalese and half-Cameroonian, but born in Bordeaux, France. The large political-cultural differences between (particularly) Senghor and David Diop are seen by Nkosi as illustrating something of a split within Negritude itself: Diop’s “ruthlessly austere” but resonant anticolonialism is contrasted with Senghor’s “lofty” style, his “verbal music” and “myth-making” (140, 141). It is to some extent because of Senghor’s assimilationist tendencies in his political and personal conduct, Nkosi recognizes, that there is “a growing tendency in African thought to see Negritude as a reactionary movement of assimilated elites.” Their “passionate expression of loyalty to the indigenous cultures,” Nkosi suggests in a finely tuned comment, had come to be seen as “inspired by guilt and nostalgia for what they had already betrayed” (143). Sembène Ousmane, for one, would certainly share the sentiments quoted here, yet Nkosi remains insistent that “from the point of view of literary criticism nothing can be more mistaken or indeed more sinister than to minimise Senghor’s contribution to African literature on the basis of an antipathy to his conservative stance in African politics” – a fine illustration of Nkosi’s fidelity to his own dictum of treasuring “Life over the Idea.”⁵² Nkosi can thus acknowledge Senghor’s “questionable metaphysics” and “shaky psychological doctrine,” but pay eloquent tribute to his “master[y] of the long Whitmanesque line which carries the reader inexorably forward in a surge of emotion or reflective thought” (143–44).

Nkosi also writes enlighteningly about the Congolese poet U’Tamsi, introducing his turn towards more recent Anglo-African poetry by suggesting that it lagged behind the francophone poets in achieving the same level of sophistication. He returns first to those among the anglophone moderns to whom he referred earlier – Awoonor; p’Bitek and Kunene – and pays tribute, in description and by citation, to their writing. The next example is to a fascinating West African poet, Abioseh Nicol, who manages successfully to

⁵¹ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 129–37.

⁵² Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 143, and *Home and Exile*, 117.

combine African traditionalist, Muslim and Christian references in his poem “African Easter.”⁵³ Okara, Okigbo, J.P. Clark and Soyinka are other West Africans noted here, but Nkosi is not an admirer of Soyinka’s admittedly often unsuccessfully “clotted” poetic style, though he respects his “trenchant criticisms of the unexamined brutalities of modern African society” (157, 160).

A problem with a chapter making as large a sweep as this essay of Nkosi’s tends to manifest itself also when one writes *about* it: it is the problem of ‘cataloguing’. I try to avoid this infelicitous style by highly selective quotation and reference and thus omit Nkosi’s brief reference to lusophone African poetry. In the final, brief section of Nkosi’s second chapter on “Modern African Poetry” he devotes only a few pages to the black anglophone South African poets. The first poet mentioned here is Dennis Brutus, to whose first collection, *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots* (1964), Nkosi pays a fine tribute – he speaks of the combination of “cramped violence” and “crushed tenderness” in these poems, but is dismissive of the abundant later publications. As if himself by now rather exhausted after his long (poetic) haul, Nkosi’s concluding references to the modern South African poets are somewhat perfunctory and (as I suggested above) he begins to catalogue by merely putting a lot of names together. Even so, he does single out (and cite from) Mtshali, Serote and Nortje.

The final chapter in *Tasks and Masks*⁵⁴ deals with (mostly modern) “African Drama: Its Themes and Styles” in an intelligent, erudite and interesting way, with many flashes of Nkosi’s acerbic wit. I quote only one ‘representative’ paragraph from it:

Whereas traditional drama speaks for the community as a whole, and whereas its purpose is to express the community’s shared beliefs actualised in certain religious practices, now drama becomes the ideological projections of the social frustrations of the new middle classes to which African writers in general are invariably attached as a group even as they continue to express dissatisfaction with the hostility toward this class.⁵⁵

I have not yet dealt with the *Tasks and Masks* essays on African novels in English (the third and fourth chapters of this collection, 30–75), titled respectively “History as the ‘Hero’ of the African Novel” and “The New African Novel: A Search for Modernism.” While his astute comments and subtle

⁵³ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 151–52.

⁵⁴ Compare the much less ambitious and shorter essay titled “Towards a New African Theatre”; *Home and Exile*, 118–22.

⁵⁵ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 177.

insights vis-à-vis Achebe's 'Igbo' novels are not to be faulted, Nkosi underestimates Ngugi's wonderful *A Grain of Wheat* (1968), imputing a mere "drab, dreary dignity" to Ngugi's characters and failing to perceive the compassion with which their failures are portrayed, or the finely complex structure of this text. On the other hand, he is complimentary when he writes of Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* (1970) that "It is not only the depiction of the workers' struggle but the richness and variety of the characterisation which give this novel its peculiar power and muscularity."⁵⁶

Nkosi is one of the few critics to have noticed the firm tongue-in-cheek of the novelist Yambo Ouologem, with reference to his controversial *Bound to Violence* (1971). Of this blood-soaked text (Ouologem is a sort of Quentin Tarantino in fiction), Nkosi writes aptly that it is "a grim picture, with more than a touch of cruel, if hilarious insanity about it" (49). I disagree with Nkosi's suggestion that the problem with Peter Abrahams' *Wild Conquest* (1951) is that it "fail[s] to arbitrate properly between legitimate African interests and the illegitimate claims to plunder by a white settler minority" (49), however – if it is wrong for the Trekkers to assume the right to move into others' territory, it must also be wrong for the Matabele to subjugate other Africans – and Abraham's title alone acknowledges as much.

It is a pity that Nkosi, early in the second of the two chapters presently under discussion, lends his authority to a persistent generalization about the earlier group of African novels as simply (ie uncritically) "celebrat[ing] [...] the] momentous [...] event" of decolonization. He also sounds unfortunately condescending here, in describing "traditional fiction" as *merely* "telling a story" – as if the telling of any story does not involve artistic choices.⁵⁷ Amos Tutuola, Gabriel Okara, Camara Laye, Kofi Awoonor and Ayi Kwei Armah's texts are very deftly discussed, however, and from an intelligent, perceptively appreciative perspective – the most satisfying kind of criticism. Less appreciative, but entirely valid and well-argued, is Nkosi's criticism of Ngugi's big novel *Petals of Blood* (1977): he calls it "a fable-cum-satire-cum-realist fiction" devised "to illustrate class formations in modern Kenya" – a clear example of allowing "the Idea" to assume a "primal value" *over* "Life" (73).

Besides, and complementary to, his published literary criticism, Nkosi interviewed over the years a large number of the most prominent African authors – interviews that appeared in print or were broadcast (both on radio and on television), especially in Britain and in the USA. Such work contributed valuably to the wider dissemination of knowledge of African authors' concerns and achievements. He is a skilful and knowledgeable interviewer

⁵⁶ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 44.

⁵⁷ *Tasks and Masks*, 55.

who combines an ‘insider’s’ information with the tact of one who knows his (mostly ‘Western’) readers’ or audience’s ignorance and preferences as well as the African authors’ accomplishments and their ‘home’ audience’s sensitivities. His work as editor of the *New African* (an important literary, cultural and political forum) – in London between 1965 and 1968 – was immensely valuable; this periodical still makes for exciting, sometimes riveting reading and is an invaluable record of some of the debates of that time.

In the first chapter of *Tasks and Masks*, Nkosi raised the prickly issue of “The Language Crisis” faced by African writers who write in the languages brought to the continent by colonialism:

modern African writing has its origins in the politics of anti-colonial struggle and still bears the marks of that struggle. That observation alone yields another more astounding recollection, that in asserting their right to self-determination Africans had to employ the languages of their colonial masters; that the rhetoric of political demand they adopted was better understood in Europe [...] than among the African masses for whom, presumably, the demands were being made.⁵⁸

But he unwittingly forestalls Bhabha’s concept of hybridity (in *The Location of Culture*, 1994) by recognizing here, at the beginning of the 1980s, that “even at its most complex and formally competent level, this literature presents to us the aspect of a *cultural hybrid* in which African and European concerns are inextricably mixed through the twine and woof of a common language” (2) – at this point not seeing, however, that that very “complex[ity]” and the “[formal] competence,” he mentions have *resulted* from the both destabilizing and enriching effect of the cultural encounter, and losing sight of the fact that not only the African novelists, but their people, have been irreversible affected by that encounter. Later in the essay, Nkosi does point out that “Just because a work inhibits that area of experience which is considered ‘authentically’ African does not make it automatically better as a work of art than another which exhibits the results of contact with Western culture,” and he moves in the direction of recognizing that the confusion of modernization with westernization has bedevilled African studies when he refers to black South African literature as having “suffered unjustly from this prejudice against its urbanity” (7). The function of writers, he notes elsewhere, is “to reveal our inner geography to the world as well as to ourselves; and this is all we can ask of our writers” (117). It is no more “praiseworthy,” Nkosi notes, to reject everything not considered “indigenous” than it is to “accept indiscriminately” everything considered “Western”; he notes the

⁵⁸ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 1.

irony that what “African peoples on the continent” share is, especially, their experience of colonization and that it is this that provided them with a type of “common language”: so “out of rejection had come an affirmation” (120, 124). These ideas seem to me eminently sane and even profound, though they cut against the grain of much popular thinking and many political utterances.

Nkosi as a critic is still very much with us and, of course, even occasionally among us in South Africa, although I have in this assessment concentrated on the earlier, collected pieces. His essay on a piece by Kelwyn Sole makes sardonic reference to “Sole in 1994 sermonising the need for the democratisation of South African culture and literature” and becomes more scathing as it goes along, describing the piece as “too long [...] too cautious [...] too replete with numbing clichés” in its “animadversions.” Clearly provoked to a point where he abandons his more usual urbane and sophisticated stance, Nkosi insists angrily, *contra* Sole, that “The charge of ‘elitism’ and ‘self-legitimation’ sits ill upon the lips of those who occupy positions of power and privilege through a legacy of racial and colonial oppression.”⁵⁹ For a collection of essays titled *Writing South Africa* (1998), Nkosi writes on “Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa,” seeing as still “unhealed” the “split between black and white writing” and imputing a lingering “colonial”⁶⁰ status to black writing. It was perhaps somewhat early at that stage to have expected an immediate blossoming of black literature, but in this essay Nkosi continues (simultaneously) to lament an “absence” of “symbolist and surrealist innovation” in black South African fiction and the persistence of what he sees as “‘black’ realist fiction” in the country (86, 83). It would be interesting to hear what Nkosi makes of more recent texts by K. Sello Duiker (2001), Phaswane Mpe (2001) and Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). In the essay “The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic,”⁶¹ Nkosi does of course discuss both Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000) and Mda’s *Heart of Redness* (2000). Nkosi acknowledges that both Wicomb and Mda share his own sense of a continuing *absence* of nationhood in South Africa. If apartheid, then, remains “a shadow of unpunished wickedness” (to quote from the Summary) in both our lives and our texts, then there

⁵⁹ Nkosi, “Sole and the Symptoms of Nervous Breakdown,” *Current Writing* 6.2 (1994): 55, 56, 57.

⁶⁰ Lewis Nkosi, “Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy 1970–1995*, ed. Derek Attridge & Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998): 75.

⁶¹ Nkosi, “The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic,” 240–58.

may also be a haunting and unassuaged yearning for shared nationhood – not only in the texts he analyzes here, but perhaps also in Nkosi himself.⁶²

To conclude: Nkosi's critical oeuvre presents us with a robust, provocative but rigorous voice that has immensely enriched South African – and the more broadly continental and diasporic African – culture(s). His writing is always interesting, even when one disagrees with him; and he often displays a marvellous sureness of touch. This is never better displayed, I believe, than in his brief, brilliant 1975 essay on Defoe's eighteenth-century British text: "Robinson Crusoe: Call Me Master,"⁶³ a piece that vividly illustrates (and predates) many postcolonial theorists' interest in reconsidering the canonical texts of the colonizing cultures from the perspective of those once colonized. Its authority, eloquence and stylistic accomplishment are inspiring – qualities that continue to feature in Nkosi's criticism written during his mature years. Having been a pioneer in so many respects, Nkosi has earned the advantage of what one might call an 'enduring contemporaneity' as a literary critic.

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⁶² "The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic," 254.

⁶³ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 151–56.

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2 Lewis Nkosi's Early Literary Criticism

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LEWIS NKOSI belongs to the list of optimists who have written on the South African reality. A versatile and multi-talented man, he is a literary critic, commentator on African affairs, journalist, dramatist and novelist. This essay, as it focuses on his early work, explores his contribution to African and South African letters largely through his work as an essayist. Nkosi was one of the journalists, and people in the arts, who formed a nucleus around Can Themba (1924–68) and his early colleagues from that now almost *too* legendary *Drum* era. The group included Henry Nxumalo (1918–57), called both brilliant and erratic by those who knew him, Todd Matshikiza, a jazz composer and pianist, and Casey Motsisi (1932–77), known to his contemporaries as “the kid,” who specialized in off-beat commentary on the shebeens. Nkosi’s writing life was, from its beginnings, multi-faceted, and perhaps his long stamina and creative and critical range arose from this versatility of voice that the era imposed on him: his early years saw him working as a magazine editor and broadcast journalist in Durban, Johannesburg, London and the USA, where he both studied and wrote. His artistic position lay between that of the above-named creative writers and that of Ezekiel Mphahlele, who, like him, was to make a significant contribution to the South African literary landscape as both scholar and creative writer. In his response to the South African reality, he always poised the social fact against the art. He worried about the style in which to present the mix of violence and glamour of the South African scene, so that one could “sustain a tone of irony and detachment.”¹ He asked himself the question: “how does one begin to write about apartheid in a way that would be meaningful to people who have

¹ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1965; London: Longman, 1983): Preface.

not experienced it?”² Constantly, he sympathized with writers who sought to translate the bitter reality of apartheid into imaginative literature:

In South Africa any overzealous policeman can arrest an African and take him down to the station-house without the vaguest idea what charges to prefer against him. If he is diligent enough, he can later find something with which to charge him. There are a hundred and one laws in the country controlling the lives of black people, and at any particular time there is a fat chance that one of them is being broken.³

Nkosi’s work, together with that of Ezekiel Mphahlele and Nadine Gordimer, can be seen as in some ways complementary; each was to have a unique niche in the annals of the 1950s. Gordimer, in her memories of that era, recalled him with nostalgia:

I got to know Can Themba – who didn’t? – and one day he turned up at my home and with him a rather snooty-looking young man, Lewis Nkosi, who had come up from Durban and was going to do some work on *Drum*. Lewis sat around looking very bored and finally said to me, “Any music in this place?” “Yes” I said. “These are the records” “This is not music,” he said, “It’s all classical!” He was quite exceptional among the *Drum* group because after living about three months in Sophiatown in Can Themba’s famous “House of Truth,” he got very friendly with a white girl and went to live with her in white suburb, Park View! He didn’t care a damn and would simply come out of that house in the morning always looking extremely well dressed. And nothing happened to him. He had a way of staring at people [...] if whites started any nonsense, it just fell away.⁴

Nkosi’s early essays commenting, often trenchantly, on literary matters and on the political scene, were published in *The New African*, *The Harvard Crimson* and *The Guardian* before they were later assembled, with some expansion, in *Home and Exile* (1965 [1983]). Other early pieces were collected in the Nigerian publication *The Transplanted Heart: Essays on South Africa* (1975). His early style carried a kind of detached humour, and an urbane irony verging on nonchalance. It was, perhaps, an aspect of the *Drum* approach, which was defined by its exponents as ironic and witty and at the same time as an attack upon apartheid. As a style, it would be frowned upon

² Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 25.

³ *Home and Exile*, 26.

⁴ Nancy Topping Brazin & Marilyn Dallman Seymour, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1990): 249–50.

today among many black writers.⁵ Besides the “cool sober prose in which they permitted themselves the luxury of a laugh,” which characterized many of the *Drum* figures,⁶ as a generation of writers they were also immensely cosmopolitan. As Nadine Gordimer expressed it,

The 'fifties intellectuals and artists read anything and everything. They were city people, educated before the Bantu education and their English was wonderfully, tremendously lively. Illiteracy didn't pass as innovation then!⁷

Nkosi confirms this love of language when he writes of his early days in Johannesburg:

I walked about the streets of the bustling noisy city with new English words clicking like coins in the pockets of my mind; I tried them out on each passing scene, relishing their power to describe and apprehend experience; I used words to delineate faces I saw in the streets and through them I evoked the luminous figures from the closed world of the imagination.⁸

Yet Nkosi's intense relation to Western aesthetics often meant that he created a distance between himself and his colleagues, and at times he wrote acerbically about his fellow-writers. In his survey of the writing of Richard Rive, Bloke Modisane, Es'kia Mphahlele and Alex La Guma, he famously castigates “the fiction of black South Africans,” accusing them of lacking the combination of art and imagination needed to grasp the African reality:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa.⁹

However, the young Nkosi's stringent literary requirements, which included the search for a new aesthetic, were sometimes fulfilled by Alex La Guma and Ezekiel Mphahlele. He commends the latter on his experimentation with African-language speech forms and idiom in his early fiction. The transliteration and rearrangement of African syntax, reminiscent of Gabriel Okara's

⁵ Brazin & Seymour, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 251.

⁶ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 7.

⁷ Brazin & Seymour, *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 251–52.

⁸ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 7.

⁹ *Home and Exile*, 31.

experiment in *The Voice*, seemed a promising innovation. Moreover, he praised the early Mphahlele's inclusion of African performativity – through festivity and ritual – as a means of achieving tragicomic effects, citing short stories in Mphahlele's *In Corner B* (1967) and *Man Must Live and Other Stories* (1946) to support his views. He points in a prescient way to the linguistic and creative energies of transcultural writing:

What Mphahlele has been trying to do is reclaim some of these words from the African languages back into the English where they have their origin anyway; and simultaneously he exploits the new connotative element they have since acquired by their association with the African languages: in so doing he manages to give them a slightly ambivalent satirical content which they would not otherwise possess.¹⁰

Yet in spite of his positive view of Mphahlele's experimentation with African spoken and literary traditions, Nkosi does not spare Mphahlele when – in his view – the latter slips into convoluted prose; on such occasions he trenchantly accuses him of “a certain dullness of phrase, much like the ponderous speech of a dull-witted person.”¹¹

Nkosi's sharp comments did, on occasion, “draw blood.” In the case of the Cape Town writer Richard Rive, outspoken critiques drew an angry response. After Nkosi's comments on what he termed the poverty of art in *Emergency*, Richard Rive wrote back indignantly, smelling personal vendetta in the attack. Nkosi also interviewed Rive in April 1963, in the studios of the Transcription Centre in Norfolk Street, London, which was run by Dennis Duerden.¹² At about the same time he published a review of Rive's *African Songs*. This, too, met with vitriol from Richard Rive. Nkosi later commented:

I was surprised to read in the next issue of *The Classic* an intemperate reply in which the author accused me of “nihilistic criticism” done for motives “personal or otherwise,” and haughtily objected that it would be ridiculous for him “to even try to make a case for the moon ‘twinkling back respectfully’.”¹³

Nkosi was certainly alert to the potential of new linguistic and stylistic identities that could come into being through innovations such as those of the early Mphahlele referred to above. Yet in general the identity that Nkosi (and

¹⁰ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 134.

¹¹ *Home and Exile*, 135.

¹² Nkosi, “Richard Rive,” in *African Writers Talking*, ed. Dennis Duerden & Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972): 157–59.

¹³ *Home and Exile*, 136.

those in the 1960s who thought like him) wanted to give our literature was largely mapped by European societies. Perhaps we should take their ideas in the spirit of comparative studies, rather than seeing the Nkosi stance as simply one of servile mimicry.

The criticism levelled against him notwithstanding, Nkosi is one of the most accomplished non-fiction writers that the continent has produced and his early work, often bold, irreverent and erudite, pointed the way for later critics and essayists. Certainly the South African scene that he presented to us after he left South Africa for Europe, and was in exile in England, was a painful and tragic one. It produced moving literary documents like Alex La Guma's *A Walk in The Night* (1962), *And a Threefold Cord* (1964) and *The Stone Country* (1967); Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom*; Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Man Must Live and Other Stories* (1947), *The African Image* (1962), *The Living and the Dead and Other Stories* (1961), *Down Second Avenue* (1959), *Modern African Stories* (1964) and *In Corner B* (1967).

In those early years, when African intellectuals and politicians were still full of the heady enthusiasm of nationalism and optimism for the continent, Nkosi was able to incorporate what writers were articulating into a larger canvas of African sensibilities. Through being published outside South Africa, the prose of his compatriots gained a larger resonance and could be seen as part of a broader African, even global, writing presence. The prose of Can Themba and Casey Motsisi stood out in coexistence with that of Alex La Guma, which was introduced to the world by Ulli Beier in Lagos, Nigeria. La Guma attracted the attention of literary critics of the 1960s by capturing in his prose the fleeting quotidian moments of the urban and sordid landscape of Cape Town's District Six. The art of his fiction made Lewis Nkosi think of nineteenth-century Russian realists like Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. These were Russian writers of all time, and the comparison honoured La Guma's art. In his essays in the collection *Home and Exile*, first published in 1965, Nkosi celebrated the suggestive power of La Guma's prose, describing "A Glass of Wine" as "a superbly observed story with an appropriate dialogue that relies on the speech idioms of the Cape Malay folk."¹⁴

When Nkosi placed Alex La Guma side by side with other African writers he saw him as a critical realist, tempering his fury with artistic genius and good humour. Yet he praised him for the wrong reasons. La Guma dealt with the theme of annihilation – the psychological and cosmic peril to which man is subject. He portrayed the diminished structure of man – the product of overwhelming oppression, humanity stripped of all its grace in the Dosto-

¹⁴ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 137.

evskian sense. La Guma's central theme and symbol is man – the human person, diminished man and his hopes and his attempt to reclaim his original self in the face of a brutal system. Nkosi is right to call upon the South African writer to transform the social 'fact' of apartheid into art. He is right to praise La Guma for his realism and imaginative ability to re-order the South African social fact. But he is mistaken in overlooking the atmosphere of doom that pervades the plot of *A Walk in The Night*. As J.M. Coetzee expressed it,

A Walk in The Night, despite its naturalist assumptions, and doom-laden atmosphere, contains embedded in it an analysis of the political weakness of coloured society in South Africa and it implies an explanation of the negativity of a fiction that realistically portrays that society.¹⁵

The questions that Lewis Nkosi helped us to formulate in the late 1960s were: What kind of literature ought the Africa of the 1950s and the 1960s to evolve? What value does the experimental line taken by twentieth-century Europe hold for Africa? What lessons might African writers learn from the European literary masters? And what role should the writer play in the political struggle?

Lewis Nkosi came out very strongly on this issue and put it shockingly and amusingly. For him, a writer was not necessarily the epitome of virtue, valour or even sanity. He refused to valorize the writer or set him up as an icon. He said at a conference in Uppsala, Sweden:

We may, of course, feel that as a writer, or as citizen or as a father and a husband, a certain writer is just a plain bastard; we may feel that so far as revolution is concerned, he is a coward. I have no statistics to present, but I am inclined to believe that most writers have been improvident in the past; they are probably congenital liars, drunks, fornicators and likely to lower the moral tone of society. Perhaps revolutionary forces are better off without this type of writer, indeed, I fail to see what particular use a deranged poet is to the armed struggle, but I suppose you can always find something to do for even a bad lot during times of emergency. Certainly writers can run errands and carry sandwiches to the front and a few may even be as Hemingway and carry guns and actually fight.¹⁶

As a journalist and literary critic based in the North, Nkosi wrote consciously balancing the literature of the African continent against the literature of the

¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, "Alex La Guma and the Responsibilities of the South African Writer," *Journal of African Literature and Arts* 9–10 (1971): 8.

¹⁶ Per Wästberg, *The Writer in Modern Africa* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell/Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968): 48–49.

African diaspora, which he had read thoroughly and digested. The continent was calling for freedom under the leading nationalist voices which Nkosi identified as new Africans. They included Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Tom Mboya of Kenya, Patrice Lumumba of the Congo. They expressed the new African spirit and the humanism on which the future of Africa was to be built. The wars of 1914–18 and 1939–45 opened African eyes to a new clamour for freedom. James Baldwin's essay *The Fire Next Time* (1963) entered Nkosi's literary bloodstream. So digested was it that the protest and the vocabulary of racial integration, the passion and grace that characterized that essay, burst out effortlessly in Nkosi's *Home and Exile*. Indeed, when Nkosi wrote his essay "On South Africa," in *Transition* 38 (to which I return later), it was subtitled "The Fire Some Time," in an echo of Baldwin's essay. In the North, the Lewis Nkosi of the 1960s was preoccupied with the theme of Africa in American poetry, and he read Lorraine Hansberry, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and Ralph Ellison for insights in delineating this theme. Of course, before Nkosi left South Africa for London and for good, he and other *Drum* writers interacted with Langston Hughes, the author of such poems of memory and resistance as "A Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Simple Speaks His Mind."

Nkosi likened life in the midst of the perverse race laws of South Africa to a theatre of the absurd. The actors in this theatre were the *Drum* writers, who included Nkosi himself, musicians, and the police. As a journalist writing on day-to-day life in South Africa, Nkosi brought out politics and life in Johannesburg in the 1950s and the 1960s. The themes of his 'drama' are sex, crime, alcoholism, violence and death. Coming to these issues with a literary mind, Lewis Nkosi said:

It is not so much the intense suffering (though this helped a great deal) which makes it impossible for black writers to produce long and complex works of literary genius as it is the very absorbing, violent and immediate nature of experience which impinges upon individual life.¹⁷

Nkosi encouraged himself to look at the incongruities of life with a sense of humour, something that worked for him and his *Drum* colleagues as a survival mechanism. For Nkosi, the writer did not have to embellish life as it was lived around him; it was already absurd. He says:

In South Africa there was often a very thin margin between fantasy and reality. I have often thought many times afterwards how difficult it must

¹⁷ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 12.

be to try and reclaim some of this bitter reality for imaginative literature. Words seem to break under the strain.¹⁸

Nkosi's essays in *Home and Exile* capture the ferment of an era of change in the life of the African continent. The pages retain the flavour of the debates on the role of the writer in society that characterized African writers' conferences in Africa and Europe. Many of the interviews from his radio sessions with creative writers – figures such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Ugandan Robert Serumaga – as well as with literary journalists who visited the Transcription Centre in London were published in the 1972 book *African Writers Talking*, edited by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse. He was concerned with biographical and background information on creative writers, literary influences, and the projects which the writers were to undertake in the future. This approach sometimes infuriated the writers, but helped readers in their own analysis and enjoyment of the literary text. Nkosi also gauged the writing pulse of the times through acute observations at key conferences and gatherings of writers and thinkers in Africa, Europe and North America. One of the events he attended was the historic 1962 seminar of African writers in English, in Kampala, Uganda. There he met such figures as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark, Gabriel Okara, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau. His peripatetic, insouciantly insightful interviews with Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Cyprian Ekwensi, Mazisi Kunene, Alex La Guma, John Nagenda, Christopher Okigbo, Richard Rive and Wole Soyinka all appeared in the *African Writers Talking* (1972) collection I mentioned above. In addition to creative writers working in English, Nkosi met scholars such as the Nigerian Donatus Nwoga and Gerald Moore, who worked extensively with francophone African writers. It was perhaps Moore who introduced francophone writers to gatherings attended by Lewis Nkosi. Certainly the issue of Negritude and the African Personality were among the topics very much in the air in those years of the early 1960s; Mphahlele famously scorned the movement (1972). Nkosi's position was far more measured, and he consistently saw the value of the movement as an imaginative centre for African artists, a position he enlarged upon in the *Home and Exile* collection.

The respect held for Nkosi by his peers from other parts of Africa can be seen by his being invited to contribute the essay on South Africa to *Transition* 38, in 1971. Here, a certain helplessness at his own distance from the events upon which he wishes to comment, and an agonizing over the role of the artist, is evident:

¹⁸ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 16.

Nevertheless this is the truth; and in the seventies we might as well admit that those of us who are outside South Africa, whether we consider ourselves revolutionaries or not, are playing a marginal role. We may be good for propaganda; we may raise some money and build up contacts for the people of South Africa; but there is no such thing as a revolution fought in exile without a base among the oppressed masses of the country for which change is desired.¹⁹

Critics of this period were greatly challenged by Jean-Paul Sartre's book *What is Literature?* (1967) and T.S. Eliot's essays in *Notes Towards The Definition of Culture* (1967), including the latter's "The Artist and Individual Talent." Lewis Nkosi was no exception. He regarded South Africa as a land undergoing revolutionary change, it was therefore normal for an African writer to be committed. As he put it,

The idea of an artist as someone who stands apart and questions his society is admittedly a foreign one in Africa. Before we can meaningfully talk about the role of the poet in present-day African society we must draw a contrast between what is accepted as the role of the artist in Western society and that conceived for the artist in the traditional African society.²⁰

He was giving a rebuttal to Sartre's thesis on engagement in literature. Although Nkosi repudiated Sartre, he took out of context the latter's notion of the need to renounce some forms of literature during a revolutionary struggle. The reasons Nkosi wanted literature by South Africans renounced differed from the criteria put forward by Sartre. For the latter, literature had to take a stand on public issues. It should lucidly express a revolutionary ethos. For Nkosi, by contrast, literature should not only deal effectively with public issues but should also have the stamp of excellent art.

The way in which Nkosi and his contemporaries related to the ideas of T.S. Eliot yet pushed them in another direction is interesting: Eliot saw the writer as a man or woman who continued the tradition set by his or her predecessors who were also writers. Nkosi and those of his time similarly sought to define African literature and the tradition in which it was composed. The African artist was a teacher who cared about the education he or she was imparting to society, as well as about the artistic presentation of that education. Nkosi, developing in this intellectual environment, concerned himself with form and content in literature. He drew the themes of the literature he discussed from

¹⁹ Lewis Nkosi, "On South Africa: The Fire Some Time," *Transition* 38 (1971): 31.

²⁰ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 114.

the overarching one of colonialism, the struggle for liberation and what was seen as the arcadian condition of precolonial Africa.

Nkosi contributed to the debate on “The Writer in a Modern African State,” in which Wole Soyinka challenged his contemporaries to emulate the traditional artist in African society. Soyinka said:

The artist has always functioned in an African society as the record of the *mores* and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to the essence of himself.²¹

Yet, in general, Nkosi downplayed the political commitment of the writer and stressed artistic engagement. He wanted to stimulate a debate which has continued in the African mass media and in university literature postgraduate seminar rooms. He said:

There is a lot of committed literature which is simply bad literature and our commitment as writers is a commitment to craft, to being good writers.²²

That apartheid as a theme was too long harped on by black South African writers seemed to have nauseated Nkosi in his safety in exile. He argued that South African writers were more interested in the situation than in the people. He argued that they were interested in the impact of the situation on them as individuals. What he forgot was that the duty of the writer was not only to explain the apartheid world but to change it. He went so far as to suggest that the best thing was to suspend literature in South Africa altogether until the situation of apartheid was resolved. Many writers could not transcend the situation sufficiently to attain universality. Thus he wrote in the 1960s:

It seems to me that the overheated atmosphere of change and power-acquisition in which the masses of the people may even be compelled to do things, the pre-eminent duty of literature is still to proclaim the primal value of life over the idea.²³

To some extent he has tried to prove his point by writing like Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, J.M Coetzee and André Brink, who are rooted in the Great Tradition. But Nkosi’s literary approach is not rooted in any African aesthetic to which he might pay occasional lip service. Rather, his approach is rooted in the romantic tradition which celebrated the genius of a writer as an

²¹ Wästberg, *The Writer in Modern Africa*, 25.

²² *The Writer in Modern Africa*, 27.

²³ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 117.

organizing focus of the creation of literature. Nkosi captured the mood of his contemporaries not only in South Africa but also in East Africa and in the West. He is a black literary critic who, in a time of inequity and iniquity, wanted to be as good as his white contemporaries in the West. But he never took race as the sole benchmark of African literature. He also asked the question: "What makes it literature and not journalism?" If he is indignant with his fellow South African writers, it is not because they have not appreciatively incorporated the South African situation into their art, but, rather, because they have done so with insufficient artistic imagination.

Conclusion

Lewis Nkosi has made a striking contribution to the criticism of literature in Africa. Rising from the humble background of a young Zulu journalist writing for *Drum* magazine to the eminence of an international commentator, after leaving the country, he wrote wry and provocative works that criticized the absurdity and the cruelty of daily life in South Africa. He questioned the South African liberal tradition and hailed the South African revolutionary spirit. He recognized the need for commitment in literature but at the same time foregrounded the supremacy of art in literature. For him, form was as important in the composition of literature as content. Nkosi sometimes saw himself as a propagandist for the South African revolutionary cause, but he ended up more as an advocate of 'art in revolution'.

His work is deafeningly silent on women writers, but this was not unusual for his times. Unlike J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and André Brink, who target their writings primarily at Europe and North America, Nkosi is a map-maker who traverses the entire continent in the manner of the *Drum* magazine and *Transition*, and talks to the African and black man wherever he is. Indeed, he goes beyond the literature of black and white people in Africa, and deals with black and white people in the diaspora. Like those of East Africa's Ali A. Mazrui, Nkosi's essays gave *Transition* a resounding intellectual and polemical tone. The resilience of that magazine is reflected in its geographical relocation from East Africa to West Africa, ultimately finding its present home in the African diaspora and the African-American voice of the USA. Nkosi's voice with its characteristically provocative still resonates in its pages. The pungent flavour of his words and ideas, which invigorated the debates on literature and society in the 1960s and 1970s and which were a source of great delight for the reader, lingers on, and has in no way lost its relevance.

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3

Lewis Nkosi: A Commentary Piece

OYEKAN OWOMOYELA

AS A STUDENT OF AFRICAN THEATER in the 1960s, I became acquainted with Lewis Nkosi through his short play *The Rhythm of Violence* (1964), which dramatized the irrationality of apartheid and its random destructiveness. In the ensuing years he has kept my attention with his provocative and astute critical observations on African writers and literature, more than has his creative writing. The earliest of those observations to come to mind occurred in 1962; it was quite succinct, yet *à propos*. It was the time of independences, when many sub-Saharan Africans were fully convinced that “the beautiful ones” had already been born. Who they were was for some a matter of conjecture, but one group that had no apparent doubts about their status as “beautiful” were the generation of writers who became prominent in those years. They were sustained in their self-assessment by the sudden spotlight trained on them from practically all corners of the Western and Eastern worlds, the clamour to lure them to performances as honoured and celebrated guests on stages in those worlds, and their own evident assurance of election.

The assurance and its effects were palpable at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression held at Makerere College, Kampala, 11–17 June 1962, about which Nkosi made the comment I have referred to above. In his report on the proceedings, published in the *Guardian* of 8 August 1962, he recalled the writers “talking endlessly about the problems of creation, and looking [...] as though they were amazed that fate had entrusted them with the task of interpreting a continent to the world.” He further described them, especially the younger ones, as “a company of literary cut-throats, out to get one another at the slightest provocation.” He exempted the older ones, like Ezekiel Mphahlele and Chinua Achebe, whom he regarded as “by far the

calmest and most disciplined"¹ of the lot. From his accounts of the goings-on at the Kampala conference, though, one might conclude that his characterization of the band of writers could apply to even some of the older ones, considering his description of Soyinka's ridiculing of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Negritude (to the annoyance of the francophone observers) and Christopher Okigbo's parodying of Gabriel Okara's poetry.

What made the writers *seem* like "literary cut-throats," one imagines, had something to do with the fierce and sometimes acrimonious competition among themselves for preeminence, competition manifest in their derogation of colleagues' works and irate responses to criticisms of their own. Many of the writers seemed determined to elbow the competition out of the limelight, if not completely off the stage, in a bid to monopolize the tributes the world was amassing for the new voices of Africa. At a later conference, the African-Scandinavian Writers Conference which took place 6–9 February 1967 in Stockholm, Wole Soyinka illustrated the prevailing atmosphere in the writers' world at the time, and the mind-set Nkosi noticed in Kampala and that I have been describing. In his speech he noted that in those heady days of African literature "the curiosity of the outside world far exceeded its critical faculties and publishers hovered like benevolent vultures over the still-born foetus of the African Muse," and added that the "average published writer in the first few years of the post-colonial era was the most celebrated skin of inconsequence to obscure the true flesh of the African dilemma."²

Nkosi was present at the conference, this time as another writer and not simply as a rapporteur. Listening to Soyinka express those opinions, he might have been reminded of his report on the Kampala gathering and the views he formed of the writers as literary cut-throats. Having listened to Soyinka, Nkosi challenged him on other assertions he made aside from his assessment of the quality of African writing. Soyinka had identified the writer as "the special eye and ear, the special knowledge and response" of society, as well as "the voice of vision in his own time" (21) who had a more legitimate claim to power in the state than did the current (usurping) rulers. Although the speech was most solicitous (perilously close to patronizing) of South African writers and their plight – they were forced into exile or snuffed out at home, and failed by writers in the rest of Africa, who did not realize how much better they had things than their benighted South African colleagues – it

¹ Lewis Nkosi, Press Report, Proceedings of the Conference of African Writers of English Expression, Kampala, Uganda: Makerere College, 1962. MAK./V(1): 1.

² Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," in *The Writer in Modern Africa: African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1967*, ed Per Wästberg (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968): 17.

nonetheless provoked a sceptical response from Nkosi. He disputed the view that a writer, *as such*, had any special role in society, or that the quality of a writer's product had any correlation with the quality of his or her citizenship.³ Reminding his audience of the radical differences between the relationship of the traditional artist to his community (which Soyinka had invoked in support of his thesis) and that of the writer in the new (bourgeois) African states, Nkosi dismissed as illusory the writers' notion that they were destined to shape the affairs of their nations. In a later elaboration he said, "It is [...] my view that talk such as we heard [...] – that poets in Africa should and are going to provide a vision of what is to happen – is false and misleading. Writers are going to do no such thing. I am tempted to be contentious and say that good writers are certainly going to do no such thing!" (46–47).

Consistent with his observation about the writers at the Kampala conference, Nkosi's response to Soyinka was indicative of a tendency to be put off by writers who in his view take themselves too seriously. One sees evidence of it again in a more recent commentary on the career of the celebrated Chinua Achebe, commentary that reconfirms my earlier suggestion that his view of the young writers at Kampala was perhaps applicable to some of their elders. "At the Crossroads Hour" is Nkosi's review of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's book *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (1997). The review was published in the *London Review of Books*, 12 November 1998. Although his main interest was in the success of the author in evaluating Achebe's remarkable career, he deviated slightly to offer some opinions of Achebe himself. Noting that Achebe "is not exactly self-effacing but his demeanour makes him *seem* so" (my emphasis), Nkosi went on to suggest that despite (or because of) the worship the reputed father of African literature has enjoyed, bolstered by his "millions of words of public statements, of reviews and interviews, of adulation and accusation," he has had to pay a high price for being "Africa's greatest indigenous novelist." With a hint of cynicism, which reminds one of his dismissal of the writer's assumption that he had a special mission in (and responsibility for) society, Nkosi referred to "what [Achebe] has sometimes referred to as his 'gift of responsibility'."

As for Ezenwa-Ohaeto's book, Nkosi's judgement is that it was doomed by both the author's relationship to his subject and the subject's own personality. He faults the book for its "lack of independence," its too obvious fawning over Achebe, which he attributes to the fact that Ezenwa-Ohaeto was once Achebe's student, and his acknowledged trepidation while contemplating the writing of the book that he might somehow displease his erstwhile teacher. He had consequently taken too great care, in Nkosi's words, to "es-

³ Lewis Nkosi, in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. Wästberg, 26–27.

cape chastisement by avoiding even the merest hint of criticism.” His suggestion is that Ezenwa–Ohaeto might have been overly cautious so as not to provoke Achebe’s ire, but Ezenwa–Ohaeto must have known that he had other people besides Achebe to worry about, for even if the master chose to maintain his well-cultivated image of self-effacement he could count on a phalanx of stalwart surrogates to take to the lists on his behalf. For example, the simple, factual observation that despite descriptions of Achebe as the father of modern African literature he was not in fact the first modern African writer to be published enraged his champion Michael J.C. Echeruo enough that he mounted an intemperate assault on the source of the observation, which he obviously either misconstrued or never read himself. The cordon that keeps him effectively untouchable, whether it resulted from his own initiative or from that of others, is in Nkosi’s view a “penance” for “the joy of creation and self-realization,” for “the thrill of representing the drama of a vast, unwieldy and refractory continent.” Part of the price for being “Africa’s greatest indigenous writer,” he says, is that “in Achebe, African literature has lost an author in order to find a father figure.”⁴

Characteristic of Nkosi’s interventions in discussions of African literary practice has been a penchant for discouraging excessive claims and flamboyant gestures that close scrutiny cannot validate: in other words, to speak caution to excess. That trait can be seen in his contribution to the Negritude debate, and to the one on the extent to which Western literary traditions should influence African writing, or, to put it differently, on the autonomy of African literature. With regard to the latter, the fear has been rampant since the 1960s that the progressive westernization of African tastes will inevitably result in the enthronement of Western values and habits on the continent, and the eventual demise of African ones. To obviate that eventuality, so-called cultural nationalists urged that Africans shun as much foreign cultural import as possible – as the Nigerian nationalist Mazi Mbonu Ojike put it, that they “boycott all boycottables.” Writers and literary critics, for their part, pronounced on the desirability of banning Western influences from African letters, of decolonizing African literature and decolonizing the African mind. Pronouncements such as these proved to be powerful bases for notoriety or popularity (depending on one’s bias) for those who made them. Nkosi found them disturbing, though, and, in *Tasks and Masks*, wondered, given the dependence of African literature on European languages, and given the system of education that gave it birth, “how can anyone speak of the works of Achebe, Ngugi,

⁴ Lewis Nkosi, “At the Crossroads Hour,” *London Review of Books* 20.22 (12 November 1998): 13–15.

Okigbo, Clark, Senghor and many others, as existing on terms ‘totally independent of any other tradition but the African one’?⁵

Nkosi was one of the few anglophone writers or critics who resisted the widespread inclination to pooh-pooh the francophone phenomenon in the 1960s. He chastised his anglophone colleagues for their anti-intellectual attitude towards Negritude and cultural studies generally, which he attributed to “an inherent suspicion of metaphysics” and inability to understand the French predilection for constructing elaborate systems on even the flimsiest of phenomena. But he aimed his criticism most directly at his fellow South African Ezekiel Mphahlele, who in his book *The African Image* (1962) insisted that Negritude must be intrinsic to whatever work of art expresses it, and not an intellectual extrapolation. While acknowledging his thoughtfulness with regard to the aesthetic issues Negritude raised, Nkosi objects to what he saw as Mphahlele’s emotional, rather than rational or intellectual, consideration of the phenomenon, because, he thought, “as a black man who has lived and suffered great disabilities under the apartheid regime Mphahlele tends to see negritude simply as another version of the racist ideology of the Afrikaners.”⁶ Nkosi was downright unkind to Mphahlele in this discussion, at one point observing that his critique of Negritude “has never been an occasion for deep political analysis [...] his contribution to the debate on the relations between black literature and politics is most perfunctory” (17), and at another dismissing him as “a sometimes exasperatingly superficial thinker” with a “simplistic view of literary production” (18).

While one can see why Nkosi, with the level of his sympathy for Negritude, would be impatient with Mphahlele, one cannot help feeling that he was unnecessarily hard in his criticism. His “tribute” to the older man in the *Southern African Review of Books*, February–May 1990, “Es’kia Mphahlele at 70,” confirms the impression the Negritude discussion left that Nkosi is by no means overawed by Mphahlele. According to him, when their two paths crossed at *Drum* magazine in the 1950s the relationship between them was strictly professional (and nothing in the write-ups of the conferences in which both men participated indicates any subsequent warming between them). Nkosi’s article ranges over Mphahlele’s remarkable seven decades of childhood privations, adult conflict with apartheid and consequent flight into exile, to-and-fro migrations, and eventual return to South Africa. The account is richly detailed and full of insight into the determinants of Mphahlele’s choices and the shaping of his career; it is compelling reading, with glimpses

⁵ Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (London: Longman, 1981): Preface.

⁶ Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 16.

of the man risking life and limb in the process of reporting for *Drum*, critiques of his writings (from *Down Second Avenue* to *Afrika My Music*), and, most importantly, a commentary on his decision to return to South Africa in August 1977. The overall tenor of the “tribute,” though, leaves one wondering whether Nkosi perhaps saw Mphahlele as one of the “elders” he describes in the opening essay of *Home and Exile*, “The Fabulous Decade: The Fifties.” He writes that while his generation was prepared to forgive their great-grandfathers for their ignoble defeat by the white invaders, they were by no means prepared to forgive “the indecent readiness” with which their “immediate elders” were prepared to give whites the benefit of the doubt, believe in their ultimate goodwill, and work with them.⁷

For Nkosi, because Mphahlele’s homecoming was a return to a country that was still in the grip of apartheid, a return “not to a neutral zone of palatable choices, but to one of intensified struggle in which every gesture counted,” it was in effect capitulation to apartheid. More distasteful to Nkosi (and others) was that Mphahlele was returning to a Bantustan “state,” and, moreover, to teach in the very educational system protest over which led to his banning and exile. Nkosi dismisses *Afrika My Music* (1984), the apologia in which Mphahlele sought to justify himself, as “a creaking machinery of moral evasion written in a language of wilful concealment,” while aligning himself with the South African exiles in Lesotho who baited Mphahlele when he went to speak at their university in 1978. Nkosi rejects his plea that he was responding to a desire to teach Africans wherever he could find them, saying that by the statement he was “perversely mocking those of us still living in exile.”

But a more sympathetic reading of Mphahlele’s homecoming is surely possible. In this regard, his remark on the conditions necessary for creating a truly African literary standard in place of the one(s) Negritude represented comes to mind:

When literature can be talked about by more people than by a small university elite, when our schools and universities can read more of it as part of the curriculum, there is a positive chance that our critical standards will evolve from organic forces in the society rather than from the musings of people at the top, ambassadors at large, intellectuals *stricken with guilt because they live in the metropolitan capitals of Europe*.⁸

⁷ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965): 3.

⁸ Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962): 84 (my emphasis).

I am interested in the reference to the guilt of the African intellectual émigrés living in European capitals, and the inference one can draw from it that Mphahlele laboured under such guilt during his exile years. Nkosi misses the point, therefore, when he expresses doubt that “a tenured professorship in one of the best endowed universities in the United States” could be “quite the Siberia that Mphahlele’s glacial rhetoric makes it out to be on the eve of his return to South Africa.” Mphahlele was apparently not mollified by creature comforts.

Tejumola Olaniyan (2003) recently called our attention to Rey Chow’s warning (in *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*) “that ‘third world’ intellectuals in the metropole guard against the ‘lure of diaspora’, that is, the tendency to forget the difference between one’s experience as a diasporic intellectual and that of those ‘stuck at home’.” Mphahlele’s thoughts, on his testimony, were always with those “stuck at home,” and his return to join them, even while the struggle was still on, would seem to be the reverse of evasion.

Finally, it is an abiding truth that Africans (perhaps one should say *traditional* Africans) make poor or sad émigrés anyway; the pull of the umbilical cord is nothing to trifle with. It is the *new* African, what one might even call the *denatured* African, who revels in exile and celebrates internationality. Ordinarily, the Igbo person who relocates to a non-Igbo area, for instance, maintains his/her close ties to home, and always longs for the eventual *final* return. The same goes for the Yoruba, whose proverb says it all: Goat forages and returns home; Sheep forages and returns home; foraging without thinking back to home is Pig’s great character-flaw.

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❧ THE DRAMATIST AND POET

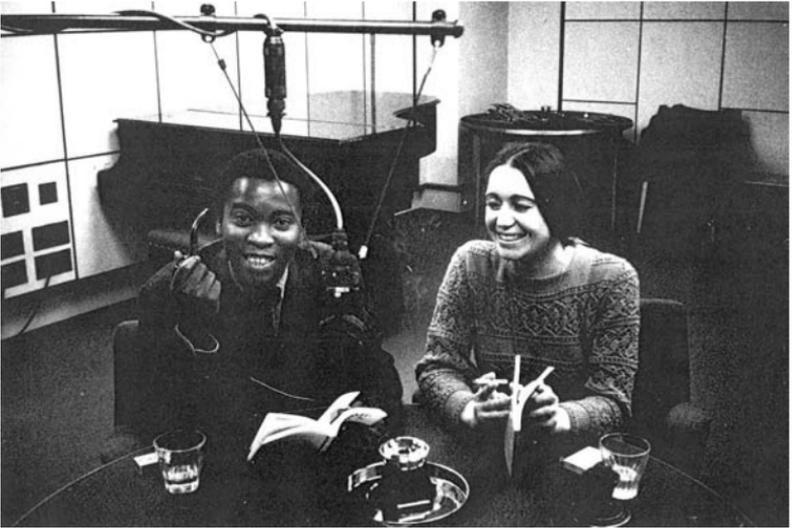
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2 Exile on the River Rhine, Basel 2002 (Lewis Nkosi)



3 Lewis Nkosi, Switzerland 2004 (Lewis Nkosi)



4 Reading with Bronwyn Ollernshaw at the BBC (Lewis Nkosi)

4

Contaminations

BBC Radio and the Black Artist –
Lewis Nkosi’s “The Trial” and
“We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King”¹

LIZ GUNNER

Cosmopolitans and Natives

“And ah, how I miss that angriest Angry Young Man, Lewis Nkosi!”²

IF, AS ULF HANNERZ SUGGESTS, Sophiatown in the 1950s was itself part of a “global ecumene [...] part of a larger urban conglomerate ‘where the action is’, where cultural process is somehow intensified – the Soho, the Greenwich Village [...] of Johannesburg, perhaps what Harlem was to New York in the days (and nights) of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance,”³ then it is fair to say that Lewis Nkosi arrived in London from Johannesburg after his stint at Harvard already a very cosmopolitan young man. He must have felt in many ways at home in the London of imperial twilight, the early 1960s. Britain was shedding its African colonies like leaves in autumn: Ghana gained its independence in 1958, Nigeria in 1960, Kenya’s came in 1963. Black writers, artists and musicians constantly passed through, or took

¹ My thanks to Jeff Walden at the BBC Archives, Caversham, for help with locating the Nkosi scripts and for his unfailing helpfulness on many occasions.

² Casey Motsisi (1963), quoted by Brian Worsfold, “Lewis Nkosi,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth Century Caribbean and Black African Writers, Third Series* 157, ed. Bernth Lindfors & Reinhard Sander (Detroit MI: Gale Research, 1996): 242.

³ Ulf Hannerz, “Sophiatown. The View from Afar,” in *Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Barber (Oxford: James Currey, 1997): 165.

temporary refuge there, and those engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle often used it as a base for their work in countering the powerful propaganda emanating from South Africa House and the Nationalist government in Pretoria. After leaving South Africa in 1960, and spending a year at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow studying journalism, Nkosi based himself in London and was soon part of the literary scene, working across borders in the sense that he was publishing in British left-of-centre journals and papers, as well as addressing himself to a more exclusively African audience. Within a short time of his being in the capital he was writing for a range of publications which included *The Observer*, *New Society*, the *Spectator*, the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian*.

Radio and material for television were also the means by which he was able to communicate with a far wider audience. Besides his work in the print media he was also for a large part of the 1960s employed at the Transcription Centre in Norfolk Street, near Paddington Station in West London. The Centre, with its own recording studio, was initiated in January 1962. By December 1965, 516 of its tapes had been broadcast by radio stations in 21 countries, including nine stations in African countries, as well as in the USA, the UK, Sweden, the Federal Republic of Germany, India, and Malaysia. After 1966, Radio Deutsche Welle, the external broadcasting service of the German Federal Republic, in Cologne, took tapes for weekly broadcasts from the Centre, including programmes in Hausa, Swahili and Amharic.⁴ Nkosi was thus not only actively interpreting South African politics and letters for London and, more widely, for British readers but was also playing a key part in the relaying of cultural and political commentary to the radio stations of the African continent (but *not* to South Africa), and globally. In addition, he was at this time travelling in Africa, interviewing writers for a series which was to appear on American National Education Television. One compilation of his interviews, entitled “The African Writer in Search of his Audience” and featuring Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and himself, was published in the *Negro Digest* in November 1965. This reminds us that there was at this period a great deal of ‘conversation’ and dialogue between the African-American diaspora and the new generation of African writers. Such dialogue can only be seen as the natural sequence of the long-standing involvement of influential figures such as Langston Hughes with *Drum* and its writers, a connection which showed itself in print in Hughes’ 1966 path-breaking anthology of poetry, fiction and essays from across Africa, *An African Treasury*. The long connection of African-American cultural and intellectual endeavour, from the

⁴ Notes taken from the Transcription Centre Archive, Harry Ransom Humanities Centre, University of Texas, Austin.

Jubilee Singers of the nineteenth century through to the influence of W.E.B. Du Bois on the New African intelligentsia generation of the 1920s and 1930s in South Africa,⁵ was thus continuing in the dialogue of Hughes with *Drum* in the 1950s. Nkosi can be seen as picking up on long-established threads of connectivity, which he built on with his own contacts. In sum, it should come as no surprise that an intellectual from Sophiatown and Johannesburg, that most African *and* cosmopolitan of places, should have been acting as cultural broker and interpreter across contending modernities at such a time. London itself was perhaps moving between a kind of late-imperial cosmopolitanism and a reactive British 'nativism' in this period of flux and realignment, when the newly independent status of previous African colonies perhaps played its part in bringing about a shift in ideas on the transference of culture, and when debates on ideas of cultural mutuality rather than one-way dominance were on the agenda.

Racial and cultural cross-currents in Britain

The way in which there was a criss-crossing not only of diverse writers but also of cultures is well caught in this account of London activities in the early to mid-1960s from the brochure on the Transcription Centre:

Two seasons devoted to African culture were organised at the Institute of Contemporary Arts [ICA], London in 1963 and 1965. These included a programme of public discussions and of exhibitions. An afternoon of African poetry was provided at the Royal Court Theatre in 1965 during the Commonwealth Festival in which Chris Okigbo performed his own poems with a drum accompaniment and Lewis Nkosi chanted Zulu poetry. Assistance was also given, and the Transcription Centre acted as hosts to, Leon Damas and members of *Présence africaine* when they came to London to make preparations for the First Festival of the Black Arts in Dakar in 1966. (HRHC Transcription Centre Archive)

The picture above is, of course, only a partial one. The throwing-open of the cultural doors of the capital to writers, artists and musicians from Africa and the Caribbean was taking place alongside a groundswell of native British racism, fanned in 1968 by the now infamous Wolverhampton 'Rivers of blood' speech delivered by the Conservative M.P., Enoch Powell. In this attack, where Powell termed blacks in Britain, "the enemy within" and called

⁵ Ntongela Masilela, "The 'Black Atlantic' and African Modernity in South Africa," *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1996): 88–96.

for their repatriation,⁶ the often covert and unofficial racism against the Afro-Caribbean immigrant population appeared to have been given public backing by a senior member of one of Britain's major political parties, in opposition at the time. Grant Farred refers to the silence of the black community in Britain in the debate over race relations during the 1960s as the first wave of post-World War 2 immigrants concentrated on making a place for themselves in Britain, albeit an outside place. After the London Notting Hill riots of 1958, the politics of race established itself as a crucial factor in the life of the metropolis, and, Farred claims, with the outbreak of this violence, blacks were demonized by Britain's white majority.⁷ Only then, and in what has come to be known as the second generation of Caribbean immigrants, did a more militant awareness of Britain's institutionalized racism come into being.⁸ It is this 'second' generation of Afro-Caribbean immigrants, more prosperous and often more educated than the earlier newcomers, that drew on the inspiration of African-American models of resistance and moved to a more militant black-consciousness position.

Connecting in the 'post-*Drum*' world

Writing on the *Drum* figures has on the whole not examined how they fitted into larger black diasporic patterns after their departures from South Africa. Sometimes, too, the fine distinctions between individual writers has been insufficiently recognized – an exception to this is Paul Gready's article "The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties."⁹ There is a poignant moment caught in the correspondence between Lewis Nkosi, then based in London, and Nat Nakasa operating from an increasingly beleaguered Johannesburg, which momentarily illuminates the group's sense of their own changing relations as they move in different trajectories, severed from the closeness of the *Drum* world, embarking on new literary and journalistic projects, becoming figures of exile but also parts of a diaspora. Nkosi writes on 3 February 1963, in reply to a letter from Nakasa reporting as editor, on the progress of the plans

⁶ Grant Farred, "You Can Go Home Again, You Just Can't Stay: Stuart Hall and the Caribbean Diaspora," *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1996): 37.

⁷ Farred, "You Can Go Home Again, You Just Can't Stay," 37.

⁸ Farred, "You Can Go Home Again, You Just Can't Stay," 41.

⁹ Paul Gready, "The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties: The Unreal Reality of Their World," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16.1 (March 1990): 139–64, repr. in *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newell (Oxford: James Currey, 2001): 144–55.

to publish the new magazine, *The Classic*, and he chides him for being a poor correspondent:

relations over such a distance are maintained by correspondence, and you hardly write unless you want some material for the magazine. The letters get more jejeune, uninformative, as sparse as [a] cob from which mealies have been shelled [...] Anyway, we can only hope that you [ie *The Classic* magazine] are now going to be published at last. [Arthur] Maimane is no longer in London. He left for Kenya where he is to represent Reuters. Pity, because Arthur has changed, is much nicer than Bloke now, and thinks more seriously, less superficially about things...¹⁰

The letter gives us some hint of the *Drum* figures making a life, and a writing place-in-the-world for themselves in the early 'post-*Drum*' years, and the glancing reference to Modisane reminds us that both he and Nkosi were in London at this moment in the 1960s. Both were to use radio as a vehicle for their creative talents in the years that followed. By doing so, the very specific as well as the wider cultural vernaculars of their Johannesburg life – shebeen blues, gangsters, police – were briefly present in millions of kitchens and living rooms in Britain as listeners tuned in to their words. And in the case of the play by Nkosi which I discuss here, listeners would hear voices that were far closer to home.

Radio as a medium in the post-*Drum* time

Radio within South Africa had not been a medium which was available to the black writers on *Drum* and her sister paper, the Sunday *Golden City Post*. The South African censorship laws of 1963, the Publications and Entertainment Act, and the 1966 Amendment of the Suppression of Communism Act (which banned both Nkosi and Modisane among others) aimed at curtailing the flow of 'subversive' information through the medium of print.¹¹ These were put on the statute books only shortly after the move by the Nationalists to shape and control the airwaves as well. The importance of radio as an instrument of propaganda had been recognized by the Afrikaner Nationalists some time before they came to power, and it was in 1960 that the Nationalist government formally instituted its African-language services under the rubric of Radio Bantu.¹² When seen against this 'smothering' of the voices available on the

¹⁰ Nat Nakasa Papers, The Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, File 2.

¹¹ Paul Gready, "The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties," 152.

¹² Liz Gunner, "Wrestling with the Present, Beckoning to the Past: Contemporary

airwaves within South Africa's borders, the activities of the London Transcription Centre, distributing its tapes of interviews to African radio stations beyond South Africa's borders, can be seen as a move of heightened significance in offering valuable alternate routes of communication and keeping alive fragile channels of debate and cultural knowledge. Alongside the work of the Transcription Centre, the value of radio as a creative and critical medium with enthusiastic African audiences was also recognized by the BBC. The World Service of the BBC at Bush House on the Strand ran the African Theatre programmes, as well as the African Writers Series. These were run by figures such as Edward Blishen and Gwynneth Henderson, broadcasters whose popular series had wide listenerships of aspirant and actual writers in many parts of anglophone Africa.

Although Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane were both to work with success in the medium of radio once they had left South Africa there were interesting differences in their approaches. For Nkosi, the medium was only one of many, and largely subordinate to his critical writings, but for Modisane it was far more central. Modisane, with a vision of himself as a creative writer above all, published his autobiographical tour de force *Blame Me on History* with Thames and Hudson in 1963. He was also in demand as an actor for radio, reading frequently for the African Theatre programme of the World Service, run from the Bush House studios. He performed, too, in Genet's *The Blacks*, which showed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1961. Modisane's plays, although spread thinly over more than twenty years (1969–87), convey his unfolding preoccupations about modern South African society and the role of the intellectual, and show him maintaining an intense engagement as an artist with the unfolding struggle in the Southern subcontinent until his death in 1986 – his last radio play was broadcast posthumously. However, unlike Nkosi, he never ventured to write creatively on the British political scene. The complex strands of the politics of race in Britain in the late 1960s with which Nkosi engaged with wit and boldness in his radio play "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King" point to his astute analysis of cultural and racial politics in the capital. We are also presented with an enlightened picture of the radio-drama section of the BBC in their airing a complex combination of discourses on blackness at a time when images of blacks in the British media were usually absent or stereotypical and negative.

Zulu Radio Drama," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26.2 (2000): 223–37; see also David Coplan, "The African Musician and the Development of the Johannesburg Entertainment Industry, 1900–1960," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 5.2 (1979): 135–64.

Commentators on the writings of the *Drum* school have often critiqued the tough gangster image in which they were forced to fit their prose, and the sexism of their writing.¹³ To some extent, their style was dictated by the expectations of their audience and readership, the black city dwellers of Johannesburg and other South African cities and towns, eager to see themselves as moderns and also heirs to the styles of American popular culture in film and music. Such demands were not present in the world in which Nkosi and Modisane pitched their radio scripts in the London of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but neither were they operating in an audience vacuum. As the correspondence files of the BBC drama department make clear, scripts were carefully evaluated, and passed back and forth between producers; changes were requested and revised scripts fiercely scrutinized. This was certainly the case with Modisane's submissions, which, like the two scripts of Nkosi's, were part of the BBC's 'Home' service, rather than their African Theatre and African Writers programmes, which were beamed to the African continent. The audiences would have been largely British, regular listeners to the short-story slot on Radio 3 and to the mid-week afternoon play slot on Radio 4. It is likely that, of the two pieces, it is the play that would have contained the less familiar material and, in a sense, the more subversive message. Whereas the drama of apartheid was by the late 1960s embedded in popular consciousness and represented the theme of basic political rights for all, the positive representation of blacks in the media was less common. The tight and seemingly effortless weaving-together in the play of a critique of the exclusiveness of the British parliamentary system and the presence of a successful black middle class and militant black radicalism – all this makes it a potent mix; it suggests the possibility of a new kind of Britishness, with race, class and the national imagination nuanced in a new way.

The Janus-faced imagination

The two works for radio by Nkosi on which I focus in this essay – the only two which appear to have been broadcast by the BBC – show Nkosi as a writer whose imagination takes him to the racial and political landscape of his country of birth. Yet his extraordinarily rich experience after leaving South

¹³ Gready, "The Sophiatown Writers of the Fifties." See also Dorothy Driver, "Drum Magazine (1951–59) and the Spatial Configurations of Gender," in *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*, ed. Kate Darien-Smith, Liz Gunner & Sarah Nuttall (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 237–42, repr. in *Readings in African Popular Fiction*, ed. Stephanie Newell (Oxford: James Currey, 2001): 156–59.

Africa, his wide travelling and exposure to many of the leading black cultural and political figures of the era in Africa, western Europe and North America, also lead him to work creatively in other settings and situate his creative work in the diasporic discourse of Black Britain and the Black Atlantic. Thus while the short story “The Trial” turns the ear and the imaginative eye of the radio listener to a courtroom scene in South Africa, the radio play “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King” is set in London, and reverberates with the racial politics of native Britons and Afro-Caribbean immigrants, with the turbulence of the American civil-rights movement, and with the joyous sexuality of Britain’s Swinging Sixties. The two scripts, one a drama and the other a short story, can be seen as – on one level – looking in different directions. The story “The Trial” looks to South Africa and to the struggle against apartheid; it sits quite comfortably with the ideology of liberal humanism that was one strand of the political discourse current in the British capital at the time and it uses the trope of inter-racial sex as a sign of resistance to a racist state. At the same time, because of the deep ambivalences in Empire relating to race and sex, the narrative line disturbs any neat categories of Self and Other inherent in the colonizing project. So the subversion suggested by the cross-racial love affair resonates not only in the apartheid arena but also in late-imperial discourse. In both texts, the trope of inter-racial sex, a frequent feature of Nkosi’s creative work, impacts on the wider political discourse. The metaphor of cross-racial sex becomes a means of modulating the specifics of national politics in the two very different contexts of apartheid South Africa and the seemingly democratic Britain of late Empire. In the radio play, with its layerings of racial and class antagonisms, cross-racial sexual harmony represents an impossible lasting haven. In the radio short story, however, the harmony of the black and white couple exists as a metaphor for an imagined, freer society, which the text can only gesture towards. The very use of the medium of radio rather than print also represented a crucial shift in audience composition. The radio made the works available to a wider audience but also made them more ephemeral; and it also gave access to a wholly new audience. It must be remembered that by 1969 there was no reading or listening audience within South Africa available for Nkosi, as by then his work had been banned for three years. His last published piece of creative work in the country was possibly the short story “The Hotel Room,” which appeared in *Contrast* in 1963–64, and his last piece of published reportage was possibly the extract from interviews/conversations with Tutuola and others that were part of his brief for the American National Education Television series. This appeared in the Cape Town literary journal *Contrast* in 1965.

Apartheid and the discourse of resistance: "The Trial"

The short story "The Trial," the title a kind of homage to Kafka, was broadcast on 16 June 1969 on the Home Service of BBC Radio 3, as its morning short story, and it was produced by David Thomson. The setting of "The Trial" is a courtroom, with the extra resonance of innumerable courtroom radio dramas popular with listeners, and set also within the frame of questions on what constitutes justice in the modern state. Public awareness in Britain of the injustice of the South African state was high at this time. The Sharpeville massacre of 1960, the Treason Trial that ran from December 1956 to March 1961 with its 156 accused, all of whom were eventually acquitted, and then the Rivonia trial of Nelson Mandela and his seven co-accused in 1964 were all still fresh in the British public memory. The narrator in Nkosi's story is a black university student who is on trial for his life after having been caught daubing a slogan – "The People shall share the wealth of the country" – on the walls of Barclays Bank. (As Barclays was at the time heavily implicated in supporting the South African government and was the target of much anti-apartheid criticism, this would have had added piquancy for some listeners.) The farcical yet dangerous and destructive nature of the South African charade of justice is made clear, with acerbic wit. The State prosecutor, Hans Grobler, is described as if from a photograph:

fat, sleek, a pronounced cleft chin. He looks like a roly-poly doll whose eyes have a sleepy yet shining intensity [...] this expression of geniality which contrasts curiously with Hans Grobler's frequently repeated request to the judges to return a full verdict of guilty as charged and the prayer that if they do find us guilty a "supreme penalty of death by hanging" should be exacted from us for the dastardly crime of high treason we are alleged to have committed.¹⁴

The balance between carnivalesque humour and a steadier sombreness, with the possibility that the death sentence could be imposed always tempering the moments of comedy, is maintained throughout the piece. The confined and dangerous state of the accused, the narrator, is contrasted with that of his friend Justin Bopape, who is free but lonely, treading the streets of London and meditating on the true meaning of freedom. The words of a letter from Justin provide the means by which the radio story takes its listeners to this meditative point:

suddenly I do not know how to take this freedom, what to make of it. The restrictions, the restraints have been lifted and yet I perceive now that

¹⁴ Nkosi, "The Trial," BBC Written Archives (Caversham, Reading, 1969): 1.

those very restrictions gave me an identity, my most essential being. In freedom I feel naked. A paradox? Remember Camus' phrase, the yearning for a lost poverty!¹⁵

The narrative line does not pursue the contrast between the free and the jailed man, but the weight of responsibility that freedom carries, the need to *make* freedom real, is cogently conveyed through Bopape's words, and would have resonated with British listeners at the time. As a foil to the figure of Bopape, Nkosi sets the resistant writer of comedic notes, his co-accused, to whom he gives the name David Kambule (this being the name of an early twentieth-century Natal prophet, representing another resistant tradition). Nkosi links humour and resistance as a gesture of optimism, as Kambule's letters of complaint to the judges eventually have an effect and the latter at last appear "visibly shaken." Of Kambule, he remarks: "Protest releases for him the poetry of his being and his most hidden love."¹⁶ Nkosi's coiled, compact character assessments in this section of the story have the tight power of the compound names of praise poetry and are particularly suitable to the spoken form of radio.

Only after he has set the contrasting figures of resistance clearly in the narrative – David Kambule, the persistent note-writer challenging the granite judges, and the lonely letter-writing figure of exile, Justin Bopape – does Nkosi move to the theme of inter-racial love and resistance. Here central Johannesburg and the Northern suburbs are briefly and sharply evoked. The narrator recalls his first meeting with Ruth, his white Jewish girlfriend, and the visit of the group of mixed students to a shebeen very close to the notorious Marshall Square police station. The script moves, point and counterpoint, between the ongoing trial with its moments of high farce – such as the production of a Russian cookery book as evidence of treason – and the memory of the developing relationship between the prisoner and Ruth. The two 'scapes' of confinement exist in concentric circles of time and space, the cityspace, and memory/imagination; the confined space of the courtroom contrasts with the precariously free space of the shebeen. Both contribute to defining a physical and psychic claustrophobia, yet both contain the possibility of freedom. In the shebeen, the words of the blues singer, Jimboy, evoke the defiance expressed through song, stretching back to the voices of black slaves on the cotton plantations of the Deep South:

If I'm so slow to hear, Jimboy sang,
If I'm so slow to listen

¹⁵ Lewis Nkosi, "The Trial," 3.

¹⁶ Nkosi, "The Trial," 5.

Baby you know it's all I ever done
Listening to white men talk...¹⁷

It is the words of the defence lawyer carrying a formal message of belief in freedom that end the story. The desire of the lovers, their attraction and their antagonism are part of this wider public proclamation, which could well have been taken from the words of one of the defence lawyers in the treason trial. It is a cross-racial belief in the rule of law and freedom which is ringingly proclaimed:

That this is no ordinary trial, your Lordship, can be gathered from the fact that the accused are in themselves no ordinary persons. They constitute a cross-section of the members of our population [...] but all of them hold one thing in common [...] and that is the belief in the brotherhood of man and a desire to work for his betterment and towards his ultimate freedom. Our case rests!¹⁸

More than anything else, "The Trial," is an act of faith in the power of art. The unknown prisoner's very act of imagining and calling back a counter-world as he sits in the courtroom gazing at the faces of his accusers is a gesture of homage to the space that art can create, where alternate realities can live. It can be set alongside other prison writings by Albie Sachs, D.M. Zwelonke or Ngugi wa Thiong'o, where art is part of the ability to transcend the space of the prison cell.

A shift of focus: "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King"

"The Trial" was put out on the airwaves three months before Modisane's first radio drama for the BBC, *The Quarter Million Boy*, which was an expansion and adaptation of his earlier short story "The Situation." The shebeen as a space of ambiguity, of tension and desire, is one of the key tropes in each, and in both works it becomes the means by which a radically different society can be glimpsed. Nkosi had already used the space of the shebeen, partly to make a similar point, and also as a means of soft-pedalling the tension, in his 1965 play *The Rhythm of Violence*. However, in his radio play, on the air a little more than eighteen months after "The Trial," the shebeen has vanished, and in its place as a site of ambiguity, and of conflict, is an elegant Mayfair flat, its living room and bedroom. "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King" was not the only play Nkosi submitted to the BBC but it was the only one to be

¹⁷ Lewis Nkosi, "The Trial," 13.

¹⁸ "The Trial," 18.

accepted. *Red Rooster*, which portrayed an African leader who sacrificed a red rooster in order to keep negative forces at bay when he was in power, was twice submitted to the BBC, once in 1973 and again in 1976, but was turned down each time. The poised wit, the irony and insights of “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King” into the complexities of race and class in British society in the early 1970s may have made it particularly attractive to the drama producers of the BBC, at that time still working under Martin Esslin. The play was produced by Martin Jenkins for Radio 4 and was transmitted on Wednesday 10 February as the Wednesday Play, running in the mid-afternoon for 50 minutes.

Nkosi sets up choices for his protagonist, a black actor: where, in the fragmenting social groups of Londoners, should he place his loyalty? It is the era of Black Power and there is pressure on David Guiana, the successful actor, to join his fellow-blacks. He is a black man living well, in a flat in the super-affluent suburb of Mayfair, with expensive art objects around him; he is not aligned to any political group except by association with the wealthy of Mayfair. His sister, Ethel, a successful professional herself, berates him for leaving his responsibilities to his own black community and teases him that his white upper-class girlfriend is using him as a stud and nothing else. She would never marry him. Shocked, he reiterates his dedication to art and to his girlfriend. At this early point in the play, his moral superiority and confidence in his position is unshakeable. The exchange between brother and sister is frank:

ETHEL: Upper-class English families don’t care a straw what Emily does before she gets married. But come wedding day, like election time, she has to vote for her very own. (*Pause*) It’s a very sophisticated system, David. You may not like to hear the truth, for Lady Sarah you’re just a big black whopping phallus and she’s getting in her kicks while the going is good.

DAVID: ...you’ve forgotten you’re dealing with human beings, people with real passions, whose appetites cannot be so neatly categorised. People are always more than the class or race they belong to, you know.¹⁹

He has decided to attend the reception for the Best Actor of the Year award, which he has won, and not to go on the march for black rights that will take place in London on the same day. A mechanic, a white working-class Londoner, visits David’s apartment to mend his television and they talk freely, as equals, although the Guyanese David is the more urbane and travelled of the

¹⁹ Lewis Nkosi, “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King,” BBC Written Archives (Caversham, Reading, 1971): 12.

two. The accents rub against each other, suggesting the vibrant, different speech codes within which English operates – that there is no one ‘correct’ English but a multitude of possible kinds of English is what this and other encounters suggest. Then a Black Power leader comes in and urges him to go on the march on Parliament, saying that his presence as an artist of standing will add prestige and validity to the event. To march, however, would mean foregoing the important civic reception and the acceptance of his award. David refuses to be boxed in, but what also becomes clear is that he is himself caught in an image of how he should act in order to break with the negative stereotypes of blackness and black under-achievement:

DAVID: ... A black actor sitting to lunch next to the Lord Mayor of London! ... the newspapers will go to town on it ... And think Moses B of the inspiration to a lot of Coloured kids seeing their own up there batting with the best of them ... And winning! I mean, we can't all be Martin Luther King you know? We got to diversify! Hit this thing from all angles and sides!...

MOSES: ... I said shut up! Why you always run your mouth like that!²⁰

The activist, Moses, berates him again, looks scornfully at his expensive *objets d'art*, and leaves, emphasizing again the importance of the march and his participation. Although outwardly resolute with regard to his political position, and emphasizing to Moses B his “responsibilities as an artist,” David is shaken by his sister’s confident assertion that his girlfriend would never marry him, that he is merely an experiment and a diversion from the serious business of marrying within her class. This is what the play turns to next.

The relationship between the protagonist and his high-spirited and high-class lover is beautifully drawn: the bantering wit, the easy sexuality of their relationship, the balance of equals, evenly matched, that they have achieved. Yet it is only when *she* chides him for playing up to the black-stud image of the black man that she becomes more than a mouthpiece for her class:

SARAH: I suppose we need you Tiger! But can't you see it's all a cruel joke we play on you. Poor David! I feel rather sorry for you! Our civilization has created a nasty role for you and you've no idea how to escape from it!²¹

²⁰ Lewis Nkosi, “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King,” 18.

²¹ Nkosi, “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King,” 28.

And then the probing begins: *will* she marry him? She is horrified. She knows her parents would throw her out. She explains that girls of her class have to marry within their own ranks. He is devastated, they argue, and she leaves in a huff. Finally David realizes where his loyalty really lies; he decides to join the march and forego collecting the prestigious prize.

One needs to ask why this play was accepted and to enquire into how it speaks to the times. First, it picks up on a strain of popular feeling, a song that acknowledges the hero, Martin Luther King, but says that most of us are not like that but just ordinary folk who want to get on with our lives. The catchy tune and lyric provide a sense of enjoyment, fun, life waiting to be lived. And it follows on with the preoccupations of “The Trial” – the black man still on the outside, and the beautiful, spirited white woman giving him briefly the kingdom of sex but denying him entry to the closely guarded terrain of the British upper class, and by implication, closing off the inner circles of the British ruling class, the latter still a notion with some kind of meaning even in the early 1970s. Yet the play also delivers a wittily profound set of insights into the options and social spaces available to blacks in Britain – particularly London – at the time. Running alongside this is the strong strand of activism and anger at exclusion – the resonances from across the Atlantic, where the American civil-rights movement was steadily gaining strength. Then, as a counter-possibility suggestive of a world where merit and artistry form a domain beyond the discriminations of race, there is the Arts prize for the Best Actor, open to all, and won by the protagonist. Does it not represent the possibility of an even-handed, non-sectarian and non-racial British cultural milieu where the world of art does not distinguish between insiders and outsiders, between those at the receiving end of Empire and its arbiters? At the same time – the sexual embrace, which is that and no more – shows the uncertainty of imperial structures: it has to maintain its Others in order to preserve its sense of Self.

But the play keeps open a space of ambiguity concerning the role of the realm of art – art within the play, and the art of the play itself. The protagonist, collecting his beautiful objects, gestures (a little like the Afrikaner aesthete character in Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter*) towards the notion of art as aesthetics with its gaze turned away from social turmoil and the realm of ugly conflict. The artist-protagonist himself, in his beautiful flat, is outside community – but the play with its harsh and playful look at race, sex and the politics of Empire at the heart of the metropole pulls art into the axis of politics and art. It is interesting that the readers in the BBC Drama Department saw this play as speaking not to the ‘world outside’, the African audiences to which the African Series from Bush House beamed its programmes, but to the ‘world within’, the “Home” listeners to Radio 4. This suggests that the

closed class world of the protagonist's transient lover – which she does in fact show she can partially transcend – is one small aspect of British society, and that the audience of Radio 4 represented something much wider, far more multi-layered, offering perhaps the kind of inclusion that the play in part gestures towards.

For Nkosi, though, there was to be no inclusion, no real ingestion, such as was possible for a figure such as the poet William Plomer, or the garrulous Laurens van der Post. The resolution of the play suggests that the black artist in the imperial mother-city does not give up being an artist, but that he has to change and see his lot as taking him elsewhere – into the circuits and currents of the Black Atlantic, perhaps – and, at the same time taking both his English, and his Africanness with him, as an artist.

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5

Hostage Drama

The Rhythm of Violence and Some Comments
on “The Black Psychiatrist”¹

SIKHUMBUZO MNGADI

Introduction

LEWIS NKOSI is the author of more than the two plays that this essay will revisit against the background of some of the questions that, over the years, have been debated concerning both the constitution of the dramatic and the conditions that, in South Africa, made this art form a particularly privileged one as political conditions worsened.

As a critic himself, Nkosi has been, and continues to be, part of this background. Consider, for instance, the comment that he made in the obituary on the occasion of Can Themba’s passing:

Can Themba’s actual achievements are more disappointing because his learning and reading were more substantial and his talent proven; but he chose to confine his brilliance to journalism of an insubstantial kind. It is almost certain that had Can Themba chosen to write a book on South Africa, it would not only have been an interesting and to use an American word ‘insightful’ book, but it might have revealed a complex and refined talent for verbalising the African mood. And no doubt, such a book would have been a valuable addition to the literature of South Africa. As it is, we mourn a talent largely misused or neglected; we mourn what might have been.²

¹ Nkosi’s autobiographical account of his experiences in Johannesburg and abroad – *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965) – which informs much of what the two plays dramatize, will also form a significant part of my discussion.

² Can Themba, *The Will To Die*, sel. Donald Stuart & Roy Holland (London: Heinemann Educational, 1972): x–xi.

Over the years, Nkosi has built a reputation for this kind of criticism and has resisted in his own criticism the seduction of the presumption that the contours of art inevitably coincide with those of documentation. If we consider that, generally, discourses associated with death tend to the metaphysical, Nkosi's obituary is a remarkably bold and impassioned testament, not so much to his retrospective evaluation of the significance of Themba's passing as to his determination to bury with Themba an era for a certain literary trajectory: namely, journalistic literature, over which his critical work has consistently presided with authority. However, his own creative writing has also been subjected to a similar type of critical scrutiny. It is with this last point in mind that I want to consider the two plays, and the prominence in Nkosi's writing of the notion of apartheid as a tragic farce acted, to borrow Joseph Conrad's phrase, "against a sinister backcloth."

Depending on how one approaches the two plays, *The Rhythm of Violence* (1964) appears to be a dramatization of the tragic consequences of an experiment in non-racialism by a group of naive university undergraduates, and "The Black Psychiatrist" (2001) is a glimpse into the tragic consequences of the sexual advantages of race-based power, in the context of the apartheid regime's Immorality Act. Concerning *The Rhythm of Violence*, and if the play is read backwards from the very brief final Act, it is the notion of tragedy that Nkosi appears to deploy that has been the source of probably the single most severe criticism. In "Ideology and the Social Vision (1): The Religious Factor," Wole Soyinka³ concludes that in the play

the problem is essentially the insubstantiality of the 'tragic hero' and the sophomoric level of the dialogue that carries forward the dramatic action.⁴

For Soyinka, this is because

the play does not even attempt to create a credibly hermetic milieu within which the trapped individual can be observed in his dilemma. We are denied a dialectic of the social situation, the metaphor of the illogic that makes up the logic, the symbols of inhumanity that constitute their humanity, the procession of untruths that legislates the truths of the society [...] The soil in which [Nkosi] seeks to plant the seed of tragedy is the mere dust of circumstantial events. (72)

³ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976): 61–96.

⁴ Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 72.

Thus, for Soyinka, it is the play's conceptualization that is tragic, rather than the culmination of the events that it dramatizes, which, as he argues, are "circumstantial." Regarding the play's "ideology," Soyinka has the following to say:

The message appears to be that a multi-racial society is the goal for South Africa (which no one denies), and in this play we are given a makeshift instance of that idyllic possibility. The principle is neither original nor banal, neither utopian nor pessimist. But Nkosi's entire projection of the future breaks down over the nature of that proof, a self-immolating proof which the disinherited of society appear required to provide to justify their worthiness to participate in the realisation of the vision. Or perhaps (it all depends how one interprets Lewis Nkosi's goals) it is the very act of bringing such a vision into reality that is made to depend on perpetual self-sacrifice by the downtrodden. [...] Nkosi appears anxious to assure his audience of the unlimited capacity of black humanism. [...] The love optimism of Nkosi's play is grafted on; the idiom of the tragedy of liberal encounter is artificial and untenable. (71–72)

Soyinka's point is well put, although it seems to me that, perhaps because of the brevity of his comment on the play, and the fact that the basis of his evaluation is the final Act, there is another crucial dialogue that Nkosi's play holds with certain texts of the 1950s in South Africa to which Soyinka's critique does not allude but which are important for the kind of intervention that I want to make in this essay. While this dialogue may not alter in any significant way the conclusion at which Soyinka arrives – at least in the final analysis – it does, however, have implications for the manner in which the basis of his conclusion: namely, that the play fails as a tragedy because its idiom is grafted on an artificial and untenable tragedy of liberal encounters, may be limited in a certain important respect. It is crucial to locate the place of the liberal imperative in the play and there to work out its source and consequence. If the play is not read backwards from the third Act, at which Tula dies en route to saving Sarie Marais's father, to the point of the second Act at which he meets Sarie Marais, as Soyinka's critique seems to suggest he has read the play, it would seem that the play preempts the idiom of the tragedy of liberal encounters at the very moment when it appears to proffer it as its final word. Indeed, from the perspective of the greater part of the second Act, before (and arguably after) Tula meets and strikes up a friendship with Sarie Marais, the play appears to be headed for an entirely different conclusion, that which would follow on from the new 'rhythm of violence' which, the play argues, has superseded the liberal dialogue (the latter has become impossible, particularly against the backdrop of the increasing intransigence of the apart-

heid regime, signified in the first Act by the crudity of its repressive apparatus, in the form of Piet and Jan). While it may be argued that this conclusion is indeed reached with the explosion of the bomb that destroys the City Hall and kills the National Party members, as it is intended to do, the assessment of its impact and of its coincidence with the historical imperative of which it is an illustration⁵ is clouded by the story of the tragedy of Tula's death and its apparent (liberal) ideological implications – the story which, Soyinka argues, is the proper basis of the play. However, let me provide a brief account of the general procession of events in the play.

Antinomies of 'left-wing' rhetoric

The Rhythm of Violence is a three-act play. The first Act takes place in the "waiting room [that] has been temporarily turned into the headquarters of the South African police who are mobilized to watch the African meeting in progress."⁶ It involves two Afrikaner policemen, Piet and Jan, who, not altogether unlike the two tramps in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, fill the tedium of watching by telling each other stories of their lives. These include Jan's fear of the implications for the apartheid regime of the setting sun, mirrored in his immediate panic when, on hearing yells of "Freedom!" "Freedom!" "Freedom!," he thinks the "Natives was (*sic*) starting trouble" (4), and Piet's fear, for the same reason, of "sunrise." Both agree that "Time just standing still" would guarantee that "We'd just go on ruling this land and the Natives would do like they're told! Forever!" (10). Jan recalls the first time he "shot a Native dead" with a machine-gun and "got sick all over his body" and his "skull [that] was ripped apart" (7) and Piet advises him that, in order to avoid getting sick over a dead Native, they must "shoot them academically" (8). All the while, a voice (of the student leader, Gama) can be heard in the background, leading the crowd in slogans and "speechifying" (19), as Jan says about the style of "Native" leadership when, as an imaginary Tom Lundula, he mimics "a Native leader."

The second Act is set in a "dingy basement clubroom which serves as the headquarters of a group of left-wing university students," with "peeling walls [...] inscribed with huge letters shouting: VERWOERD MUST GO! FREE-

⁵ The new "rhythm of violence" of which the play speaks also mirrors the choices that the South African liberation movements had to make after Sharpeville, with both the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) considering and carrying out acts of armed resistance.

⁶ *The Rhythm of Violence*, in *Plays from Black Africa*, ed. Fredric M. Litto (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968): 3. Subsequent page references are in the main text.

DOM IN OUR LIFETIME! INTERRACIAL SEX IS A HISTORICAL FACT!" (23) and other slogans. Here the dominant discourse is determinedly 'inter-racial'; no matter how much there is to drink, those who are tasked with carrying the message of inter-racialism, Gama (black) and Jimmy (white) – and they have girlfriends to match, Gama's Mary (white) and Jimmy's Kitty (black) – do not pass up the opportunity to 'integrate'. The arrival of Sarie Marais, an Afrikaner girl and new recruit who befriends Gama's brother, Tula, sets off the climax of the play. The reason for the students' having gathered in the clubroom is that they are waiting for the bomb explosion at City Hall in which a National Party meeting is taking place. It turns out that Sarie Marais' father is at the meeting to tender his resignation as a member of the National Party. The students' party is thrown into confusion as those who know about the bomb argue about whether to detonate it or to save Sarie Marais' father after two attempts at warning him by telephone fail. In the ensuing confusion, Tula slips out and proceeds to City Hall with the intention of defusing the bomb; in the final Act, however, he lies dead before he can reach the basement where the bomb goes off. The play ends with Sarie Marais weeping over Tula's dead body and Piet and Jan arresting her on suspicion of involvement in the act of "sedition" (72).

I want to argue that the main thrust of the play is not so much the procession of the events that I have just outlined or the substantiality/lack thereof of the more obvious dialogue that carries them forward, but, rather, the veiled dialogue that these events inform and/or are informed by, a dialogue that is much older and specific. From this perspective, *The Rhythm of Violence* is not a tragedy, at least not in the sense in which Soyinka locates the play's thrust in the death of Tula as the cue for a disquisition on an elaborate theory of tragic heroism.⁷ Rather, as I noted earlier in regard to Nkosi's obituary of Can Themba, the proper location of the debate in the play is between the passing of an era for a certain literary trajectory of which Nkosi argues Can Themba was a consummate advocate,⁸ and its 'supercession' by the more militant literary sensibility of the early 1960s, when it was becoming evident that the apartheid regime, as Jan puts it, would "just go on ruling this land and the Natives would do like they're are told! Forever!" However, as I shall argue,

⁷ A theory which, Biodun Jeyifo argues, can be traced to "three great moments: Aristotle; Hegel; Marx-Engels"; Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (London & Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1985): 23.

⁸ There were others, among them Bloke Modisane, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams and Nkosi himself, all of whom, like Themba, canvassed in their autobiographies a detachment from power – a sort of 'no man's-land' – without considering the power implications of this detachment.

seen against the background of what Nkosi was to write in *Home and Exile* (1965), published a year after *The Rhythm of Violence* appeared, the terms that frame this supercession in the play are shot through with a ‘left-wing’ optimism that misses the point of the operation of the apartheid power that the play targets and, as a consequence of it, takes its own power for granted. If, in the final analysis, Soyinka is correct in his assessment of the play as an insubstantial dramatization of the tragedy of liberal encounters, then both his assessment and Nkosi’s in *Home and Exile* (“Alas, we didn’t realise how small and powerless we were”⁹) miss a crucial point that should not be clouded by talk of substance and/or numbers. To re-state the point that I have already made: what is at stake in *The Rhythm of Violence* is not so much the insubstantiality of the dialogue that leads to the play’s tragic conclusion, nor the small number that constitutes the “fringe society” of the clubroom, as the power that is staked out in the very act and terms of the “left-wing university students” detachment.

Let me cite four cases in the above connection (ie, that Nkosi’s play is in part a staking out of a position of class power through a dialogue with certain trajectories in the writings of Can Themba and his contemporaries, Nkosi included). In *Blame Me On History* (1986), Bloke Modisane writes:

Although I felt a mental accord with the Pan-Africanists, I retained my political alienation. I was exhausted by South African politics; everywhere I turned there was politics and there were flies and there were attitudes of our own country. (249)

And later:

I wanted a little peace, some amount of freedom and a little time to reconstruct my battered soul under an easier political climate where I could humanize myself. (250)

Peter Abrahams, in *Tell Freedom* (1981):

For me, personally, life in South Africa had come to an end. I had been lucky in some of the whites I had met. Meeting them had made a straight ‘all-blacks-are-good-all-whites-are-bad’ attitude impossible. But I had reached a point where the gestures of even my friends among the whites

⁹ “It was a time when it seemed that the sound of police gunfire and jackboot would ultimately become ineffectual against resolute opposition and defiance from the new ‘fringe society’ coming together in a spirit of tolerance and occupying a ‘no man’s-land’ between the two warring camps. Alas, we didn’t realise how small and powerless we were”; Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 24.

were suspect, so I had to go or be forever lost. I needed, not friends, not gestures, but my manhood. And the need was desperate.

Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa. Also, there was the need to write, to tell freedom, and for this I needed to be personally free. (311)

Ezekiel Mphahlele, in *Down Second Avenue* (1971):

At the beginning of 1957 the little imp in me whispered pesteringly: 'Budge, budge!' I was suddenly seized by a desire to leave South Africa for more sky to soar. I had been banned from teaching, and conditions were crushing me and I was shriveling in the acid of my bitterness; I was suffocating. We were operating our house budget on a miserable income of £40 a month – *Drum* had raised my salary, but it had been pegged at that figure. I couldn't settle down to high-powered writing. I despaired often about the education of our children under the new system, but I felt I had no right to save them by taking them away, instead of fighting it out side by side with those whose children are also being brought up in a police state. And yet I felt I needed to build up moral and mental reserves. (200)

And Can Themba, in "The Bottom of the Bottle," describing self-ironically his relation¹⁰ and that of his "House of Truth" consorts to South African politics:

We were those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilization (at the highest level that South Africa could offer) and had heard a gruff 'No' or a 'Yes' so shaky and insincere that we withdrew our snail horns at once. [...] We were cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards upon our bruised spirits. It was flight now, no more just self-erasure. (110–11)

Whether one approaches the above from the point of view of the sober determination of Modisane, Abrahams and Mphahlele's individualism or the drunken cynicism of Can Themba's "House of Truth" collective, there is on both sides an inclination toward 'personal' detachment/alienation from the prevailing political conditions by the sensitive and frustrated protagonist, who would as a result "retain my political alienation" (Modisane), be "personally free" (Abrahams), "leave South Africa for more sky to soar" (Mphahlele) or "turn revolt inwards upon our bruised spirits" (Themba). There is a context to these responses. These writers share liberal mission education and American

¹⁰ Can Themba, "The Bottom of the Bottle," in *The Will To Die*, 108–15; "a floozie who was too far-out to distinguish Cupid from Dr Verwoerd" (111).

civil-rights backgrounds, the basis of both of which is the notion of a shared humanity across racial divides and the idea that through hard work, the “sky” is the limit – the individual can “soar.”¹¹ Having lived at one time or another in Sophiatown, a predominantly black slum in Johannesburg, these writers had contact with liberal white American and British priests who conducted church and other community services in Sophiatown, and these priests encouraged educated black professionals to start centres at which they would serve as good examples for young men who otherwise had criminal gangs as role models. In his story “The Bottom of the Bottle,” Can Themba establishes the political context of his own writing by recalling a visit, at his Sophiatown “House of Truth,” by two activists from the African National Congress (ANC), who accuse him of keeping “young men [and] mak[ing] them do things, do things that we don’t think are in the nahtional (sic) interest.” One of them also reminds him that “The fight is on” and that “We want you all, nice-time boys ... Tsotsis, teachers, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, all!” This is because, as he says, ““The Ahfrican Nahtional (sic) Congress is not a political party, it is the organization of every Ahfrican, every Ahfrican”” (112). The Bantu Men’s Social Centre – already active and not unlike the idea that the two activists have of the ANC – would subsequently serve as the melting-pot for what has come to be referred to as the roots of urban black or township (political/resistance) culture, at least insofar as the history of this culture has been written as a progressive narrative of the march of the middle-class men through linear time. However, as Gail Gerhart observes in *Black Power in South Africa*, there was another crucial aspect of the withdrawal of the black middle class into an exemplary group during the time of the social centres:

for any African who had given up traditional ways in favour of a modern lifestyle, self-esteem was inextricably bound up with the successful acquisition of white culture – in every aspect from material possessions and occupational skills through forms of etiquette and leisure pastimes. Much or all of the prestige accorded to well-educated or wealthy Africans by their communities was recognition of their success in becoming “like whites.” And ultimately (as a reading of African news media throughout this period confirms), the most prized source of prestige and esteem was the recognition of African worth and achievement by whites themselves.¹²

¹¹ Implicit in Modisane’s, Abrahams’ and Mphahlele’s autobiographies is the same idea that one finds in Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, of the talented individual rising, through hard work, above the racial and economic hurdles to claim his place in civilized society.

¹² Gail Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley & London: U of California P, 1978): 111.

Whereas Gerhart's observation may seem out of place in a largely critical idiom that the black writers of the 1950s cultivated, particularly in relation to the leftist orientation of *The Rhythm of Violence* – indeed, these writers were writing with the awareness of defeat and a false liberal promise of multi-racialism¹³ – the disappointment that animates the decisions to leave South Africa (Modisane, Abrahams and Mphahlele) and/or to withdraw into a detached cynicism (Modisane, Abrahams and Themba) is predicated on the failure of the few good whites to stem the tide of apartheid racism (as promised in the sermons of Bishops Huddleston, Philips and others who preached the triumph of multi-racial brotherhood over discrimination). More particularly, however, it is the failure of the white liberal (English-speaking) intelligentsia to sustain and to guarantee against apartheid racism the transcendence of the comfort-zone of the professional career of the black writer and a kind of bohemian lifestyle that had blossomed for most of the 1950s. In the latter connection, the ending of Abrahams' autobiography that I quoted above is salutary; so is Nkosi's description of his small circle of bohemians, which he proffers without irony:

Shebeens, like the London pub, provided the focal point of city life. Interminable talk went on there about politics, business, love, literature. Anything. When a new generation of white South Africans grew up which was prepared to rebel against the narrow confines of the colour-bar society, the only place, outside the suburbs, where they could meet young Africans was in the 'shebeens'. Under the cloak of darkness, groups of us, without obtaining police permits for white members of our convoys, drove into the sealed-off African townships, dodging police patrols, assisting young white girls over fences in badly lit township alleyways, outraging, in the process, the happy calm of black citizens who were most astonished to see pink faces suddenly materialise, unbesought, in the protected centre of their unstable lives. They were shocked and scandalised; they worried about the danger and enmity they were going to earn from the disapproving authorities. Most of all, I suppose, they worried about having to rearrange their emotions about white people who had been neatly pigeonholed as bosses and white devils. How was a mother to

¹³ Nkosi writes: "Though we doubted we could have done any better in the circumstances, we were nonetheless bitter that our great-grandfathers had lost a country to the whites [...] What we were not, by any means, prepared to forgive was the indecent readiness with which our immediate elders were prepared to believe that after this history of war and pillage white people meant well by us, and that given time they would soon accord us equal say in the running of the country's affairs"; *Home and Exile*, 3.

address a white girl whom her son brought home after dark, under the cover of darkness, from the university, from a Liberal Party meeting, from COD, or the jazz club?¹⁴

This is the material of Can Themba's short story "Crepuscule."¹⁵ However, I have quoted at length Nkosi's description of the bohemian life they lived as a tight group of 'dare-devils' because, in my view, it constitutes the subtext of *The Rhythm of Violence* and the play's emphasis on the inter-racial sexual privileges enjoyed by those who have no fear of authority – who have not been browbeaten into "the happy calm [of the] protected centre of [the township blacks'] unstable lives." As in Themba's "Crepuscule," the cynical denigration of 'awestruck' township citizens is depicted without any sense of contradiction. The one who assists young white girls over fences in badly lit township alleyways is, as Themba says in his story, "a hell of a guy" (4). The township becomes, as in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, a sort of Marabar Caves, as it were, visited for the dangerous pleasure of the "new generation of white South Africans." Though it is evident that the Dr Aziz-like figure's stature is raised above that of the ordinary black township citizen as a consequence of the risk he takes, there is no mention of 'Dr Aziz' being assisted over the fences of the white suburb and of his 'brown face' suddenly materializing, unbesought, in the protected centre of its citizens' stable lives.

But the race–sex dyad is dominant in quite a few of Nkosi's works, and the self-indulgence of its 'critical' address is particularly spectacular. For all its radical 'left-wing' rhetoric about the new "rhythm of violence" that would replace the "ultimate absurdity like [Alan Paton's] Stephen Khumalo: an embodiment of all the pieties, trepidations and humiliations we the young had begun to despise with such a consuming passion,"¹⁶ *The Rhythm of Violence* offers no significant advance from the basis of Paton's novel in the idea of liberal reform and of English-speaking white liberal trusteeship. Indeed, the black protagonist Gama's 'radicalism' is conceited and hides the unease with which the detribalized male (or, in this case, the deracialized male) would want to make the point known at every available opportunity that he is 'radical' (in both racial and sexual terms) and that, by all accounts, he has a legitimate claim to what appears to be the ultimate 'prize', which is white (or European) womanhood. Gama's addressing of his white girlfriend, Mary, as "the flower of European womanhood" (24) is, as are many other instances in which Gama speaks, a conceited playfulness that conceals a trajectory which

¹⁴ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 14–15.

¹⁵ Can Themba, *The Will To Die*, 2–11.

¹⁶ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 5.

is as weak as the soft-porn titillation that animates the context in which readers are expected to read something politically profound in the juvenile experiment. Kitty, Jimmy's black girlfriend, is by all accounts a stereotype that appears to have adapted well to the image of the racial cross-over that the play seems to make the burden of its exemplary black characters, but from which they would nonetheless earn 'deserved' recognition for their pain.¹⁷ When, in *Home and Exile*, Nkosi talks about "members of my own generation, both black and white, [who] were beginning to disaffiliate from a society organised on a rigid apartheid design," of "stories [that] began to filter to the press of mixed racial couples taking part at University dances; of white youths from the rich suburbs defying the law and roaming black townships by night; of new clubs and jazz haunts where free racial mixing took place on an unprecedented scale," of "these same young people who have revitalised political life" and, finally, of "the depth of desperation" among "the black people of South Africa [that is] so profound that the sixties will see no end to the riot and gunfire" (40–41), it is not too severe a critical observation to make that the opposition that this sets up between the dynamism of the multi-racial alternative¹⁸ and the desperation of the black periphery is self-indulgent and somewhat condescending towards "the black people of South Africa." The "desperate" black 'periphery' is largely a construct of the kind of rhetoric that Nkosi mobilizes, which has been roundly and elaborately condemned by Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele respectively, as belonging to a protest tradition that appeals mainly to a white liberal and black-middle-class conscience.¹⁹ To be sure, it is the protest rhetoric itself that is peripheral to the subjects on behalf of whom it claims to speak.

Against the backdrop of this last point, let me return to the point that I made in the introduction: namely, that Nkosi has resisted in his criticism the seduction of the presumption that the contours of art inevitably coincide with those of documentation. That *The Rhythm of Violence* appears to dramatize this resistance is evident, particularly in the manner in which the play establishes the "dingy basement clubroom which serves as headquarters of a group

¹⁷ It is here (indeed so, in the case of Tula's self-sacrifice) that one would locate Soyinka's critique of the play's vision as dependent upon "perpetual self-sacrifice by the downtrodden."

¹⁸ Albeit the ultimate political dynamism/vitality belongs to the risk-taking "youths from the white suburbs."

¹⁹ In "Preparing ourselves for freedom," Sachs rejects the kind of rhetoric that denies "the black people of South Africa" the largesse with which Nkosi portrays those who disaffiliated themselves from a society organized on a rigid apartheid design; so does Ndebele in "Actors and Interpreters."

of left-wing university students” as a sphere of authority that would counter the authority of apartheid. Also crucial, in this connection, is the manner in which, within the clubroom, and against the characters of Jojozi and Slowfoot as interlocutors, the play ponders (the ‘art’ of) the “cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards upon our bruised spirits,” of whom Can Themba speaks in “The Bottom of the Bottle,” and the shift to (the ‘art’ of) violence. Located as it is in the basement clubroom and on the “left-wing” of apartheid, the play’s main thrust would seem, in part, metaphorically to illustrate the view held by J.M. Coetzee:

For the writer the deeper problem is not to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms.²⁰

In short, the play’s main thrust is such that it seeks to counter the ‘hostage situation’ in which it merely dramatizes its implication in the terms of engagement with apartheid that are determined by the rhetoric and vision of apartheid itself.²¹ The slogans on the walls of the clubroom already announce the play’s determination to move out of the field of vision of the apartheid panopticon. The important question to ask in this last regard is: what constitutes apartheid in the play’s wisdom and beyond the contours that it draws around apartheid? As a term that was to gain widespread use, ‘apartheid’ entered official political discourse in South Africa via the ascendance of the Afrikaner National Party to political power in 1948 and remained in the South African political imaginary for more than four decades. Before then, as a social fact, apartheid constituted both the Dutch and the British attitude towards other groups that had inhabited Southern Africa prior to colonial occupation.²² It may be argued that Dutch apartheid was more virulent and spectacular than that of the British, but, in the overall scheme of colonialism,

²⁰ J.M. Coetzee, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa,” in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992): 364.

²¹ It would seem that, whereas withdrawal into a “fringe society” still shapes the terms of this thrust, it is not the type that Can Themba talks about: i.e. “turn[ing] the revolt inwards.”

²² It could be argued that, to a significant extent, it overrode the systems of racial and other forms of gradation that were in place prior to Dutch and British occupation. Bessie Head, in *Maru*, has offered a glimpse into some of these systems as they pertained to Botswana.

the British saw the KhoiKhoi, Khoisan and black Africans as qualitatively different and inferior races who, only after they had attained a certain level of enlightenment, would be junior partners in progress. Indeed, that was to be the case. Peter Walshe notes, in relation to black Africans, that

the origins of African political consciousness in Southern Africa can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century, to the impact of the Christian missions and the development of a non-racial constitution in the Cape. As the century progressed, mission-educated Africans came to exercise a limited but real influence within Cape politics, and the Native policy of that colony was seen to contrast favourably with those policies developing in the Boer republics and Natal. By the turn of the century a new African élite had emerged, committed to non-racial ideals gleaned from Christianity and supported by the theory, and to some extent the practice, of Cape politics.

These attitudes were in turn encouraged by the gradual process of economic integration, an awareness of the Negro struggle in America, and a belief that tribal political organisations had been a preparation for the processes of democratic and parliamentary government in which educated Africans had a right to participate. When, in the aftermath of the South African War and at the establishment of Union in 1909, it became clear that non-racial ideals were not necessarily to predominate in Southern Africa, there was consequently sufficient awareness amongst Africans for new political organisations to coalesce and for protests to be made both to the South African authorities and to Great Britain.²³

The origins of the view that apartheid is "a daily exercise in the absurd," as Lewis Nkosi and others²⁴ have described it, can thus, in part, be traced to the disappointment among the African elite and mainly English-speaking white liberals that the Cape scenario was not to last. This is not to say that this description is unfounded but, rather, that the point of comparison arises from the view that with apartheid, the scope of material and intellectual progress of the African elite was rudely curtailed. Apartheid saw the confiscation of land to which Africans had had rights of ownership and the introduction of Bantu education that was to put an end to mission education, which this elite group had enjoyed until the early 1960s. Though inferior and parochial in its con-

²³ Peter Walshe. *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (Craighall: Ad. Donker, 1987): 1.

²⁴ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 35. Anne McClintock argues similarly in "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Women and Nationalism in South Africa," *Transition* 51 (1991): 104–23.

ceptualization and practice, Bantu education appealed to a wider spectrum of African society than had been the case with mission education, which appealed to a minority group of (Christian) converts as a vanguard group that served to buttress belief in the non-racial colonial strain to which, given the 'right' conditions, Africans could "soar," at least in comparison with those Africans who had stuck to the old, which is to say 'pagan', ways.²⁵ One of the consequences of Bantu education, which the architects of apartheid arguably did not anticipate, is that even a rudimentary knowledge of how they were being "penned in an inglorious spot," to use the words of Claude McKay, would enable a wider spectrum of the oppressed to understand the basics of their domination. However, it was still those who had received mission education, like Stephen Biko and the pan-Africanists before him, borrowing from and adapting to the South African conditions the writings of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, among others, who could be said to have been primarily revolutionary in orientation, instead of reformist/ameliorative.²⁶

Thus, in the above connection, the first Act of *The Rhythm of Violence* aligns itself with the idea of the absurdity of apartheid, which it then becomes the project of the inter-racial group of "left-wing university students" in the second Act to counter with what, I would argue, is the prototype of the disappointment among the African elite and English-speaking white liberals with the ascendance of racial segregationist tendencies within Union and their culmination in the Afrikaner National Party policies. In this last regard, it is not clear in the play what, precisely, constitutes the 'left' of the student group's political orientation, apart from the point that Gama makes:

For years we have been waiting for action from the Congress leadership.
For years we have heard nothing but speeches and rhetoric. Friends, today
the young people are seizing the reins, and we promise you plenty action!
Whether the struggle will turn into a violent one or not, we say that de-

²⁵ Even among the most liberal of the white liberals, there does not seem to have been any doubt that even the most educated African will not be able to redefine the terrain of enlightenment which, to be sure, was always European. It is only towards the close of the 1800s that tentative assaults on this view occurred, but only after anti-imperial resistance in the colonies forced a review of fundamental colonial assumptions. The modernist novel in Europe, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, arose out of this disillusionment with the 'good work' that imperialists were doing in the colonies.

²⁶ This last point does not detract from the implications of the 1973 nationwide workers' strikes and the June 1976 student uprising: namely, the fact that what theorists such as Biko did was to verbalize more cohesively the mood that was the result of this broadly based political consciousness.

pendes on the South African police. In any case, the issue is an *academic* one. Today, here and now, we pledge ourselves to act! Before you all we resolve to strike a blow against apartheid! From now on, we are serving notice on these arrogant men that we can no longer tolerate white domination, subjugation, and repression at their hands. When the blow will be struck, I don't know. It may be sooner than they think. Tonight! Tomorrow, or the following day, but the blow shall be struck! (8)

However, let me probe the basis of the play's conception of the political 'left' and of apartheid as “a daily exercise in the absurd.” With this, I also want to ponder the implications of the main title of this essay – “hostage drama” – for the play's terms of engagement with the dimension of apartheid that it dramatizes. The “absurd,” in *Home and Exile*, is “the total effect of the apartheid laws in South Africa [which] make it almost illegal to live.” Nkosi points out that “Before you are through reading about what the black is not allowed to do, you begin to wonder if there is anything he is permitted to do.” As regards “blacks,” Nkosi's view is that the fact that they “have been able to endure under apartheid is a measure of human ingenuity almost difficult to describe or understand. It seems that the blacks do have the required humour and wit – almost too much of it!”²⁷ This is because, for Nkosi,

For a black man to live in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century and at the same time preserve his sanity, he requires an enormous sense of humour and a surrealistic kind of brutal wit, for without a suicidal attack on Dr. Verwoerd's armed forces, these qualities seem to provide the only means of defence against a spiritual chaos and confusion which would rob any man of his mental health. (35)

Thus, by implication, apartheid becomes the dialectical terminus beyond which “the blacks” are at their wit's end; the blacks' wit must be cultivated in the service of survival under apartheid, as a “defence against [apartheid-induced] spiritual chaos and confusion.” In the play, Piet and Jan epitomize the absurdity of apartheid. As I indicated earlier, they are not unlike Vladimir and Estragon, the two tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, except that they are waiting for the “Natives” to “start something.” Otherwise, like the tramps, the waiting is what makes them and, also, as it turns out on two occasions in the first Act, what breaks them:

PIET. We're standing guard over the future.

JAN. I know, but whose future? Ours or theirs?

²⁷ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 35

PIET. Ours! Why do you say that? So long as we stand guard, there is no danger.

JAN. I don't know, Piet! All I know is this is wearing me down, goddammit! While we stand guard, we cannot sleep! It's wearing me down, I tell you.

[...]

PIET [*savagely*]. Damn it, I wish they would start something! Anything! So we can handle them once and for all. They are wearing me down, too, wearing me down! They are wearing me down! They are wearing me down, goddammit! (15–16, 22)

Other than reflecting on the paralysis that this waiting induces, passing a bone between themselves and occasionally jolted by Gama's voice in the background, they pass the time rehearsing imaginary and past confrontations with "Natives," replete with the rhetoric of a system that is becoming increasingly paranoid as the rhetoric of its resistance becomes more threatening. At one time, Jan plays a "militant Native leader," Tom Lundula, who leads a march to City Hall "to present demands" (19). The dialogue with Piet as Major Ludorf serves to buttress the play's point about the shift in the terms of engagement with the apartheid system (or "the white man") of which Gama's speech above is an illustration.

JAN. I, Tom Lundula, am the leader of the procession.... Hey, that would be a good name for a trusted Native leader! A militant Native leader! [*Savouring the name.*] Tom Lundula!

PIET. Well, Tom Lundula, step forward and let me have a look at you. [*JAN steps forward stiffly.*] You look an intelligent Native to me, Tom Lundula. Maybe I'm wrong, but you look like a well-mannered Native who knows his responsibilities.

JAN. I'm flattered that you think so, sir. Under different circumstances you and I would be good friends, but this is hardly the time!

PIET. As I was saying, you look like a moderate Native who knows the laws of the land. And you know that leading thousands of Natives into the city like this without a written permission from the Chief of Police is a punishable offence.

JAN. We know the laws of the white man, Major Ludorf. We've made a career out of studying the laws of the white man.

PIET. I thought you were a clever Native, Lundula. I thought so. Also I knew that even a clever man can be misguided at times. You know, wrong advice can be given to him, which leads him into the ways of folly.

JAN. Sir, you mistake our mission. We come not to get advice from the Chief of Police. We come here – I and my people – come here to present demands to the City Hall, and unless those demands are met, not one of my men is going back to work. (19)

The exchange between the condescending ‘Major Ludorf’ and defiant ‘Tom Lundula’ continues until the former orders the marchers to disperse or face his order for “my men to clear the streets” (21). Piet is surprised that Jan could get so “carried away” in the role while the latter “is embarrassed to find that he is no longer acting but has completely identified himself with the African cause,” which, as he says in his defence, “comes out of listening to them speak for too long” (21).

It is, thus, against this background that the play proposes its terms of intervention – its “rhythm of violence” – that will supersede the cosy racial partnership for which “this is hardly the time!” As I pointed out earlier, the second Act is a glimpse into the ‘leftism’ that will usher in the proper inter-racial partnership that Piet, as Major Ludorf above, misunderstands as the partnership between the good old moderate and clever Native “who knows the laws of the land” and the flattering white “sir” who makes the laws. Apart from the laws on illegal gathering and marching into the city without permission that the mock confrontation between Major Ludorf and Tom Lundula illustrates, one of these laws, which the second Act tackles, is the inter-racial sexual one, and relates to what Piet asks Tula early in the play when the latter comes to deliver petitions protesting the “colour-bar”:

PIET. Would you like to marry a white girl? [TULA is caught unexpectedly by the question. His honesty prevents him from giving a simple answer. PIET flares up suddenly.] Yes or no? Boy, can’t you answer a simple question?

TULA. That would depend on many things, baas.

PIET. Like what?

TULA. Well, sir, like whether she is the right girl to marry. Whether she is intelligent or –

PIET [*interrupting*]. Look, boy! You think you’re smart, eh? You think you’re clever?

TULA. No, sir!

PIET. Well, you’re not! You’re a damn stupid Native if I ever saw one! Stupid! [*He holds TULA by the lapels of his coat and is shaking him against the wall.*] You can go back and tell that to your organization. [*He seizes the petitions from TULA and scatters them on the floor. TULA moves toward the door.*] ... (14)

Piet's agitation results not so much from Tula's thinking that he is clever – even though this is also important in the play's overall argument – as from the fact that he is not like “all good natives” who, as Ndi Sibiya puts it in Nkosi's novel *Mating Birds*, know “where [their eyes] belong.”²⁸ As in *Mating Birds*, the breaching of the Immorality Act, by an act of omission or commission,²⁹ forms one of the supports for the play's ‘left-wing’ intervention, as opposed to the ‘moderate’ one of “Congress” to which Piet alludes above.

Another aspect of the play's intervention is ushered in by way of two black characters, Jojozi and Slowfoot. In the second Act, for instance, it is as though Can Themba, as the journalist by the name of Jojozi, has been lured out of the detached cynicism and (drunken) autonomous ‘rhythm’ of “The House of Truth” into “the rhythm of violence” that marks the clubroom as the space for a new political agency and urgency. Indeed, certain parts that are identified with Jojozi in the play seem to come expressly from Themba's short-story collection *The Will To Die* (1972), or from comments that have been identified with him. So are those parts that are identified with Slowfoot, who appears to be one of Jojozi's “House of Truth” consorts, and who, like Jojozi, must be brought into line with a context that is changing. This context, as I have already indicated, and as Gama puts it to his girlfriend, is “the start of the rhythm! The rhythm of violence, lovey!” (28), against the backdrop of an increasingly brutal system of which Piet, Jan and the Afrikaner nationalists gathered at City Hall are enforcers and architects respectively. Consider, for instance, Jojozi's response to the way Gama reacts to his brother Tula's friendship with Sarie:

GAMA. Did you hear that? My own brother – my own kid brother – stands there and says to me, Leave us alone! Has your kid brother ever told you to leave him alone?

JOJOZI. He never lived to tell me that. He died an untimely death, poor brother! The son of a bitch had no business to die such an untimely death. (47)

Or, still on the subject of Tula's friendship with Sarie:

JOJOZI. My God! Can you imagine the stories in the paper! A Boer girl and a Bantu boy found in flat under compromising circumstances. [*Intones.*] This is the South African Broadcasting Corporation. A Boer girl and a Bantu boy were found by the police under compromising

²⁸ Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds* (Braamfontein: Ravan, 1987): 9.

²⁹ Piet expects Tula, like a ‘good Native’ “who knows the laws of the land,” to acknowledge that a white girl is out of bounds for a ‘Native’.

circumstances last night. They were both taken into custody after making signed statements to the police. Contrary to – (46)

Chris and Gama join in to complete the news bulletin. The part of the first quotation, in which Jojozi says about his brother, “The son of a bitch had no business to die,” is quoted, word for word, by Nkosi in his obituary of Themba as having been said by the latter “at a friend’s funeral,” and the second quotation bears a striking resemblance to Themba’s own experience with a white girl in the story “Crepuscule,” except that in the story Themba evades the police on two occasions. In the case of Slowfoot, whose defining characteristic is his prodigious consumption of brandy and a matching drunken abandon, his description of the students’ gathering and Jimmy and Gama’s reactions to it are worth noting for the verbosity of the 1950s literary style:

SLOWFOOT [*grinning sardonically*]. Ah, I can see the somber quiet rests heavily upon this illogical conglomeration of the flotsam and jetsam of society! [*Nobody responds to him. He sizes up the group and tries again.*] A dead stillness! Only drunks are not impressed by the sober solemnity of history!

JIMMY. And history is not impressed by the solemn sogginess of a drunkard’s mind!

SLOWFOOT. Ah, Jimmy, my boy! I knew you would rise up to the occasion!

GAMA. Will that clot shut up! He’s getting on my nerves!

SLOWFOOT [*whistles drunkenly and stumbles forward*]. Hey, waita minute! Listen who’s talking now! The tough cool boy! The wonderboy who’s in truck with history! And for the first time he’s unsure like the rest of us mortals! Gama, rise and shine; immortality is passing you by!

GAMA. If somebody doesn’t stop that drunk, I swear I’m going to punch him on his blabbering mouth!

SLOWFOOT. Ah, it “was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... it was the time of wisdom, it was the time of foolishness!” [*He stumbles forward*] A time of extreme stupidity! You see, Gama, my boy, you’re not the original thing! There’ve been revolutions before! (65)

Thus, for Nkosi, Jojozi and Slowfoot typify Nat Nakasa and Can Themba, “personal friends and former colleagues, I knew better than most”:

I lived in the same house with both of them at different times. After they are gone it seems to me now that there was always something strangely sinister and altogether ominous in their form of detachment and the

desperate wit they cultivated, in the mocking cynicism of the one and the love of irony of the other. Each in his own way tried to reduce the South African problem into some form of manageable game one plays constantly with authority without winning, but without losing either. In order to survive and in order to conceal the scars, they laughed, clowned, mocked and finally embraced their 'outlaw' condition with all of its surrounding cloud of romantic tragedy and supposable drama. [...]

Nevertheless, irony is a personal stance; in South Africa it is defensive. Irony cannot defeat a brutal system and oppressive regime; it can only assist for a while in concealing the pain and the wounds until the anguish is too deep and unbearable to be contained within a perpetual self-contemplating irony. Nat Nakasa finally committed suicide in New York [...]

Can Themba, on the other hand, had always disguised his own pain behind a devil-may-take-the-hindlegs kind of attitude and a prodigious reliance on alcohol as a drug. His drinking was phenomenal.³⁰

Thus, the terms of the play's intervention can be aligned with Nkosi's view that apartheid is fundamentally a spiritual (or discursive) absurdity which, if it was not as deadly as its repressive apparatus has on many occasions proved to be. As Piet recalls, shooting "Natives" in Sophiatown, would require only "an enormous sense of humour and a surrealistic kind of brutal wit," the kind that Jojozi and Slowfoot are remarkable for. As Gama puts it in his speech above, "Whether the struggle will turn into a violent one or not [...] depends on the South African Police." Secondly – and here I am not in total agreement with Soyinka's observation that "the message appears to be that a multi-racial society is the goal for South Africa" – it seems to me that the play echoes Nkosi's view – at least before he abandoned it in *Home and Exile* – that "the sound of police gunfire and jackboot would ultimately become ineffectual against resolute opposition and defiance from the new 'fringe society' coming together in a spirit of tolerance and occupying a 'no man's-land' between the two warring camps." The reason that I am not in total agreement with Soyinka on this question is that the play has in mind an inter-racial, rather than a multi-racial, social vision, in which the terms Black, White and Indian would no longer be possible. Gama, a black boy, is dating Mary, a white girl; Jimmy, a white boy, is dating Kitty, a black girl; Tula has struck up a friendship with Sarie, a "Boer girl"; and, when Jojozi, after his advances are spurned by Lili, the Indian girl, asks "Why don't Indians in this country ever 'integrate'?" Lili answers "I just wouldn't like to integrate with *you*, that's

³⁰ Can Themba, *The Will To Die*, vii, ix.

all" (48). It is, thus, 'integration' (inter-racialism), rather than separate but equal (multi-racialism), that is at the core of the play's social vision. Thirdly, it is not the death of Tula but, rather, the senselessness of his death that entrenches the play's resolve that violence is the only language apartheid understands, even if innocent people, like Sarie's father and Tula,³¹ are sacrificed in the process:

GAMA. ... Ah, who cares? One Boer gets blown up because he happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time! It's not the first time it's happened. Hundreds of black people have been killed by Boers! It's a pity if one good Boer gets on the rails of history and gets ground up with the rest. [*Pause. Suddenly.*] Jimmy, what do you think? You think I am right or wrong? Tell me. (63)

Thus, if the dialogue that leads to Tula's tragic death is insubstantial, as Soyinka rightly observes, it is because it can only be so; however, as I have already argued, it is not the basis of the play's main argument. I made the point above that, as an illustration of the militant sensibility of the early 1960s, Nkosi's play is shot through with a 'left-wing' optimism that misses the point of the operation of apartheid power that it targets and, as a consequence of it, takes its own power for granted. I also argued that the play's power lies not so much in its violent attack on apartheid – an attack that is in any case an illustration of a pathetic stereotype – as in the class-based power that accrues to the small inner circle of inter-racial protagonists: Gama, Jimmy and their girlfriends, Mary and Kitty. At one stage, and in a curious but, also, not so curious way, it is Piet and Jan who identify the background of this power, which is later confirmed by the dialogue between Gama and Jimmy. Referring to the students' demonstration early in the first Act and Gama's threatening speech later in the same Act, they point out that

PIET. It's the blerry English and their City Council! If this was a Boer town, nothing like this would ever happen! We'd stop those blinkin' bastards before they'd even have time to open their traps!

JAN. The English don't know nothing about handling Natives! Look what happened in Kenya! Look what happens in Rhodesia now! That's what they get for mollycoddling the Natives! (6–7)

And later:

³¹ Even though the inner circle is not aware that Tula has slipped out to try and detonate the bomb, his brother, Gama, thinks that he might have gone to City Hall to witness the explosion and, maybe, "sing to the police! Warn them!"

PIET. It's Gama.... He is all mouth and nothing much else.

JAN. He talks dangerous words.

PIET. He learned to talk like that at the big university up there on top of the hill. But he's all talk.

JAN. I hear the Government is going to stop them from going to the white universities.

PIET. High time too. (17)

This is not merely the surfacing of the old enmity between the Boer and the English, bred in the aftermath of the events following the British occupation of the Cape in 1820, which led to the Great Trek of the Boers into the hinterland and the Transvaal and the Anglo-Boer War towards the close of the 1800s. It is also a comment on the liberal paternalism that informs the partnership between the English and the "Natives," however else embroiled in the bitterness about the events I have just mentioned the comment may be. Indeed, this is confirmed in the dialogue between Gama, Jimmy and Mary on the question of the bomb that has been planted at City Hall:

MARY. [*soft, very feminine and appealing*]. Please, Gama, will you tell me? Did everything go according to plan?

GAMA. Everything according to plan! Isn't that right, Mr. MacBride?

JIMMY. That's right! I dare say I'm extremely gratified with the way the job was carried out. Extremely gratified!

[...]

MARY. Jimmy, did you clear up all the papers I told you to? Just in case they come around?

GAMA. They won't! Anyway they know enough about the club already, but nothing we've done yet makes us responsible for planting a bomb under the Johannesburg City Hall while the Boers are having their rally. The very idea! Such an irresponsible idea! Isn't that an irresponsible idea, Mr. MacBride?

JIMMY. Extremely irresponsible! Nobody but an exceedingly inconsiderate person would ever think of it.

GAMA. That's right! And we are very responsible young people.

JIMMY. We believe in negotiations of the kind where a spirit of give and take exists!

GAMA. [*laughs hysterically*]. A-ha-haa! That's right, my boy, a spirit of give and take! [*He punches JIMMY on the shoulder, and JIMMY punches him back in a sort of reflex action.*] That's it! Give and take! (26-27)

The "spirit of give and take" is supposed to counter the "spiritual chaos" that apartheid induces and over which Piet, Jan and those meeting at City Hall stand guard and reinforce. It may not be such an important observation that, in this brief dialogue, Gama keeps deferring to Jimmy to make his points; Jimmy must reassure Gama that it is necessary, rather than anti-white, to kill "Boers." However, if one considers the absent sub-text that informs the relationship between the two,³² this deference, and the emphasis on the "spirit," rather than the "material," could arguably be seen to conceal the English-speaking white liberal trusteeship that frames the liberal counter-charge that the two represent and from which Gama gains in stature as a radical black protagonist who has gained the confidence of 'good whites'. Thus, it seems to me, the question is not so much whether or not it is necessary to kill the "Boers" that are assembled at City Hall as the nascent idea that is nonetheless in ascendance, which the partnership of Gama and Jimmy will serve to re-inaugurate. It is, to be sure, the idea of liberal democracy that governs social relations, in which the spiritual, rather than the material/economic, is at stake. Indeed, as 'unintended' a by-product as it appears to be, it is a prophetic play in this regard, for it is precisely the *return* of the old middle classes that informs the idea of progress in South Africa today that the play reinforces. Or was it ever gone?

Now, what has been conspicuous by the absence of its critical engagement in this essay thus far is the play's portrayal of its female characters. I have already adverted to the sex-race dyad in the play but, in doing so, have not offered the dimension in which it echoes its focus in *Mating Birds*. The reason for this is simple. In *The Rhythm of Violence*, this dyad is kept intact – without the contradictions in which it is mired in *Mating Birds* – because it is not the play's primary focus but, rather, is placed in the service of what the play implicitly considers a 'higher cause'. However, it is no less significant to a critical analysis of this 'higher cause', even if it lacks the consistent textual support that is *Mating Birds*' enduring feature.³³ Another reason, however, is that it is in "The Black Psychiatrist" that this question becomes more urgent, and I want to tender a few observations in this direction.

"The Black Psychiatrist" trades on the strategy of (racial) sexual-textual seduction, in ways that draw attention to the play's mode of address, rather than to the issue that it addresses, which, in any event, only becomes apparent

³² They cannot possibly share the same economic base, given the order of access to wealth in South Africa at the time.

³³ In *Mating Birds*, it is the text itself that seduces the reader, while it surreptitiously markets certain notions about white femininity and black male desire in a racist superstructure, in particular and, in general, white female and black male sexuality.

at the end of the play. The primary consequence of this strategy is that it compels one to return to the scenes in *The Rhythm of Violence* in which Nkosi addresses sexuality.

“The Black Psychiatrist” dramatizes an encounter between Dr Dan Kerry, a Coloured psychiatrist and South African exile living and practising his profession in London, and Mrs Gloria Gresham, also from South Africa, but who, as we learn towards the end of the play, has changed her name from Nina Joubert. The greater part of the play is taken up by the strategy of suspense/sexual–textual seduction, in which Gloria, or Mrs Gresham, does not announce the purpose of her visit to Dan’s consultancy but, instead, baits him with hints of an “intimate” relationship that they supposedly had in the past, despite Dan’s violent denials and protestations, which she ignores. At the end of the play, it turns out that the two did indeed have an intimate (sexual) relationship while growing up in South Africa. However, Dan only remembers Nina Joubert, rather than Gloria Gresham, as the woman with whom he had this relationship; and, as he learns later, they are in fact siblings: Nina’s father had fathered Dan by sleeping with his domestic servant and concealed the baby’s paternity. All along, Nina as Gloria has not been aware of this until her encounter with Dan in his rooms.

I want to argue that, for me anyway, it is not so much the past that this encounter brings to the present that is at stake in the play, as the manner in which this past, and its re-encounter in the play’s present, is embroiled in what is arguably Nkosi’s longstanding preoccupation with inter-racial sexual encounters. As in the description of Mary in *The Rhythm of Violence*, as speaking in a “soft, very feminine and appealing” manner, Gloria Gresham’s introduction into the play is couched in a notion of feminine coyness and sensual/sexual appeal. The invitation to participate in this titillation is extended not only to Dan but also to the reader; as in *Mating Birds*, the reader is invited to gaze and devour with Dan and Nkosi white flesh, as Mrs Gresham’s thigh is revealed through the “slit right down the front” of “a soft shirt dress.” This is fastened onto Gloria’s comment about Dan’s room as “bare, naked, empty,” so that the projection outward onto an innocuous commonplace also becomes the projection inward onto a sexual ‘prize’ that Dan, if he gets her hint, would reclaim as the spoils of a past that has come back. While in “The Black Psychiatrist” it may appear that it is black male flesh that is sought after, as opposed to *Mating Birds*’ idea of the availability of white female flesh to the daring black male, the two ideas meet at the point where it turns out that, like the “English girl” in *Mating Birds*, Gloria is sex-starved: her husband is having an affair with his assistant. The point is buttressed by the descriptions of her behaviour in what is supposed to be a professional environment: “she laughs sexily,” disguises her desire to be had by “someone

from a different background" by claiming that she is representing her sister, whom she has advised to find a psychiatrist from a different background, and she "laughs suggestively." In short, she is, like the "English girl" in *Mating Birds*, "a bait put there to destroy our men [but] soft and round and desirable." Indeed, on one such occasion, Gloria baits Dan into a sexually charged dialogue and promptly accuses him of trying to chat her up:

WOMAN. All the same, I think you're intrigued by me. Wouldn't you say you were just a little bit intrigued, Dr. Kerry?

GIVING THE WOMAN COMPLETE APPRAISAL. HE SEEMS GREATLY IMPRESSED BY HER POWERFUL SEXUALITY.

KERRY. Well, Yes. I would say, quite intrigued.

WOMAN (JOYOUSLY) You are?

KERRY. Well (SLIGHT PAUSE) Wouldn't any man?

WOMAN. (SHARPLY) What do you mean by that?

[...]

KERRY. What man wouldn't! (LAUGHS) As a matter of fact, I don't mind admitting: it's not very often that one gets a visit from a woman of such obvious good ...

WOMAN (SUDDENLY HARD) Stop it!

[...]

KERRY. Now, look, I think you're being bloody unfair!

WOMAN. Am I?

KERRY. Yes. I was merely trying to pay you a compliment.

WOMAN. What for? You are a psychiatrist, aren't you? You're not here to chat up women, are you?

KERRY. I was doing nothing of the sort!

WOMAN. I'm warning you, Kerry! I don't care if you're black and South African and have been oppressed for as long as anyone can remember. This is not South Africa. Here you're just another psychiatrist, a professional man, like anybody else. No favors. You're supposed to perform your duties like anyone else without fear or favor.

Conclusion

It seems to me that a much longer project that will take on board Frantz Fanon's theorization of the sex-race question in *Black Skin, White Masks* would be ideal for the study of this phenomenon in Nkosi's writing. What this essay has done is to subject *The Rhythm of Violence* and the prominence of

the sex–race question in Nkosi’s writing to some of the rigours of – for lack of a better description – the ‘new left’. It is my view that the ‘left wing’ that Nkosi canvasses in *The Rhythm of Violence* is one that can be found among the élite who see “their people,” as Themba writes in “The Bottom of the Bottle,” as “tied helplessly to an ant-heap” (112), ever to be anything but “desperate.” It is, as it were, a ‘left wing’ that stands and/or falls depending on the organization of its tactics by a ‘right wing’ that it vaguely understands.

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6

Psychoanalysis and Apartheid

The Image and Role of the Psychiatrist in Selected Works of Lewis Nkosi

ASTRID STARCK-ADLER

IN HIS ESSAY “Sex and the Law in South Africa,” Lewis Nkosi stressed the complex if not perverse relationship between blacks and whites stemming from the strictures against all interracial sexual relationships during apartheid.¹ The fictional transgression of this interdiction was to become one of the leitmotifs of certain black and white writers of South African fiction – Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope*, Peter Abrahams’ *The Path of Thunder*, Nadine Gordimer’s *A Sport of Nature*, to mention but a few. Through its variations, the theme constituted the supreme metaphor of apartheid’s *Aufhebung*. That is what Nkosi analyses and depicts, in part, in his short stories and plays.² This metaphor did not function as an obsession,³ but as an attempt to go beyond a reality which became more and more repressive

¹ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London: Longman, 1983): 37–44. Nkosi quotes specifically from Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope*, in which a young white man intently pursues a young black woman who is not unaware of the sexual provocation she embodies for a white man.

² See also “The Prisoner” and *The Rhythm of Violence*.

³ Cf. André Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics: Lewis Nkosi’s *Mating Birds*,” *English in Africa* 19.1 (May 1992): 1–20. He denounces the author’s persistent fascination for the subject and sees in him an individual who is obsessed by white women, who is deeply sexist and marked by a Calvinistic morality through which he only sees white women as sexual objects, temptresses who will hasten him to his downfall. All the clichés and stereotypes used by Nkosi in his writing are taken at face value by Brink.

as the individual was exposed in his “naked life.”⁴ The visionary nature of the metaphor is revealed with hindsight and is magnificently expressed in the title of the novel *Mating Birds*, which can be compared with Peter Schneider’s novel *The Wall Jumper* (tr. 1983) and Wim Wenders’ film *Wings of Desire* (1988), both of which imagine a fictional transgression of the Berlin Wall before it was brought down.

How does one render the reality of the racist South Africa of the apartheid era, where to be black, to be non-white, was to have one’s being negated? How does one evoke the ‘colour bar’ without falling prey to the ‘colour bore’, as some have called it? The writer’s role, says Nkosi, is to find new forms: “The only epic theme we have is apartheid and only new ways of telling the story about apartheid and about resistance to apartheid can help us to dust off the old mysteries around forced removals, resettlements, police shootings, if we are to make them look new again.”⁵ How does one restore a sexuality which has been effaced, desire which is always less than words, a stuttering and leashed body? How does one escape using normative language for a sexuality which can only be omnipresent and voyeurist, since it is constrained in and of itself?⁶ How does one avoid the established clichés according to which one is always already guilty?

In both the novel *Mating Birds* and the play “The Black Psychiatrist,” Nkosi introduces a character whose role is that of a catalyst: the psychoanalyst.⁷ He is someone who “triggers speech,” who wants to be “master of the truth.”⁸ In *Mating Birds*, Dr Emile Dufré, an anagram for Freud, is also a Jew, but Swiss-German, and he tries to find out, from the ‘outside’, what in Sibiya’s childhood could have caused the aggression which leads him to commit a crime; whereas in “The Black Psychiatrist,” Dr Kerry, a black South African who has set himself up in London’s Harley Street, is himself ana-

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue* (Paris: Seuil 1997): 61.

⁵ Lewis Nkosi, “Vu de l’extérieur: La littérature d’Afrique du Sud et la crise des représentations, écrivains noirs, écrivains blancs,” *Nouvelles du Sud* 12 (August–October 1989): 167.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 1: *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). “Entre l’État et l’individu, le sexe est devenu un enjeu” (37) (Between the State and the individual, sex has become what is at stake).

⁷ Sigmund Freud, quoted by Ernest Jones: “L’écrivain ne peut pas échapper au psychiatre, pas plus que ce dernier ne peut échapper au premier” (The writer cannot escape the psychiatrist, any more than the latter can escape the former); *La vie et l’œuvre de Sigmund Freud* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), vol. 3: 474.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 87, 89.

lysed.⁹ Dufré comes all the way from Zurich especially to study the Sibiya ‘case’ of a young Zulu who is condemned to die by hanging for having ‘raped’ a white woman, Veronica Slater; similarly, Dr Kerry is visited by a white ‘patient’ originally from South Africa, Gloria Gresham, who urges him to remember his past life but who, in turn, is confronted by her own story, that of having the same father as him. These incursions into the past, the *sine qua non* condition of the analytical process, are to become opportunities to throw into question the dominant language which is the vehicle for a repressive ideology. In *Mating Birds*, the psychoanalyst Emile Dufré, a kind-hearted, patient and courteous man who, as a Jew, “has seen much that is odd and unpleasant in the world,”¹⁰ having arrived suddenly in a foreign country with all his scientific know-how, seeks to apply to Sibiya’s case the criteria which he believes to be universal but which are eventually revealed to be reductionist. Even though Sibiya sees him as a perfect listener, Dufré is incapable of hearing what is being said to him or what cannot be put into words. In this regard, it can be claimed that Dufré represents an institutionalized psychiatry set apart from psychotherapy which is normally there to listen to stammered words or silence, the only means Sibiya has to express himself. The different instances – the psychoanalyst, the judge, the court – reveal what they contain from the world of prisons: they function within a jail with imaginary walls, walls thereby made all the more insurmountable. The universe of prisons is therefore multiplied before us and is both fictitious and real. The only escape possible in either space or time is through the liberation of memory, a compartmentalized, fragmented memory: Sibiya tries to write the story of his life, a life which starts from when he meets the English woman and extends to his sentencing, but he does this in a disorganized way; similarly, Gloria and Kelly are suddenly forced to integrate their South African pasts, which are superimposed upon each other.

The tales of childhood, however, can only be processed through an emotional, subjective memory. It is interesting to note that both the novel and the play unfold on an individual level, on an historical level, as well as on the level of the writer and his craft: for example, in a nightmare which Sibiya has in prison, he is back at university – from which he has now been expelled and where he was only ever tolerated – during a history lecture. Professor Van Niekerk, described as “that ogre, that racist pig, that academic fraud” (102), “always arrives carrying an immense manuscript with pages from which words have been carefully erased. Laughing, he hands [Sibiya] this book and

⁹ “The Black Psychiatrist,” *Weber Studies* 13.2 (Spring–Summer 1994): 5–24.

¹⁰ *Mating Birds* (1983; Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987): 25. Further page references are in the main text.

bids [him] to walk into the future by following the instructions inscribed in it” (102). On the individual level, it can be said that Sibiya is excluded from a body of knowledge which he cannot decipher; on an historical level, the manuscript contains no word on the history of Africa (further on, we are told that the history of Africa began with the arrival of whites); on the level of the writer, it is the anxiety of the white page but also, and above all, the anxiety of being the one whose role it is to write his own story within the framework of an African story.¹¹ That is why Sibiya, who is also a writer, undertakes his own analysis in parallel to Dufré and against him, an analysis which becomes a work of poetic creation: “When Dufré is gone, I write down what I have been relating to him ... I write it down rapidly ... coaxing the memory, which at best is unreliable, or at the very worst treacherous” (26). We are dealing with overlapping layers of narrative: Dufré also writes, doodling in his notebook (74) with the “distant objectivity [of] a social scientist” (75). He leaves with Sibiya’s manuscript, “the product of the rambling mind of a gallows bird” (58–59), and its publication will bring him notoriety.

Sibiya fails in his attempt to argue his innocence, but his battle is neither solitary nor desperate: his cell-mates, who are tortured daily, loudly sing liberation songs. The novel ends on such a liberation coming from a black song, a song which represents reaching language beyond writing, with a participation by the body which does not have to go through the subterfuge of the written, printed, word. The song links the detainees to “the unruly birds which [Sibiya] see[s] daily mating in the sky!” (184). Sibiya will die because of his sentence, but also because any novel which is a putting into writing is also a putting to death. He shows that true language is the language of the body – which, because it is mutilated, is experienced as an obsession. As he slides into the nothingness of being to make it his, Sibiya creates for himself a type of non-identity (or a problematic one) that is broken up into fragments which the reader has to unravel through the subtle game of varying narratives.

The story I told to the court, to the judge, and his assessors was essentially the same story I have been telling here off and on; the same story I later told to Emile Dufré, to my mother, to my friends and my relatives. But in telling and retelling it to the court I found in the end that the whole thing had become somewhat garbled, confused, it had lost any clear logical outline, had become a story without any apparent shape or form, like a

¹¹ Cf. Elmar Lehmann, “Katastrophe oder Versöhnung? Beobachtungen zu süd-afrikanischen Romanen der Gegenwart,” in *Current Themes in Contemporary South African Literature*, ed. Elmar Lehmann & Erhard Reckwitz (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1989): 9–25.

modern novel whose plot resembles the shamelessness of emotion itself. In such novels, things happen but the causes remain unclear. (163–64)¹²

With this we can contrast Veronica's testimony to the court, which is "completely a work of fiction" (169): she is the true narrator because she uses the standard language, a language which is "the least likely to offend the intelligence of [the] seasoned judges" (169). Her testimony, based on lies, is the "work of a diseased fabulist imagination" (169) and fits perfectly into the dominant racist ideology. These two differing versions do not allow the truth of the facts to come out, constituting a stereoscopic, Kafkaesque view.

1. *Mating Birds*

The novel opens in the cell of prisoner Ndi Sibiyi, who is soon to die and who, while watching the birds mating in the sky, is reminded of the reason he is imprisoned. On several occasions during the novel the narrator resorts to this metaphor. He is a bird whose wings are to be clipped (88). He compares himself to a wounded bird. He fills "the princess full of white birds" (121). In court, recounting the rape, Veronica "looked like a trembling, rocking bird" (151) and she says that "it was the hottest day [...] in twenty-two years. Birds were falling off the rooftops" (153). This metaphor of the bird defines the two main characters in the novel.¹³

Whether he is speaking to Dufré or writing, Sibiyi is the first-person narrator operating from a retrospective perspective on the past. He denies being a criminal or an unrepentant rapist right until the end, but that is what will give him the notoriety which will transcend all borders. Instead of becoming "the first truly great African writer" in his country, as he had hoped, he has become "something of a folk hero" (11), "a university-educated native who went bad" (12) and, what is more, someone who makes the headlines of tabloids: both bestial and brutal, he is said to have an oversized organ which is in permanent erection.¹⁴ This monster attracts white visitors – men and women – who come to be repelled by him. Locked as he is in such clichés, how will he come to write the story of his life, as he is urged to do by Dufré, who is a combination of eminent criminologist, friend, torturer, faithful companion, observer, solemn interrogator, confessor, perfect listener, indefatigable asker

¹² The same thing stands for the play, in which the change of viewpoint is easier to indicate by stage settings and reversals of situations.

¹³ The allusion to birds is also in the play: "You men ... Birds of passage is what you are" (4).

¹⁴ See also Françoise Clary, *L'Espoir de vivre: Violence et sexualité dans le roman afro-américain de Chester Himes à Hal Bennett* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1988).

of questions, wrecker of peace? According to Sibiya himself, Dufré is convinced of his guilt – “In this respect, he is no different from every white person...” (64) – though Dufré finds the death sentence excessive. Sibiya notes:

For what in the end can we say to each other, this white man and I, that can break the shell of history and liberate us from the time capsule in which we are both enclosed? What can a Swiss-German Jew say to a black South African convict that can ease the pain and loss and create between us a bridge of communication across vast differences of social background and history? (41)

Dufré’s interest in Sibiya is purely clinical. He wants to “trace the origins of the obsession” (40), of Sibiya’s desire to “obtain sexual gratification from a female source other than a woman of [his] own race” (40). He would also like to know why Sibiya does whatever he can to hasten his own end, knowing full well what punishment awaits him. Dufré’s language is of “flawless accuracy,” the “language of the scientist” (140). His rimless glasses create a screen between Sibiya and himself: whereas they prevent him from seeing the African reality, they reflect onto Sibiya no image of himself which would allow him to use an authentic language. That is why all of Dufré’s attempts to establish some sort of complicity between them fail: “Shall we start at the beginning Mr Sibiya?” (39), “May I remind you, Mr Sibiya, [...] of your solemnly entered promise to discourse to us on the years of your pastoral childhood...” (40). But the ‘we’ used by Dufré to create this complicity could be a clue to Sibiya’s split personality, a split which is in fact mentioned at the beginning and the end of the novel (where Sibiya feels that he is witnessing someone else’s last days), and which also covers the double language he uses: the language of the body and the language of clichés, a language anchored in both his own world and the white man’s world, and which he wants to transcend. But above all he distorts language, having studied, and knowing what Dufré is looking for: to get him to speak of his childhood, where Dufré will find the solution to the mystery. Sibiya therefore presents Dufré with childhood memories of the idyllic world of the extended family – his fathers and mothers of the Mzimba kraal. His noble, but above all historical, origins – his father is king – function as a founding myth. It is in another founding myth that Sibiya sets up Veronica. But Dufré is not interested in myths. Did his mother and father love each other? That is the real question which will allow him to draw his conclusions. In fact, Dufré speaks at length in Sibiya’s presence about love (109). Later on, Sibiya provides him with a dream which could come straight out of the Arabian Nights, in which he succumbs to the charms of the king’s daughter, thereby causing his own death. It is so well put together that its subsequent disconcerting clarity astonishes the analyst:

“Obviously a wish-fulfillment dream,” Dufré said excitedly [...] “What is very surprising,” he added, reflectively, “is that the dream material should have been so obvious in their postulates, their enactment of ambition for sexual gratification. No attempts whatsoever at symbolism. No mushrooms. No climbing of trees or pressing through dark tunnels.” (122)

But Sibiya is a thoughtful being. On his own, while meditating on his childhood, he realizes that he hadn’t been as happy as all that. Because he does not have his own language,¹⁵ Sibiya is forced to use other languages, which he tries on for size one by one:¹⁶ for example, the language of clichés (the black man’s penis, rape, the naming of white women as sluts used by the people of the kraal and by the whites/Van Rooyen, stripteasers, orgies); the language of founding myths (golden statue, ancient city, long fish spewed out by the waves, lost treasure [Veronica’s vagina]); the language of the warrior to denounce oppression, acculturation (trophy, anger, battle dress [school uniform], war materials [books], the rolling fire of Dufré’s questions); the language of the sea (fishing and hooks, eels and sharks – from Sibiya’s father, to warn him – which leads to the long fish spat out by the sea); the biblical language of the curse (Sibiya is marked by the sign of Cain, forbidden fruit and redemption; whereas Veronica is described in terms such as saint, immaculate purity, virtuous); the language of reification to indicate the nothingness of being of blacks (hooks on which the priests hang their hats); and the in-between language which makes him look like a dangerous criminal (Sibiya fills the black princess with a jet of white birds; he penetrates the white woman with his black penis).

All Sibiya’s attempts at telling the facts will only lead those listening to him to the conviction that he can only be lying. Not only is his black word not trustworthy from within white discourse, but it is not even so to his own people, who see in his fast and confused narrative the proof of his guilt. The rapidity of narration holds for his writing, too. Is it a concretization of anxiety, or is it because, by having to use words which don’t belong to him, he can’t stop? This criterion of rapidity, and thus of suspicion, is picked up by the psychoanalyst and is locked into a language without poetry, without fantasy, without sensuality. Sibiya, in his disconnected and broken statements which fail to render his reality – his encounters with Veronica, encounters for which the only existing language is that of rape – relives all of this as if in a fever. His narration of the facts is never ordered in any of his languages since

¹⁵ “South Africans are, as a nation, a speechless people whose fear of the spoken or written word has created a horrible fatuity in their life both private and public”; Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1965): 119.

¹⁶ “We live in a substitute culture borrowed from other lands” (119).

he takes on the silent language of desire which is inscribed in the body, black as well as white.

Everything starts on the beach where Sibiya aimlessly spends his time, dreaming of leaving South Africa,¹⁷ after being expelled from university for having taken part in a demonstration. This is when he suddenly notices a young woman, washed up on the gravel like a “golden statue,” come from afar, who will be brought to life by his gaze because, having already broken the rules, he sees her as “a human being.”¹⁸ By contamination, this humanity will spread to the objects and beings close to Veronica. She, for her part, sees him. More than that, she looks at him with “a hot eagerness for what was impossible to give a name” (175), and we witness a simultaneous transgression. During the days to come Sibiya will cast his gaze over to the side of the beach reserved for whites only, while Veronica for her part will look to the beach that is reserved for “Non-Whites” only. Bodies seeking out pleasure coincide with the body of the text produced by the writer, who, when he writes, experiences “Relief . . . not unlike sexual release” (24). At the mercy of desires, imprisoned in his body, “enfolded in the castle of [his] skin” (35) and locked in silence, Sibiya develops a carnal and self-destructive desire¹⁹ for Veronica: “Exposed, isolated, she was alone there – or so it seemed – inhabiting a marginal world between the despised, segregated blacks and the indifferent, privileged whites” (7). This desire will become delirious, since it never reaches the level of words. Observing him with a look which falls short of words but which becomes tactile, Sibiya sets about modelling Veronica’s body. He traces her curves, becomes the sun or the breeze “that riffled through her rich brown hair as through the wealthy pages of a smutty book” (8), or becoming the undulating waves in which she moves. In his dreams, his hands replace his eyes: He can touch “her soft skin and smooth hair” (67).

In this no-man’s-land they have created with their gaze, Veronica and Sibiya “could feast [their] eyes on each other’s bodies” (127), but they will never move from looking to language, except during their unexpected encounter at the tobacconist’s where they knock into each other and “touched flesh to flesh (114) and where Veronica, dropping something which Sibiya goes to pick up for her, says: “It’s entirely my fault!” (115). To speak about Veronica, Sibiya uses the languages of myths, of the siren, which place her in

¹⁷ One could perhaps develop here Walter Benjamin’s concept of the wanderer who takes possession of an area by walking in it. Here Sibiya’s gaze takes him through it.

¹⁸ This reversal allows a unilateral situation to be surpassed, the situation which allows a white person to see a black person as a human being.

¹⁹ The author claims that his protagonist’s self-inflicted death-wish was inspired by Thomas Mann’s novella *Death in Venice*.

an ahistorical context, linking her to the archaic world which cannot be described in standard language: he finds the “sound of her voice ... low, tranquil, and musically modulated like the sigh of the sea at night” (115). To be acknowledged, Sibiya is at times a toy, a clown, a performing animal. Until the moment of their final contact, when “a breath from her skin came to [Sibiya] [...] and brought back to [him] all the forgotten memories of dank, cloistered childhood odours, milky smell of my mother’s breasts, the warm damp odour of crumpled bedclothes” (174), they only use the “primitive language of looks and gestures” (112), making love with their eyes and both managing to reach orgasm²⁰ by “sex without contact” (149). In Sibiya’s words, Veronica and he “had defeated apartheid” (149–50). The eye allows all barriers to be broken while leaving everything as it should be. The final contact of bodies reintroduces distance and, because it is forbidden, it can only be seen as a violent act, as a rape, even in Sibiya’s eyes.

2. “The Black Psychiatrist”

The play picks up on several themes and distorts or inverts them. In fact, we see a genealogy of our origins which relates to many myths (the sexuality of whites in Africa, the rape of servant women and emasculation, the literal or figurative castration of the male). The black psychiatrist’s knowledge and manner are targeted by his white patient’, who casts herself as his memory. She reminds him that he cannot rid himself of her as he might like to. The psychiatrist is subjected to a double discourse: 1) there is an attempt to deny him his particular history and nature: even though he is South African, he must behave like any psychiatrist who enters into universal conventions; 2) on the other hand, the negative traits which are attributed to his ethnic group are also attributed to him as well – that he is embittered, and attracted to women. He is also accused of being a dangerous political agent.

The suspense in the play lies in the fact that Gloria seems to know everything about Kerry, although she is constantly mistaken. But Dan Kerry also subjects his patient to a process of memory. He reveals to her that her father, Johannes Joubert, raped his black maid and that he is the fruit of this rape. Gloria cannot accept this idea and calls him a liar until the end. These two characters are enclosed in Kerry’s rooms, which have all the appearance of a prison and are without any contact from the outside.

In conclusion, we could say that these two complex works open up a counter-discourse which not only leads to a re-creation of the past, but to a

²⁰ Cf. Georges Bataille, “Histoire de l’œil,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970): 14.

new way of apprehending reality. In this, it is the psychiatrist's role which is determining: he forces a reintegration into individual and collective history which cannot be uni-directional. Through the interpretation of different logics and fresh metaphors, the author gives a new reading to the issue of apartheid: in the stereoscopic visions of Sibiya and Dr Kerry, of the psychiatrist Dufré and Gloria, a dialectical link is established, one that puts things back in their place and forces a return to the source, to the origins, implying a redefinition which is also a re-creation.

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7

The Desire of Knowledge or, The Body in Excess

Lewis Nkosi's Play "The Black Psychiatrist"

THERESE STEFFEN

everything in our age apparently leads back to the Trier on the Moselle or to Zurich and Vienna, to the *Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Communist Manifesto*. (Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds*)

1. Desire and the body in excess

WHO OR WHAT AM I? becomes a question of being and knowing, a question of desire. So it was for Fanon.¹ Fanon, arguably one of the most prominent black psychiatrists of the twentieth century, repeatedly connects cognitive desire with the body in excess: "I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self, to balance space, to localise sensations, and here I was called on *for more*."² The "more" is an excess – more precisely, an excessive – presence of the body that surpasses the body-ego.³ Lewis Nkosi's one-act play "The Black Psychiatrist," I maintain, perfectly amalgamates the notion of the body in excess with the desire for being and knowing, for identity. Involved in this quest for a shared past are the excessive body of a patient, Gloria Gresham, and the

¹ Teresa De Lauretis, "Frantz Fanon, Lived Experience and the Body in Excess," *Crossover: Cultural Hybridity and Ethnicity, Gender, Ethics*, ed. Therese Steffen (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2000): 194.

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; tr. 1967; London: Pluto, 1986): 111 (my emphasis).

³ Chapter Five, "The Fact of Blackness," in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, deals extensively with the black body, objecthood and the search for identity beyond the colour bar.

restrained counterpart of the black psychiatrist, Dr Dan Kerry. Their long day's journey into the night of apartheid South Africa involves surprising twists and turns, to which I will return later.

My critical interest in the body in excess also extends to the function of the psychiatrist in Lewis Nkosi's oeuvre in general, and in his play "The Black Psychiatrist" in particular. It is prompted by this text's psychoanalytic drift, its focus on the centrality of sexuality in racial – or rather, racialized – identity, and in its emphasis on the corporeality of the social subject. Thus, the body, either in excess or in restraint, becomes the ground and vanishing-point for individual subjectivity in the making, as well as for multifarious public images and projections within and beyond the colour bar. Any desire to know, therefore – or, rather, to extract hidden knowledge from the unconscious – is ideally grafted onto the figure of the psychiatrist.

Moreover, the black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's (and, for that matter, also Lewis Nkosi's) apprehension of the body as a locus of desire and excess is not only strikingly contemporary but provides the black subject, as Stuart Hall points out, "with [...] an alternative, corporeal schema beyond the genetic or physiological facts."⁴ This "alternative schema," however, should by no means relocate the black body within the realm of 'nature'; quite the reverse. Thus, Nkosi's "The Black Psychiatrist" thwarts the dichotomy of 'nature' (stereotypically linked with 'black' and 'female') vs 'culture' (stereotypically linked with 'white' and 'male'), as he juxtaposes the female patient's excessive white body with the psychiatrist's calm black male presence.

At this point I shall briefly turn to the body as the irreducible material ground of the subject's existence, the body as it lies stretched on a psychiatrist's couch. This is how Freud defined the bodily ego:

The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; [...] ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body.⁵

Seen thus, the body-ego is a projected perceptual boundary that does not merely delimit or contain the imaginary morphology of an individual self, but actually enables access to the symbolic realms of law and power. It is a site of

⁴ Stuart Hall, "The Afterlife of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?" in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (Seattle WA: Bay Press, 1996): 16.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. & ed. John Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1974), vol. 17: 19,27.

incessant material negotiations between the external world with its political and social institutions, its environment, its population, the gaze of the other, on one side, and the internal world of the psyche with its instinctual drives and defence-mechanisms – repression, disavowal, projection – on the other.⁶

Precisely at this interface of external and internal worlds "The Black Psychiatrist" locates the desire to know, to seduce, to unearth and to taste the forbidden fruits of the past (grafted onto a white female body), as well as the counter-desire to forget, to repress and to control an unsavoury past (embodied by the black psychiatrist). Nkosi provokes thought in this crossed gender-and-colour scheme of the white female seducer and the black male seduced in the play's climax.

2. Personal and national identities beyond "identitarianism"

Following these preliminary observations on desire as a major force within and beyond the mantra of race, class and gender, and the body – excessive or restraint – as a linchpin of external erotic and internal psychic explorations, I will briefly discuss the problematic aspects of what Hartwig Isernhagen calls "identitarianism."⁷ To him, this represents an intimate but often forced link of identity with 'history'. The underlying parallelism between the one and the many is only to be expected in literature, he argues, "since the notion of identity is throughout in the discourse of identity handled in ways that [...] equate group and individual, collective and personal histories and identities" (111). Yet the question also applies to Lewis Nkosi's writing: is "The Black Psychiatrist" a play of simple "identitarian" patterns that connect personal histories with History at large? Let us first investigate how identity is constituted along "identitarian" trajectories. To follow Isernhagen, this happens

through a close-knit linkage between remembrance/memory, narrative/discourse, and meaning, memory is not only interconnected with subjectivity or the subject (in answering definitional questions, such as 'Who am I?'), but also with language (in answering questions of representation, such as 'How do we get from memory to a knowledge of it?') and with responsibility (in answering ethical questions, such as 'What are my obligations?' (110)

⁶ See De Lauretis, "Frantz Fanon, Lived Experience and the Body in Excess," 195.

⁷ Hartwig Isernhagen, "From Identity to Exchange? Some Remarks on the Discursive Construction of Ethno-Cultural Difference and on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*," in *Imaginary (Re-)Locations. Tradition, Modernity, and the Market in Contemporary Native American Literature and Culture*, ed. Helmbrecht Breinig (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2003): 110.

The Freudian “talking cure” in “The Black Psychiatrist” indeed constitutes a “close-knit linkage between remembrance/memory [what the female patient remembers], narrative/discourse [how she enacts memory], and meaning [what doctor and patient deduce from the process].” Yet Nkosi’s search for personal and national identity does not fall into the category of banal “identitarian” parallelism, as his play is intricately interwoven with a traumatic sub-text of racial segregation, white supremacy, miscegenation, incest and exile. In most cases, meaning and subjectivity are not being built on anything positive but, rather, on a lack, a void, as Dominick LaCapra, among others, states.⁸ Therefore, any search for identity remains trivial if it does not count absence, loss, and trauma among its constitutive elements. Trauma-based notions of identity may also contribute to foundational myths, both individual and collective. Thus, not only drama and fiction but also factual “Truth and Reconciliation” narratives⁹ contribute to the healing power of a new nation like post-apartheid South Africa. As an identity drama grounded on trauma, I argue, “The Black Psychiatrist” searches determinedly for truth and reconciliation but foregoes “identitarian” clichés.

3. Positions – positionings: Between home and exile

Trauma, absence, loss, and exile in South African history and elsewhere are deeply linked to colonialization, slavery and its aftermath, segregation, and – above all – the system of apartheid which remained politically institutionalized in South Africa between 1948 and 1994.¹⁰ The ensuing racial politics result in highly complex cultural conditions that are marked by continuous suffering due to forced displacements and relocations within the country, yet

⁸ Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Summer 1999): 696–727. After Freud, Erik Erikson would be a better source for a linkage between identity and trauma, as he clearly opts for identity crisis as an opportunity to grow: no crisis, no identity. Similarly, one may say for “minority” writing: no loss, no identity. The African-American trauma of slavery, the Holocaust, and the South African apartheid regime all represent such periods of national and personal crisis and growth. Lewis Nkosi’s “The Black Psychiatrist” testifies to both.

⁹ Antjie Krog’s book *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998) offers a full account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work, using the testimonies of oppressed and oppressors alike.

¹⁰ “Exile knows no return, or so the common belief has it, yet the variations of exile involving African writers have been so extensive that it is impossible to identify a single pattern,” Charles R. Larson writes in *The Ordeal of the African Writer* (London & New York: Zed, 2001): 136ff.

more often also by temporary or permanent exile. In short, the loss of home and the denial of a national and personal identity for non-whites were constitutive elements in South African struggles for selfhood.

One of the most crucial issues, therefore, in South Africa, as well as in US-Afro-America, or in India – areas that saw major emancipatory steps in 1994 (SA), in 1865 (USA), and in 1947 (India) respectively – remains the quest for identity: “Who am I?” “Who have I been,” “Where am I going?” “Where have my relatives been?” In other words, questions concerning roots and routes.

Thus, individual and collective identity instabilities and quests literally call for someone who searches souls and minds professionally. Who other than a psychiatrist – albeit a white invention – could fulfil the task according to the rules of the trade? Freud’s own definition of psychoanalysis as the talking cure (originally coined in German in 1896) reads thus:

First: Psychoanalysis is the term for the procedure to examine the mental/emotional/spiritual/psychic processes that are otherwise barely accessible. Second: Psychoanalysis is the term for a treatment of neurotic disorders that are discovered by this method. Third: Psychoanalysis refers to a range of psychological insights found through this investigation, that grew into a new scientific discipline.¹¹

The first point applies to our case. Psychiatrists as private and public investigators of (even predators on) every nook and cranny of their patients’ innermost lives loom large in the oeuvre of Lewis Nkosi, which spans the second half of the twentieth century and is still growing into the twenty-first. Why would psychiatrists, both black and white, populate the work of a Zulu? “Why not?” I hear Nkosi reply.

Born in Durban in 1936, educated in Zulu, then in English at missionary schools, Nkosi observes that his was “the last generation” to receive their education before apartheid mandated government-run schools for black South Africans.¹² Those who argue that it is dangerous to give the oppressed a sound education were proved right in his case. In his interview with Janice Harris, Nkosi reports how, as a journalist/intellectual in the 1950s, he joined other black writers in reporting on the reality of apartheid in the townships around Johannesburg. In 1960, he was granted a Nieman Fellowship to study

¹¹ Jean Laplanche & Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse*, tr. Emma Moersch (*Vocabulaire de la psychoanalyse*, 1967–73; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992): 411 (my translation).

¹² Janice Harris, “On Tradition, Madness and South Africa: An Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” *Weber Studies* 13.2 (Spring–Summer 1994): 25.

at Harvard. Initially he was refused a passport. Then, the legal sleuthing of a good friend uncovered a law that would allow Nkosi to leave if he would sign away his right ever to return. He left, assuming that exile would be temporary, that things in South Africa would change. Things did not; the years that followed shaped themselves into a rich odyssey as he studied, taught, and wrote his way from Harvard to London to Sussex to Zambia to California (Irvine) to Poland, to Wyoming, where he was from the fall of 1991 till 1999. His exile ended dramatically when he flew back to a post-apartheid Johannesburg in December 1991 to attend the New Nation Writers Conference. Where is home to him now? Wherever two or three like-minded souls gather together, be it in Paris or Laramie, Cape Town or Basel, to talk about things that matter: justice, language, ideas, love, friendship, books. Only in February 2003 did Lewis Nkosi receive his South African passport, the first in his entire life. It was a moment of great joy, a form of homecoming after a life in exile, as he has acknowledged.¹³

4. Lewis Nkosi's white psychiatrist: Emile Dufré in *Mating Birds*

Psychiatrists, both black and white, initiate as well as mirror modern man's confessions in Lewis Nkosi's work, yet the profession itself is also under close scrutiny. Already in his first novel, *Mating Birds*, the young black first-person narrator and major protagonist, Ndi Sibiya, accused of having raped a white girl, is questioned by a white psychiatrist in a revealing portrait of the trade. Dr Emile Dufré emerges as a eurocentric expert who is mainly interested in confining a black man's sexual behaviour in the cage of his Freudian theory. This comes as no surprise: Dufré's name anagrammatically spells Freud. It stands to reason that his first name, Emile, might allude to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Bildungsroman* of the same title (1762), which deplors the negative influence a degenerated political class exerts on individuals.

Dr Dufré's stereotypical prejudice against the dangerous "African rapist" who jeopardizes the entire "civilized world" is clear. Yet Nkosi's text distances itself from these ominous misgivings via questioning quotation marks:

Dufré presents a picture of quiet tenacity coupled with obdurate intelligence. He will not easily give up the purpose of this mission, which, as he has frequently indicated to me, is to compile the full portrait of an 'African rapist', whose exploits have captured the imagination of the entire

¹³ Personal communication.

‘civilized world’. He is the perfect scholar, tireless in his pursuits of ‘facts’, rigorous in the sifting and testing of hypotheses.¹⁴

I suggest that Dufré’s function, as “the perfect scholar” of Swiss-German origin, also lies in his straddling the Viennese School of Freudian psychoanalysis and the Zurich trajectories of C.G. Jung. Yet Dufré embodies not only the individual and the collective unconscious in Freudian and Jungian terms but also the political unconscious of Marx and the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. Only the ironically detached young black perpetrator Sibiya, who has nothing to lose but his life, sees right through the facts of the so-called “civilized world.”

“Everything in our age apparently leads back to the Trier on the Moselle or to Zurich and Vienna, to the *Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Communist Manifesto*,” the well-informed Sibiya laconically observes in the following passage, a statement bound to question cultural eurocentricity:

The story of my life? Everyone wishes to know the story of my life! [...] It is a modern disease, this appetite for facts that, once obtained, it is hoped, will explain everything. Else how to account for the trouble everyone takes, the expenditure in time and money? One man, a European of Swiss-German background, has flown all the way from Zurich. [...] This man has left everything behind, his job, his family, his wealthy patients, to come and see me, to inquire, to prod, to probe. A large, sober-looking man in flashing, rimless glasses. Dr Emile Dufré speaks in a slow, courteous manner, using the persistent questioning routine familiar to those who seek to unravel the mysteries of the unconscious as physicians use instruments for sounding and testing for defects in an unhealthy body. Dr Dufré gives the impression of vast calm, of restfulness. He is patient, he is unhurried. Over and over again he asks the same questions, only rephrasing them to avoid monotony, or worse still, in order to avoid giving the impression of not believing what I tell him. With this man, huge, white, bespectacled, friendly but remote, childhood stories are a specialty. Again and again he asks about my mother; he asks about my feelings toward my father. Did I ever wish to kill him, or perhaps did I not secretly hope that while my father was cutting the trunk of a tree, the tree would come crashing over his head. (18)

Dufré’s slow penetration of the body of “the dark continent” – he came all the way from Europe to South Africa to apply his “persistent questioning rou-

¹⁴ Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds* (1983; Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987): 70. Further page references are in the main text.

“tine” – perfectly parodies Sigmund Freud’s attempt to conquer the dark continent, his Africa equated with woman and the unconscious. Yet Sibiya, the young black protagonist of *Mating Birds*, is well aware of what white psychiatrists seek to find confirmed in Africa beyond their own fascination with the exotic Other. And also beyond the Oedipus complex alluded to in the male child’s wish to kill his father: “did I not secretly hope that while my father was cutting the trunk of a tree, the tree would come crashing over his head.” Sibiya assures the reader that he has read a great deal about psychiatrists that both surprises and amuses him: “Are these not, after all, the men who believe that faeces are to a child what money in the bank is to an adult?” (18). The accused Sibiya contrasts these Western patterns of individual introspection with the vividly different ways of his African visitors. Not only do they arrive as a group but they follow a method firmly rooted in their oral tradition. Rather than to a “talking cure,” they adhere to a “listening regimen” as they forgo any preconditioned questioning about his childhood. Instead, they engage the accused in an exchange of information that draws him into deliberate storytelling. During Sibiya’s report, the African visitors keep a sharp eye and an open ear on the way he delivers his text. They prioritize the pragmatic and performative context over the factual content and thus reach for the unconscious truth in his enunciations. Nkosi and his young protagonist hardly doubt the superiority of the indigenous way of listening over the white theory of deep questioning, as the following passage demonstrates. Furthermore, the African visitors are hardly fixated on more or less appropriate sexual (mis)behaviour, from which they would draw more or less appropriate conclusions.

My African visitors are refreshingly different. They ask no questions about my father or my mother, whether or not I come from a broken home or a happy one. These visitors, who must be as curious as anyone else, come and sit in the visitors’ room talking of matters far removed from sexual crimes. They talk of the weather, of the drought, and of the ruined countryside after the last year’s spring rains have carried the soil off into the ocean. After that they stop and let me talk while they listen. It is a magnificent well-trying method, this silence, never asking any questions. A trap. It opens me up. At such times it is I who *want* to talk; it is I who want to mention everything. At such moments I am like a clock that has been fully wound up and suddenly needs a release. I want to tell everything, to leave out nothing. (19)

Nonetheless, his Zulu visitors, when they depart, are doubtful of Sibiya’s innocence. What are their clues? They have listened to his voice, to the quick rhythms of his speech, to the something alien in it – “a wanton disregard for

the proprieties of formal discourse in which one Zulu telling a story to another brings to the narrative the constraints of courtly dignity sometimes in a manner so haltingly circumspect as to cause a listener waiting for the point of the story to groan aloud in suppressed torment" (21).

Despite the Zulu visitors' ultimate superiority, Dr Dufré proves to be – at least in his narrative function – a successful combination of a Swiss follower of Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung, and the detective Sherlock Holmes, as he allows the reader to follow his painstaking research into the protagonist's mind. Yet, the deep-seated African doubts about white psychiatry must be kept in mind in view of the black psychiatrist Dr Kerry, who almost too successfully slips into his role of a 'passing' Harley Street doctor in "The Black Psychiatrist."

5. Lewis Nkosi's black psychiatrist: Dan Kerry in "The Black Psychiatrist"

"The Black Psychiatrist," a one-act play, was first staged in 1983 in Lusaka after a long gestation period. It was then published in English in 1994, produced at the John Stripe Theatre in Winchester, USA, in 1995, then translated into French and finally, in 2002, into German. It was produced in Paris (2002) and was scheduled to be read at the Berlin Literary Festival in 2003.¹⁵ In a strikingly humorous way, it seeks to dramatize the dire issues of apartheid and post-apartheid. As the title of my investigation proposes, it traces the result of Nkosi's attempt at slowly and surprisingly unearthing what has been repressed so far in one of his beguiling gender and racial code switchings.¹⁶

This time around, the antidote to the white talking is not a group of Zulu visitors as in *Mating Birds*, but an attractive white female patient who will turn the roles and tables on the Vienna and Zürich manifestoes. Voluptuous and flirtatious, Gloria Gresham seeks the help of Dr Dan Kerry for various reasons: first, because he seems to exert a strange erotic attraction on her; secondly, because she indeed needs help in coping with her philandering hus-

¹⁵ "The Black Psychiatrist" premiered at the Lusaka Theatre Playhouse in 1983. The play was also produced at the University of Wyoming, at Houseman Studio Two, New York in April 1995, and at the John Stripe Theatre in Winchester, as well as at the Lambeth College Theatre in London, also in April 1995. French productions include *Le Psychiatre Noir* by the Théâtre de l'Autre Souffle on Guadeloupe in 1999, and in December 2002 at the Centre Pompidou, also by the Théâtre de l'Autre Souffle.

¹⁶ According to Lynne Hanley, Nkosi tends to write across the colour bar, combining the issues of apartheid and desire.

band. She finds Dr Kerry in a revealing prison-like environment, as the first stage direction of “The Black Psychiatrist” indicates:

The consulting room of a psychiatrist on Harley Street. The walls are bare, white, unadorned except for a single Zulu cowshield hanging on the back wall with two assegais lying across its center in the form of an emblem.

The room must have a feeling of narrow confinement; the windows are permanently closed and set high up as though in a prison cell. There is also a door leading out to the waiting room. This door is kept shut.

Furniture consists of a couch and stool next to it. There is also a desk and chair at which, as the play opens, a handsome young black psychiatrist in his thirties, is sitting, studiously working through a pile of papers and notes.

Otherwise, the room is bare, with a stripped austerity that borders on the puritanical.

Time: One late morning in summer.

The door bell rings.

KERRY: Come in!

A white woman in her early or mid-thirties opens the door and walks just inside the door, then hesitates. She is pretty, blonde, and wearing a soft shirt dress that is slit right down the front and is secured around the waist with a belt. Her body has that ripe, mature appeal of women over thirty. The woman smiles engagingly. Dan Kerry gets up from this desk....

Dr Kerry’s *huis-clos* situation is obvious: “a feeling of narrow confinement; the windows are permanently closed and set high up as though in a prison cell.” The door to the waiting-room is shut. Into this austere atmosphere falls Gloria Gresham’s “body in excess” like a ripe apple. Despite the two sharply contrasting protagonists, the audience should notice that they are both said to be in their thirties. Surprisingly, it is the female patient rather than the psychiatrist who begins questioning him, with an astounding familiarity:

WOMAN: Dr Kerry?

KERRY: Yes.

WOMAN: Dan? Dan Kerry?

KERRY: That’s right. *They stand facing each other.*

KERRY: Please, come right in. *The woman comes walking in that fine splendour of women over thirty blessed with good earthly flesh on their bones. The woman pauses.*

WOMAN: Dan Kerry? After all these years! How astonishing!

KERRY: (*Puzzled*) Astonishing?

WOMAN: Yes. I mean if you really are the Dan Kerry.

KERRY: (*Wryly*) Well, I sincerely hope I am *the* Dan Kerry.

WOMAN: Of course, you are! (*She wanders about the room.*) Oh, Dan, it's simply marvelous! The room I mean. Just as I imagined it would be: bare, naked, empty. Simple, uncluttered space for your immense soul to roam in.

KERRY: (*Perplexed*) Mrs...eh...?

WOMAN: Gresham. Gloria Gresham. (*Pause. She turns around from her wanderings and faces him, smiling with immense understanding.*) Of course, you don't remember me. I don't blame you. It's so long ago! I myself had forgotten until I came across your name in the newspapers. I couldn't believe it was really you! But there it all was: "*COLOURED SOUTH AFRICAN ACHIEVES INTERNATIONAL FAME: FIRST EMINENT BLACK PSYCHIATRIST TO PRACTISE IN LONDON'S HARLEY STREET.*" Well, I was absolutely bowled over just seeing your name in print! (*Slight Pause.*) Anyway, how does it feel? To be the first *eminent* psychiatrist of your race, I mean?

KERRY: I'm afraid I'm not the first, Mrs. Gresham. (5-6)

Dr Kerry might very well have referred to the Martinican Frantz Fanon as one of the first pre-eminent black psychiatrists of the twentieth century. *Black Skin, White Masks*, written before Fanon went to Algeria, enjoyed a resurgence of interest in the 1990s. Incidentally, this is also the decade in which Nkosi's play "The Black Psychiatrist" re-emerged.

On the issue of interracial love, a further striking parallel between Fanon and Nkosi's text can be found: the South African Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, followed in 1957 by the Immorality Act, which forbade any interracial sexual relations. Fanon, after marrying a white French woman, Josie Dublé, had been criticized for betraying his own ideals. Yet it is precisely this idea of the black man being sealed in his blackness and the white man being encased in his whiteness that Fanon sought to avoid. However, parallels between Fanon and Nkosi's "The Black Psychiatrist" end abruptly when Freudian psychoanalysis is concerned: Fanon rejects the notion of the unconscious as applicable to the black man. The Oedipus complex does not exist among Negroes, he claimed.¹⁷ There is no unconscious there. "Since the racial drama [like the sexual drama] is played out in the open, the black

¹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 152.

man has no time to ‘make it unconscious’.”¹⁸ Fanon uses the term “unconscious” in the more common or ‘descriptive’ sense of something not present to consciousness, something repressed: ie altogether forgotten as a result of censorship and by means of the psychic defence-mechanism that Freud called repression. And it is in this sense, perhaps, that Fanon’s claim might be understood, as Teresa De Lauretis maintains.¹⁹

Nonetheless, Gloria Gresham, one feels tempted to think, adopts an Aimé Césaire-like role in leading her “black psychiatrist” not only into interracial trouble but back to his South African roots.²⁰ With the audacity and impudence of someone who is secure both in the frame of her body and in her secret knowledge, the dazzling Gloria Gresham trespasses on Dr Kerry’s threshold in more than one way. Not only does she assume a tone of intimate acquaintance but she also humiliates him with a racial slur that reveals the cruel naivety of her true beliefs: “Anyway, how does it feel? To be the first eminent psychiatrist of your race, I mean?” Dr Kerry is, after the world-renowned Frantz Fanon, of course, not the first black psychiatrist, but certainly successful enough to practise at the best address of the profession, London’s Harley Street.

Whereas Dr Dufré in *Mating Birds* functions as the European grand inquisitor, a colonizer of the mind and expert in the service of white master-narratives, the black or coloured South African psychiatrist Dr Kerry has found fulfilment in his medical profession abroad. What links him with his native oral tradition at large is his medical specialty, the “talking cure.” Dr Kerry, Harley Street, represents, in Salman Rushdie’s sense, the Empire that not only writes back but also walks and talks back to the centre. As an attractive representative of the postcolonial age who made it into the very centre of the former Empire, he is sought after by white women looking for emotional warmth. For these patients, Dr Kerry also embodies the invested – and, later on, literally divested – educated noble savage. Yet in his success, contingency is always already inscribed: the inside, or flipside, of his Harley Street address is an interior of narrow prison-like confinement. Neither the single Zulu cow-shield nor the two assegais on his walls²¹ – defensive and offensive tools

¹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. 150.

¹⁹ Teresa De Lauretis, “Frantz Fanon, Lived Experience and the Body in Excess,” 197.

²⁰ Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poetic innovator and political leader, led Frantz Fanon closer to his African and Pan-African roots. Césaire’s ability to fuse race consciousness with politics helped Fanon developing his African ties.

²¹ An assegai is a slender spear or javelin with an iron tip used as a traditional weapon by the Zulu people in Southern Africa.

respectively – can protect Dr Kerry from Gloria’s insinuations of intimacy as she twists and tears down what is most important in any successful analysis: the clearcut division maintained between analyst and analysand throughout the session. Even worse, she undermines Dr Kerry’s authority in questioning his own identity right away:

WOMAN: Yes. I mean if you really are *the* Dan Kerry.

KERRY: (*Wryly*) Well, I sincerely hope I am *the* Dan Kerry.

The analyst cannot function without his authority: a vicious circle with tragicomic consequences has been initiated:

KERRY... You said just now you wanted to read everything about me. Why did you want to read about me?

WOMAN: Oh, I don’t know. To re-live the past, I suppose. (*Pause*) You men are so quick to forget. It’s one gift you all seem to possess, forgetting.

KERRY: Mrs. Gresham, are you sure you’re not committing an error?

WOMAN: Why should I commit an error?

KERRY: Because I don’t think I’ve ever set eyes on you before... In fact, I’m (*he hesitates*) I’m *almost* certain it’s all a mistake.

WOMAN: Ah! *Almost!* But not quite sure, are you, Dr. Kerry?

KERRY: No one can be absolutely sure about something like that. (*Pause*)

Anyway, you’ve said nothing so far which proves we’ve ever met before...

WOMAN: (*Her tone suddenly hardens*) Of course, we’ve met before! I’d say you and I have enjoyed what you might call ... very *intimate* moments.

KERRY: I *beg* your pardon!

WOMAN: Oh, dear. I hope we’re not going to adopt that kind of tone all of a sudden.

KERRY: I don’t think I’ve ever set eyes on you in my whole life!

Notice that in terms of diaspora and exile, Dr Dufré, the Swiss psychiatrist in *Mating Birds*, is a white man in a black world, whereas Dr Kerry is a black man in a white realm, or rather, not quite, as internal and external diasporas intermingle in his case. Dr Kerry’s external diaspora is black, his internal diaspora, however, is coloured. Gloria Gresham, who seems to know more than Dr Kerry does, aims repeatedly at this “almost” and “not quite”:

WOMAN: Ah! *Almost!* But not quite sure, are you, Dr. Kerry?

This “not quite sure” aims precisely at the gap in his consciousness, the space of his phantasm opened and widened by the excessively inquisitive Gloria. A brief outline of the idea of the phantasm reads thus: “a perception of something that has no physical reality; a figment of the mind, especially a specter, or ghost” (*Webster’s*). In Freud’s terminology, phantasm refers to the fantasy of displacement/‘*Verdrängungsphantasie*’ as the phantasm covers the abyss. This is the imaginary scenario wherein the lack in, or of, the Other emerges as the inconsistency and finally the contingency of the symbolic order, as Slavoj Žižek states repeatedly in his writings.²² Yet any reality, one is reminded at this point, is structured according to and along the phantasm. It is the fictitious tale we live by that covers the abyss like a phantasmatic umbrella. Only via this continuous cover-up, displacement or exclusion of the threatening, can we continue to live.

It is the phantasm as fantasy of displacement that holds things pleasant and unpleasant both in place and at bay. It provides the frame in which we perceive the world as constant and consistent. Yet this pattern ultimately relies upon an error. Error in this sense does not refer to any mistake or illusion, but to the fact that reality at its fullest should know, acknowledge and finally integrate the gap that necessitates the phantasm in the first place. It is the aim of the talking cure to unearth the subconsciously repressed past and to integrate the shadow into a conscious whole.

What, then, is the function of the return of the repressed, symptomized or covered up phantasmagorically? In order to create a consistent meaning, a shared past, present, or future, not only every human being but every society needs a phantasm (even if only the phantasm of needing nothing/nobody). Any society as well as any individual subject is marked by this very ambivalence: both to seek the truth and to deny it as a phantasmagoric nonentity. The less the subject or society is able to understand and to undertake the other’s language (in order to foster its own reconstruction of a meaningful past), the more threatening the phantasm becomes. Every fantasy, every phantasm – according to Freud – is grafted upon an unconscious traumatic inscription in the past, and is thus already marked by belatedness (“*Nachträglichkeit; nicht-einholbares Moment*”). “*Das unsägliche Bedrohliche*”/“the unspeakable threat” is always already there, the chip on the shoulder that accompanies us via the stories we make up and comfortably live by, at times uncovered by psychoanalysis. This is precisely what marks Gloria Gresham’s and Dr Kerry’s encounter in the following exchange. Gloria’s

²² Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 1993).

racism, only thinly disguised by her admiration, becomes increasingly manifest in her lecturing Dr Kerry on his duties.

WOMAN: I'm warning you, Kerry! I don't care if you're black and South African and have been oppressed for as long as anyone can remember. This is not South Africa. Here you're just another psychiatrist, a professional man, like anybody else. No favors. You are supposed to perform your duties like anyone else without fear or favor.

KERRY: You're not here to lecture me on my duties.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze appreciates in Freud's terminology of the phantasm – and he would also appreciate it in Lewis Nkosi's text, I maintain – precisely its "temporary ambivalence" (of the past but in the present) and the resulting multilayeredness. Phantasms are also the linchpins that hold the conscious and unconscious experience together. In the course of their role-switching and table-turning exchange – the patient increasingly becomes the doctor, the doctor her patient – Gloria Gresham loosens the linchpin in Dr. Kerry's mental construct as she slowly and steadily penetrates his inner diaspora, with striking results.

WOMAN: I came to see what you have become. An old friend. Do I need a reason to come and see you?

KERRY: Who are you? (*A desperate try*) Are you by any chance a friend of Dr. Barlow?

WOMAN: Who is Dr. Barlow?

KERRY: A South African heart surgeon.

[...]

WOMAN: I don't know any Dr. Barlow.

After their ongoing, bantering yet latently aggressive exchange on the meaning of extraordinary vs. ordinary ("WOMAN: What's the nice way of being ordinary? / KERRY: Being 'normal'. That's what I meant"), Dr Kerry asks for a pause.

He laughs self-consciously.

KERRY: Now, wait a minute. Is this some kind of inquisition or something?

(*Pause*) Anyway, you must please try to understand. When I use the word 'normal', I'm not employing it in a strictly professional sense here. (*Pause*) I mean, in my kind of profession one is soon made forcefully aware that beneath the surface, people aren't quite what they seem at first glance.

WOMAN: So you wouldn't give me a clean Bill of Health? Is that it?

Dr Kerry explains to Gloria that this conversation is leading nowhere. She sighs and begins to remove her stockings instead. Dr Kerry is greatly alarmed, yet she claims to be “centrally overheated” and keeps her stockings laddered, a cliché of madness well known in literary history.²³ What follows is the story of her husband’s affair with another woman. Notice the “near-breakthroughs,” “near-misses,” the “almost but not quite” also in this passage.

WOMAN: He’s a chemist. An adulterous chemist, Dr. Kerry. [...]

They should award him a Nobel Prize just for the late nights he keeps in the laboratory. And the near-breakthroughs, I never heard of so many near-breakthroughs in my whole life.

Pause.

KERRY: That’s hardly an unusual state of affairs, Mrs. Gresham.

WOMAN: God, you’re boring!

KERRY: You may not like it, but it’s the truth. The history of scientific research is littered with failed hopes and wasted ambition, with near-misses as you call them. At all times scientific research is characterised by squandered opportunities and dissipated insights.

The woman laughs scornfully.

WOMAN: My God! Do you always talk like that?

KERRY: What do you mean?

WOMAN: The way you talk...like a newspaper editorial.

The following passages feature Gloria not only asking Dr Kerry whether she should take a lover but whether he could be the one he already used to be in their shared past.

WOMAN: Oh, my darling! Why did you let them take away from me? Why did you let them? Why? Why? Why? (*Pause*) Why didn’t you fight? Why didn’t you murder them? Why didn’t you murder me and murder yourself? Why did you let them separate us? Why didn’t you let them murder us instead? Why did you let them murder freedom?

[...]

KERRY: Look, you are making a mistake! I was never your lover!

As he threatens to throw her out of his office, she ultimately takes command:

WOMAN: Sit down (*He sits on the couch*) That’s better.

KERRY: One call to the police and they’ll be here in five minutes.

WOMAN: Lie down. (*He lies down*) And try not to upset yourself.

²³ Hamlet is a famous example.

He lies down on his couch, only to be joined by Gloria seconds later. Patient and doctor are at last – and at least horizontally – on equal terms as they face their phantasm. They are both supposed to speak as “*They both lie on their backs, their hands clasped on their stomachs.*” The astounding climax visually introduced by this odd couple stretched out, not unlike medieval corpses on their sepulchures, begins. Layer by layer, Gloria uncovers Dr Kerry’s past as a secret underground activist, his belonging to “several questionable organizations,” to “the ANC for instance? An organization dedicated to the violent overthrow of the white government of South Africa.” Gloria Gresham enquires unabashedly, and Kerry guesses, as we do, that she is sent by “the South African Special Branch” – the security services. “Have ‘The National Front?’ or the ‘British Fascists?’ sent her to spy on him?” She refrains from answering, but obviously knows everything: “You went to China and Moscow for indoctrination classes. . . . You were wined and dined at the Old Peking Hotel in Moscow.” And, even more intimately: “You vomited on the steps of the Kremlin, Dr Kerry. They had to hold your bloody head up like a barrel of whisky just in case you spilled more of your vomit over everyone else.” What else can Kerry do than declare her mad and have her evicted by the police? Yet she replies dryly: “You are wasting your time. Even your door is locked. . . . Kerry, you’re locked in your own mental prison.” Inner and outer confinements match. At this point, also Dr Kerry’s past and present, his clandestine and open activities, fuse and mingle. Individual and political fates are indeed intertwined. Yet this is but the beginning of Gloria’s inquiry into the deep secrets of their shared past.

The final cathartic moment builds up when she accuses him of having used her: “You used me and then you threw me away when it suited you. All I wanted was a token from you, not of love but of friendship in memory of a fond alliance”;

You can’t face up to your responsibilities? You think you can just shrug me off as though I didn’t exist, but I do! I’m your memory! I’m what you’re trying to forget about South Africa, but you won’t forget me! I won’t allow you to! You can’t forget my suffering! And the others? What about those others left behind? Are you going to just shrug them off too?

In urging him to tell the whole story, Gloria first assumes her classic Western role as the female embodiment of memory. Yet, on a more traditional South African level, she might also be perceived as an *isangoma*, a fortune-teller who challenges her *griot*, Dr Kelly. Ghost-like, she appears to attack the professional guru-*griot* who is in charge of the master-narrative.

In the African traditions there is no way in which the voice of the *griot*, for example, can be deconstructed from within because there is no internal criticism within the discourse of the *griot* which would put under question mark or under parentheses what the *griot* claims to be the truth. The *griot* claims to have authority bestowed on him by tradition. [...] In many African traditions, the *griot* is the mouthpiece of god.

[...] Well, among the Zulu you would find that a diviner or *insangoma* would actually assume a different speaking voice when possessed by the spirits... Usually an *isangoma* is a woman, and these are diviners who foretell the future. They are said to be inhabited by the spirits when they speak and because they are inhabited by the spirits they actually achieve a vocalization which is different from the way they normally talk.²⁴

Yet, Gloria, so far the unchallenged *isangoma*, begins to face difficulties with her guru-*griot* in the following scene:

Silence. KERRY walks about. KERRY ponders. KERRY sighs. The woman watches him keenly. He then starts talking: Let's start from the beginning. In the first place the white girl I was in love with was not named Gloria. She was called Nina. Nina Joubert.

"What's in a name? Anyone can change a name," is her dry reply. But Dr Kerry retorts:

You want me to be frank with you? Okay, just this once. I'll be frank with you. Remember, you asked for it. (*Pause*) Right? Okay, let's admit you and I were lovers. You see, I couldn't go on seeing you because your father found out about us. He made it sound like a great scandal, his pure-white daughter holding hands with the coffee-colored son of the housemaid, the old fake! They all became very excited about it. Threatened to get my mother and me off the farm. God, what damn hypocrisy! What I didn't know then and what you obviously don't know now, is that our affair was totally unacceptable in more ways than meets the eye.

WOMAN: (*She laughs scornfully*) If you mean because of the apartheid laws? Save your breath.

The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, complemented in 1957 by the Immorality Act, fixed apartheid rules even in the privacy of bedrooms. Yet Dr Kerry stresses the fact that, on top of that, their union was "By any other laws [...] completely unacceptable." These "other laws" beyond the colour bar concern the ultimate Freudian taboo: incest.

²⁴ Nkosi, in Harris, "On Tradition, Madness and South Africa," 35.

KERRY: I'll tell you what I mean. (*He goes and stands at the window, his back turned on her.*) Your father, Gloria, is also my father. For a long time Old Joubert was sleeping with his black maid in the backyard. I am the result of that squalid union.

A suspended silence. Then the WOMAN explodes.

WOMAN: You're a liar!

KERRY: There are ties of blood between us.

WOMAN: You are a bloody liar!

KERRY: Oh, yes, Old Man Joubert, bloody tyrant and White Supremacist Extraordinaire was not above mixing it with the maid in the kitchen. Isn't that what they used to do in slavery days after all?

In this final turning of the tables, it is Dr Kerry who forces Gloria to face her own phantasm. At this point, South Africa and the United Kingdom, home and exile, conscious and repressed elements of the past and present, collapse. The triangulation of gender, race, and class issues turns into a classical Greek moment of tragic recognition.

KERRY: Your damned father. Our father used her, old Johannes Joubert. Do you understand that? He took advantage of his position as an employer. That was rape. The result was me. I'm your past! Why don't you accept me!

WOMAN: (*Trying to be calm*) Are you suggesting my father was betraying my mother with a house-maid? Are you going to stand there and repeat such libellous lies? [...]

KERRY: It wasn't your mother Old Joubert was betraying, you cow! It was my mother he betrayed! (*Calming down*) It was my mother he exploited. A poor ignorant girl out of the bush, she came to work for your damned family – a young woman unaccustomed to the ways of white men, full of goodwill and trust – and your damned father (*Softly*) our father – used her.

White supremacy in the guise of class finally comes to full light in Gloria's telling accusation. "Are you suggesting my father was betraying my mother with a house-maid?" Her precarious double standard becomes obvious in this final twist. Though she overtly covets Dan Kerry as a lover, her white father should not have made love to his mother, a black house-maid, all the time betraying her own white mother. At this point, however, Dr Kerry has fully regained his professional authority as well as his personal integrity. He tells her to leave at once and forever:

KERRY: Then get out and stay out! Next time you'll know better than to come barging in here, turning up a lot of stones! (*He laughs scornfully*) I wanted to re-live the past. There are usually scorpions under rocks.

Whereas his burden is stones, hers are obviously scorpions that fatally bite back. The political and cultural message of the tragicomic ending, however, might well be a reminder of the fact that, despite apartheid laws, despite the enforcement of segregation, human nature does function beyond the colour bar. Men and women, black and white and 'in-between' mulattoes – they all share a past, they all share a present and, hopefully, a future. They cannot but live together, accept responsibilities, and respect, even love each other. Dan Kerry's outcry to his lover and half-sister reaches beyond the personal to the political stage: "I'm your past! Why don't you accept me!"

This will eventually happen in the sequel to "The Black Psychiatrist," a one-act play entitled "Flying Home," written in 1994, and meant to be staged together with "The Black Psychiatrist." On their way to attend Nelson Mandela's inauguration in 1994, Gloria Gresham and Dan Kerry find themselves paired again, sitting in the waiting area at Heathrow airport ready to fly home to South Africa. Yet what is home to people who are used to life-long exile? Homecoming, as the location of Heathrow airport suggests, is a difficult task for human beings who are always already 'in-between'. In fact, they will never get anywhere from Heathrow except deeper into their own history.

Conclusion

How is a black psychiatrist to hold on to his personal identity – which is more than the sum total or combination of other identities – with dignity and sanity? Lewis Nkosi's "The Black Psychiatrist" offers a fascinating glimpse into the continuing 'production' of identity which is "not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past," as the Jamaican writer Stuart Hall explores it in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In the case of the black psychiatrist Dr Dan Kerry, it is a re-collection of personal and political past diasporas, both black and white and in-between. Gloria Gresham's excessive body – excessive in her flaunting its increasingly bared charms, excessive also in her desire to love and to 'know' – serves as a driving force in this joint quest for a shared past.

My argument in examining "The Black Psychiatrist" as "the desire of knowledge or, the body in excess" is indebted not only to Frantz Fanon, Sigmund Freud, Gilles Deleuze, and Fredric Jameson, but also to the critical debate which has claimed that apartheid still haunts contemporary South Afri-

can culture as well as the US-American past from the reconstruction period onwards: from the infamous "separate but equal doctrine" of 1896²⁵ up to the twenty-first century; from the beginning of apartheid in 1948 till the years past 1994. However, the historical cross-mapping at work in my analysis prompts one to inquire further. What is at stake in reading from the position of posteriority, of looking backwards in history, is the uncovering of an inaugural historical narrative of conspiracy that will confirm our own suspicions. It is along these trajectories that I have offered to read the theatre of passion displayed in "The Black Psychiatrist": the patient's initial revenge plot, Gloria's histrionic divestment (literally) of the black psychiatrist's professional investment or, rather, investiture – under the auspices of a code of conspiracy. I have done so in order to explore the mutual implication between a modern postcolonial subjectivity and the sceptical doubts about the remains of the apartheid past.

According to Elisabeth Bronfen,²⁶ a narrative also gains new urgency once it is reconsidered belatedly: ie from a position of posteriority. Such looking-back at history from the present allows us both to disclose an inaugural text for the paranoid subject, with its excessive hunger for seeing and knowing, and to look at the present from the vantage of the past. Bronfen follows Mieke Bal's suggestion that we might best practise contemporary historical inquiry by virtue of what Bal calls "preposterous history": an analytic reversal on the part of the critic, "which puts what came chronologically first ('pre-') as an after-effect behind ('post') its later recycling."²⁷ According to Bal, this kind of revision, based on the notion of "shared time as an epistemological requirement," makes the claim that an obsession with finding visual proof for a clandestine conspiracy, and the surfeit of narrative this produces, is defined by concerns that are both of today and then.

Mieke Bal's theory, I argue, perfectly summarizes Lewis Nkosi's play "The Black Psychiatrist" in its performance of epistemological desire via the body in excess, in its unearthing of a "clandestine conspiracy," as well as in the "surfeit of narrative [...] defined by concerns that are both of today and then." "The Black Psychiatrist," aimed at bridging the gap between an internal truth and suspicious external manifestations, precisely allows for an exter-

²⁵ America's legal policy on racial segregation in the twentieth century was set in 1896, with the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which institutionalized the formula of "separate but equal" in public institutions and facilities.

²⁶ Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Conspiracy of Gender: Hamlet's and Ophelia's Passionate Histrionics," conference MS (Summer 2004), in personal communication.

²⁷ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999): 7.

nalization of the allegedly inaccessible inwardness: namely, as the performative enactment of a self-investigation. Gloria Gresham deliberately uses her “body in excess” not only to seduce Dr Kerry, but literally to divest him of his professional and personal authority. This bodily enactment of a double self-investigation via cross-examination and enforced role-change between patient and psychiatrist does proceed in a surprising way as it uncovers layer after layer of external and internal black diasporas. Dr Kerry, the successful South African exile in London, has indeed stored away his past except for two decorative African remnants: his Zulu shield and two assegais. Although he has reached the peak of his profession, as symbolized by the prominent address of Harley Street, his life is still marked by what Deleuze and Guattari call external and internal deterritorializations. His internal black diaspora of the past, so successfully hidden and repressed, suddenly returns in the guise of the “excessive body” of his patient. Gloria Gresham, the woman who remembers yet who is also well-remembered, will be finally exposed in her latent and manifest racial prejudices. As much as she covets Dr Kerry as a former and present lover, she is unwilling to accept him as a sibling, a human being on equal terms. Ironically, Gloria’s racism and double standard allow Dr Kerry to recover his personal and professional authority.

Thanatos (death) in the many guises of loss, lack, displacement, exile, or fatal segregation, is being conquered by Eros and humour in a formula that is unique both to Dr Kerry and to his creator, Lewis Nkosi: the exile, the world traveller, the critic, professor, writer, survivor. His wry sense of humour and intellectual vigour transform tragedy into comedy with an erotic vengeance. In a swift and engaging style, the phantasm of the repressed past belonging to both protagonists, Dr Kerry and Gloria Gresham, turns “The Black Psychiatrist” into a parable of remembering and dismembering an unsavoury shared history. The result is a tragicomic reconfiguration of an individual as well as a collective history that has always already been enmeshed, the one contaminating the other. Hence, the message of the play reads thus: black and white people, though forcibly segregated through apartheid, belong to the same struggle. They share South Africa in a common fight for a livelihood. They always have. Whether they like it or not, their fates are intertwined.

On a larger scale, the historical past and its relation to current facts can be grasped only if they are understood as parts of a single great collective story, the narrative of humankind’s fall from plenitude. All shattered dreams and fragments call for phantasms, “*Schutzdichtungen*.” They serve our continuous need to fill the abject, the abyss, with a meaningful story we can live by. Yet many elements of that fundamental story – the collective struggle for freedom – have been distorted and suppressed: hence Fredric Jameson’s preoccupation with the concepts of a political unconscious. Jameson also maintains that his-

tory can be apprehended only in textual form. In other words, the story or history as a master-narrative, like the concepts of time and space, is a fundamental epistemological category that structures our experience of the world and represents in its form the contours of human desire.

"The Black Psychiatrist," Nkosi's one-act play, bristles with all these subtexts, as Neila C. Seshachari writes (1994), because beneath the psychiatrist's relationship with the woman lurk larger questions of African identity: first,

a 'cultural' identity, the one shared with ancestral kin who share the same history; secondly, a 'political' identity that binds all people who are players in the post-colonial struggles of developing nations; and thirdly, a shared 'social' identity of all marginalised peoples.²⁸

Thus, in every sense, historically, traditionally, politically, as well as individually and intimately, Gloria Gresham and Dr Dan Kerry embody an individual and collective past and present of South Africa beyond identitarian clichés. It is the South Africa of hidden drama and successful exiles whose lives remain intertwined. Gloria and Dan, unlikely half-siblings linked by their past, present and future trespassings, cannot but walk, talk, and live together.

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²⁸ Neila C. Seshachari, "Editor's Note," *Weber Studies* 13.2 (Spring–Summer 1994): 3.

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8 An Introduction to the Poetry of Lewis Nkosi

LITZI LOMBARDOZZI

THERE IS MUCH TRUTH in Michael Chapman's observation that black poetry generally had to "create an emotional currency which rejected the norms of a literary academy [...] value was attached not to skill with words but to the idea, the action, the life: to speak boldly, to shape history, to saturate words with purpose was to carry the poem beyond closed form and by implication, the closed society into the open field, where the call for solidarity invited endorsement."¹ By way of contrast, Nadine Gordimer held that "black writers have had to look for survival away from the explicit if not to the cryptic then to the implicit, and in their case they have turned instinctively to poetry."² A careful reading of some of the early poems by Lewis Nkosi will support these views unequivocally, as his poems are a vehicle for the creation of a new conscience and a new vision, as well as being a call to arms. Although the issues raised in the early poems of Nkosi are no longer of topical relevance, his poems will always be a reminder of his youthful dream of a free and equitable South Africa, pre-1994.

Nkosi, a sometimes controversial literary presence for nearly fifty years both in South Africa and abroad, is better known for his academic essays, plays, short stories and novels. His poems, however, are less known in academic circles and to his reading public, and have not often been cited in critical discussions. The poems are directly related to the social and historical perceptions of the poet at the time of writing, the aesthetic and cultural concerns deriving from and drawing on Nkosi's personal experiences and poli-

¹ Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 2000): 335.

² Quoted in Piniel Viriri Shava, *A People's Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Zed, 1989): 71.

tical circumstances. His poetic output, albeit small, is firmly rooted in a particularly strong sense of time and place, hence has immanent discursive significance in terms of these defining issues. Most of the poems were written from a position of exile, and the marginality contained in some of them also mirrors the life of the author. Nkosi's poems function on two levels, these being a subjective impression of the individual and the collective voice of a nation, sensed in the undertones of a larger collective voice. The objective of the present essay is not, however, to unmask, expose or deconstruct Nkosi's poetic discourse, but rather to allow the poems to speak for themselves, as they form the beginning in Nkosi's creative output in which he addresses the reciprocal coalescence of identity, racism and cultural spaces. The message takes precedence over form, but both form and content are complementary and create a dynamic interaction of ideas.

The body of Nkosi's poetry is made up of a mere seven poems, and should not be seen in the context of what is variously termed township or Soweto poetry, because these poems were not written for a popular audience. They were written between 1955 and 2002, and each poem constitutes a voice of Nkosi's not often heard in his primary works and literary criticism. His poetry reveals a man very different from that of the often abrasive essayist and cynical academic. His poems have been published in a variety of journals and magazines, including *Black Orpheus* and *Sechaba*, but have not received much consideration – understandably perhaps, given their limited number.

Although both an experienced internal and external exile, Lewis Nkosi as a writer is not representative of the masses. Through his poetry, Nkosi identifies and names much of what he has experienced in a voice that makes no shrill demands, but speaks with obstinate authority about a history of alienation and exploitation under colonial domination. The poetic voice is locally rooted but globally connected. The poems depict a progression in this black writer's life from a vibrantly ambitious young adult raging against apartheid's dispensations to a mature man who has finally found a meaning to his life. His early poems are embodiments of themes which question and speak out against the suffering of those who have been left to "mumble in the dust" through the political absurdities of the day. The poems are an attempt by Nkosi to construct new self-images and to justify a place in society. Nkosi's poems take readers to the centre of what it means to be black in a world of discrimination and apartheid.

Nkosi's early poems reflect his sense of the brutality of injustice, the bitterness of self-awareness and lost opportunities. Nkosi's poems do not only reflect on the negative, however, but conclude with a unique sense of hope. It is this undiminished positive outlook in the face of adversity that forms the cohesive core of his poetry. This is evident in "To Herbert Dhlomo" (1955), a

poem that is, on one level, an elegy in memory of the writer, essayist and poet Herbert Dhlomo (1903–55), editor of the first black South African newspaper, the *Ilanga lase Natal*, where Nkosi was a staff member at the time of writing. This prominent literary figure was clearly a mentor to the youthful Nkosi – “When I was at high school everybody who knew H.I.E. Dhlomo called him simply ‘H.I.E.’ He was so iconic!”³

To Herbert Dhlomo

H.I.E., H.I.E.,
 Me and all my brothers dark,
 Those that mumble in the dust,
 Without a hope, without a joy,
 Streaked with tears for ravaged Africa
 Have, with thy silence, ceased to live.

In vain we seek the lost dream to regain,
 In vain the vision yet to capture:
 The Destiny of a Thousand,
 million dark folk
 Who seek, who yearn --
 Alas! A fruitless toil.

H.I.E., H.I.E.,
 Speak to us again;
 Whisper thoughts yet to empower us
 To live the Dream, to live the Vision
 Of a free Africa over again.⁴

This first poem by Nkosi derives its primary material from his own rural boyhood and manhood in South Africa, a world which maintains a presence throughout his poetry. The powerful images of an oppressed nation “mumbling in the dust” and weeping for a “ravaged Africa” are scorching indictments of the realities of the apartheid regime. Nkosi once stated that

in the moral chaos through which we were living, we longed to find a work of literature, a drama or a film, homegrown and about us which

³ Lewis Nkosi, personal communication, 13 January 2004.

⁴ *Ilanga lase Natal* (22 October 1955): 17.

would contain a significant amount of our experiences and in which we could find our own attitudes and feelings.⁵

This poem remembers the need to rise above an identity forged in lost dreams, fruitless toil and a joyless existence, and Nkosi's poetry attempts to provide a voice to a "thousand million dark folk," enabling the redefinition of a new identity, not in terms of hopelessness, but finally empowered to speak for their own destinies in a shared understanding of a free Africa. This poem is initially a downward gyre into a dark nadir of utter despair, and contains a deep sense of inconsolable personal and tragic loss. Dhlomo's passing leaves behind not the individual, but an entire nation floundering in a miasmal matrix of social iniquities. The poem is, however, not without hope for the future, and concludes on a positive note, the diction exemplary of a spirit that remains undaunted throughout, stubbornly insisting on the right to be acknowledged.

Similarly, "Images of a Nation Yet to Be," again through place and background, directly confronts the crisis of the black man and a nation emerging from the pain of division, having as its theme the political situation in South Africa at the time, and written "in commemoration of Amandla's visit to Lusaka" in 1981.

Images of a Nation Yet to Be

(In commemoration of Amandla's visit to Lusaka, December 1981)

They came to Lusaka

Amandla came

They came to Lusaka

Power to the People!

They came riding on a wind of fire

They came They came power muscle dance and song

They came They came

Amandla came with them

Those limbs glowing oil from self-produced sweat

Bushfire of pure flames

Purifying hearts in doubt or ignorant

They came

The wizards of an unstoppable army

They came

Witchdoctors sprinkling spears with songs of freedom

They came

⁵ Lewis Nkosi, "Refugee Woman," *Sechaba* 17.12 (December 1983): 6.

Princely princesses melting hearts with peerless smiles
 They came
 Costumes Xhosas Zulus and Sothos
 Fleishy images
 Of a nation yet to be!

But –
 Here we are already!
 Spear is here! The Nation is here!
 Listening to your songs
 The enemy cannot sleep
 The drumbeat swallows the antelope
 Dumbstruck
 The enemy dreams of dervishes.
 Leaping awesomely into the gunsmoke air
 The Enemy dreams of Spear
 About to sever the jugular
 The bull in Pretoria has no more gonads
 He will try in vain to fertilize
 The People's virgins!⁶

This poem first appeared in *Sechaba*, the official organ of the African National Congress in South Africa, published in Tanzania. The difficulties in South African politics are formally dramatized by the rigid and almost militaristic precision of the linear form of the poem. The tone of this poem resonates with a deep anger at the colonial exploitation of Africa. In "Images of a Nation Yet to Be," Nkosi rallies the youth of Africa to take a stance against a bleak future through the powerful images of the African warrior of old. The poem depicts a nation in motion surging towards a new identity and selfhood. The content of the poem is a total reversal of the emotions and attitudes visible in Nkosi's first poem, "To Herbert Dhlomo." Those who "mumble in the dust" are now elevated and transformed into the arresting sight of "a stately tree"; those who could only mumble without a voice now ride on a wind of fire, singing songs of freedom. The poem exhibits an exuberance and energy unparalleled in other poems of this nature. At the time of writing, Nkosi had already been exiled from his native soil for over twenty years, but his affinity with his memories of place and time has remained unadulterated by his sojourn abroad, as this poem clearly reflects. He is quoted in a review as saying that "black South Africans cannot be anything but South Africans,

⁶ Lewis Nkosi, "Images of a Nation Yet to Be," *Sechaba* 16.10 (October 1982): 32.

or at least, Africans, even after years of living abroad.”⁷ Ever the artist rather than the activist, Nkosi draws on his childhood impressions and memories of the fighting warrior with “glowing limbs” leaping “awesomely” into the “gun smoked air.” The poem is representative of a vision of a disempowered nation demanding recognition and empowerment. However, throughout history, social turmoil has always provided the touchstone for artistic creativity, reflection and expression, and perhaps it was this social turmoil and the lack of creative space that provided the bedrock for Nkosi’s writing, inspiring and compelling black writers and artists such as he to become astute social and literary critics through their poetic imagination.

Refugee Woman

Refugee woman!
 Woman of no name, no country, no friends
 Woman whose name is Misery
 Surely a very perishable flower!

Men have seen you everywhere
 Each time
 A child slackly held in your arms
 Men have seen you in Judaea
 Huddled up in a bed of straw
 Waiting to give birth to a child in a manger
 Or ready to take flight from King Herod’s
 mighty soldiers
 Once you were seen running from bombs in
 Korea/Hiroshima/ and Dresden
 Once sheltering from tree to tree in Vietnam
 but –
 Always a baby in your arms!
 Always, that mute cry in your mouth
 Hungry, thirsty, worn out as a bean string
 Camped, bivouacked, cold and lonely, raped
 or abandoned
 Your eyes shut off from the light of every sky.

Once I saw you in Soweto

⁷ James Booth, “Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*,” *Research in African Literatures* 17.3 (Fall 1986): 401.

However, “Refugee Woman” can also be seen in the context of a metaphor for a ravaged country and its oppressed and denigrated people. It can be read as the expression of the poet’s own sorrow and experiences as an exile, writing from a damaged sense of place. The plea for justice, compassion and freedom clearly audible in the poetic voice extends beyond the borders of his native land to include the effects of political, social and religious intolerance globally. The scenes of depredation and hardship, isolation and exclusion, where “your eyes shut off from the light of every sky,” serve to jolt limp consciences awake to harsh realities based on artificial divisions. The persona is the “miserable child,” the stunted human personality crying out to his motherland in a time of brutality and death, desperately in need of a refuge, a place in the world to call home.



Spanish Roses (for Teresa)

I wear your smell –
 The awkward memory
 Of your matadored body
 And bring my hands to weave a crown
 Upon your crested head.
 Your smile has a wounded way
 Of coming and going.
 Unclasp these silent Spanish roses!
 To feed a fabulous bull,
 Pave your body thick
 With breaking apples.
 Give one bending breast
 To this slowly culling.
 Think of when the noonday sun
 Shall quietly turn away,
 And give your towering sunlight
 To a wavering crowd.⁹

Jealousy

Though I have not touched
 The bending suppleness
 With which you shaped her body,

⁹ Lewis Nkosi, “Spanish Roses (for Teresa),” *Black Orpheus* (17 June 1965): 21.

Nor smoothed the amazing erectness
 Of her private fortune;
 Though I know you governed her well
 Across the mossy stones;
 I know tangibly you feel
 The lack of fleshiness or
 The swell of breast
 To rump this evening's lassitude.
 I know too the verisimilarity—
 The slender litheness,
 The nimbleness of her legs!
 I too am an African.
 I have hugged the budding rain
 As well as you; I have sung and loved
 Her unlimbering thighs.¹⁰

To Astrid For Her 59th Birthday

*An imitation of an image in Chagall's painting
 "Lilies of the Valley 1916"*

These flowers tell about you
 what is most beautiful
 This tender-hearted blooming
 of passionate love
 in secret rooms
 without windows
 and white petals
 with envy
 so besides themselves
 they always jostle
 for comfortable places
 on a bright green stem
 when true happiness
 is but two pale pink flowers
 sitting side by side
 on a smiling sunflower.¹¹

¹⁰ Nkosi, "Jealousy," *Black Orpheus* (17 June 1965): 21.

¹¹ Nkosi, "To Astrid for her 59th Birthday," in *Das Gedächtnis der Wörter: Berliner Anthologie*, ed. Beatrice Fassbender & Ulrich Schreiber (Berlin: Alexander, 2003): 140.

Nkosi's later poems are intensely intimate and reveal a gradual change of mood, and marking the progress from a young man filled with despair and anger to a mature being who has found his particular purpose in life. There is this other, lighter, side to Lewis Nkosi, which sets him apart from the label 'activist writer' – that of a sensitive albeit bohemian individual, a man who loves and appreciates women. Critics such as James Booth accuse Nkosi of being exclusively masculinist, particularly in his description of women. Booth places Nkosi firmly in the position of a spectator who views women as a commodity and nothing more. However, there is more depth to Nkosi than being relegated to the ranks of male chauvinist, and this can be supported by a reading of his poems "Spanish Roses," "Jealousy" and "To Astrid for her 59th Birthday." These are personal poems with a lyrical quality in celebration of women and the body, revealing a poetic voice which is *both* spectator and participant. The poems abound with sensual imagery of all that constitutes woman in the physical and emotional sense. The reader is conscious of the poet gazing on, but also responding to the female form. "Spanish Roses" and "Jealousy" present two different levels of reading – the subtext is a sensual description of an intensely physical relationship between two lovers. However, on a more subtle level, it functions as an intensely visual description of a landscape shaped by memories of home and native soil. The imagery of the body and the intense relationship between the two lovers also serve as metaphors for a nostalgic memory of a place called home. Africa is the place of "towering sunlight," where the noonday sun "shall quietly turn away," a place of "budding rain," which has become "an awkward memory." One has a sense of the almost topographical enactment of sympathetic involvement with the subject-matter underlying this poem. Through its analogies, it clearly suggests the connection between the exile and his native land which provides the emotional sustenance for the exiled subject. The poet is, paradoxically, at once estranged and familiar in his environment, becoming simultaneously both the exile from his motherland and the native within it.

Nkosi's appreciation of women is neatly encapsulated in a recent poem dedicated to his partner of recent years. It is a gentle monologue about nothing much, but about a great deal, too. The poem was written in contemplation of a painting of lilies by the surrealist French painter Marc Chagall. Interestingly, Chagall was noted for his fanciful visual potpourri of scenes from his life, depicted in arbitrary colours of blues, greens, yellows and pinks. The poet imitates these very colours to describe a mood, that of a contented individual, who is neither spectator nor voyeur, but an active participant enjoying the happiness found in simple pleasures, such as contemplating a work of art. However, the poem also alludes to a micro-environment, a comfortably domesticated place called home, where happiness is fostered by a close rela-

tionship with another person, this poem functioning as the antithesis to “Refugee Woman.” Here the exile has come home at last, has found a niche in the world. The poem retrieves memories in a personal relationship of intimate closeness, with no intrusion possible from outside influences which might negatively influence this harmonious state of being. The relationship is intensely private and precludes any scrutiny or criticism by the external world, and is likened to “a room without windows,” a “secret place” known only to the participants. The object of his delight is vividly portrayed in surrealistic colours of yellow, pink and green, becoming itself an original work of art, a personal artefact no longer dependent on external interpretation. The image of the smiling sunflower transcends the original Chagall work of art, firmly rooting life in the realism of the present, rather than in the idealism of the past.



What Makes Poetry Not Prose

Poetry is not like Prose
 conventional
 a thing of grime and slime
 full of blubber
 red-eyed, dishevelled
 a real skivy
 hitched to some one-eyed monster
 named Realism.

Poetry is more severe
 arch and knowing
 she takes the measure of each
 challenge each scruple
 before plunging in
 and knows how to swim
 like a cork, her limbs like knives
 flashing stroke after stroke
 and slicing water indifferent
 to every language
 barrier.

Poetry is not like Prose
 degenerate

her stays always half undone
 cotton-loose showing milk-white breasts
 that are dimpled bruised
 below the narrow cicatrice
 surely tell-tale signs
 of life's thorough beating
 by a fellow named
 Realism.

Prose!

She is every writer's exploitable wife
 long-suffering, elbow-deep
 in life's daily soapsuds
 She is sweaty, greedy, omnivorous
 always on some binge gorging herself
 on yesterday's life's left-overs
 biographies memoirs scandal confessions
 every tart considers saleable!

Poetry lives on iron rations
 her nails are carefully cut
 her stays tight as cables
 she gives only glimpses of flesh
 bound by perfect lingerie
 mood and voice
 knotted into verbs grown
 belligerent
 at simple nouns
 that simply coil with pleasure
 at the mere touch
 of an adjective.

Poetry is not like Prose
 Sweaty with struggles
 of the Everyday named Realism
 not always naked beneath rolled-up sleeves
 and racked by lust
 at every stranger's touch.
 Herself a hooker
 Poetry knows her worth
 She goes to bed sometimes

with men and women sharp enough
to see the glint in her roving eye.¹²

Lewis Nkosi's most recent poem was written in response to the theme set by the organizers of the 2003 Berlin International Literature Festival – what defines poetry as poetry? The poem “What Makes Poetry Not Prose” is a metapoem artfully comparing prose and poetry, a poem about poetry, which subtly serves to weaken any argument in favour of prose. The characteristics of poetry and prose are defined in terms of the female and the feminine. The poet draws analogies between the nature of poetry and prose, effectively foregrounding the differences between the two genres, juxtaposed against an argument on the nature of women. Douglas Livingstone once said that poetry is his way of “making love to the planet and its heavens,” and he too compares poetry to feminine wiles, in resonance with Nkosi's stance. Livingstone had this to say about poetry: “Poetry possesses you – body, mind and soul. And she is capricious, even a cruel, a wanton and delightful and very jealous mistress. I try to handle her with respect and humour, but she is a sight bigger than I am.”¹³ These sentiments are also mirrored in the poem by Nkosi, in defence of which he says the following:

needless to say, I don't hold to the idea that poetry, except in a very narrow sense, is superior to prose. But I tried an evocation of how poetry gives the impression by its language play and rigour compared to the democratic all-inclusiveness of prose.¹⁴

The images and diction cavort and tumble about playfully to illustrate and reinforce the flexibility of thought and construction in poetry, so belying the often erroneously perceived severity and restrictions of poetry, a genre which, the persona opines, is less demanding than the novel, which relies on the vagaries of the more “exploitable and degenerate” prose. That poetry is more “severe,” “indifferent,” and tightly constructed according to a formula is merely an impression created through reading strategies. Poetry embodies a particularly fluid nature with many destinations, hence it is lightheartedly likened to a prostitute who knows her worth and can command any price. However, more descriptive of the true nature of poetry, surprise is evoked by the poet's descriptive imagery of and analogy to a woman who “knows how

¹² Lewis Nkosi, “What Makes Poetry Not Prose,” unpublished (Berlin International Literature Festival, 16–17 September 2003).

¹³ Douglas Livingstone, “On Writing Poetry,” in *Face to Face* (Durban Arts Youth Festival, 1992): 10.

¹⁴ Personal communication, 13 January 2004.

to swim like a cork, her limbs like knives flashing stroke after stroke.” Poetry, unless read and interpreted, will stagnate – it is all form and content, but it will remain meaningless unless it is allowed to convey many different meanings through its various nuances. Poetry is, as Nkosi so wonderfully describes and illustrates it in his poem, a construct within which words can cohabit in a tangle of sensual images, where nouns can “simply coil with pleasure at the touch of an adjective,” their meaning and function ultimately depending on the interpretation ascribed to a poem by the reader’s situation and perceptions, and whether the reader is able to “see the glint in her roving eye,” a reference to the allusive nature of meaning in poetry. Poetry acquires meaning precisely because of its fragmented nature, and because it is not “hitched to some one-eyed monster named realism.” Prose must admit to its essentially interrogative nature, as it can ask uncomfortable questions when and if allowed to slip loose from the burden of memory.

In conclusion, Lewis Nkosi’s poems, few as they are, deserve to be read. His poetry is a way of identifying and defining himself. The poems may even serve to modify perceptions held by some critics of Nkosi’s writerly personality, because poetry, in the final analysis, is able to sculpt its own particular space and its own especial identity, more so than prose fiction and critical writing – Nkosi’s small but eloquent poetic oeuvre affords his readers a little-known additional angle on this formidably intellectual writer.

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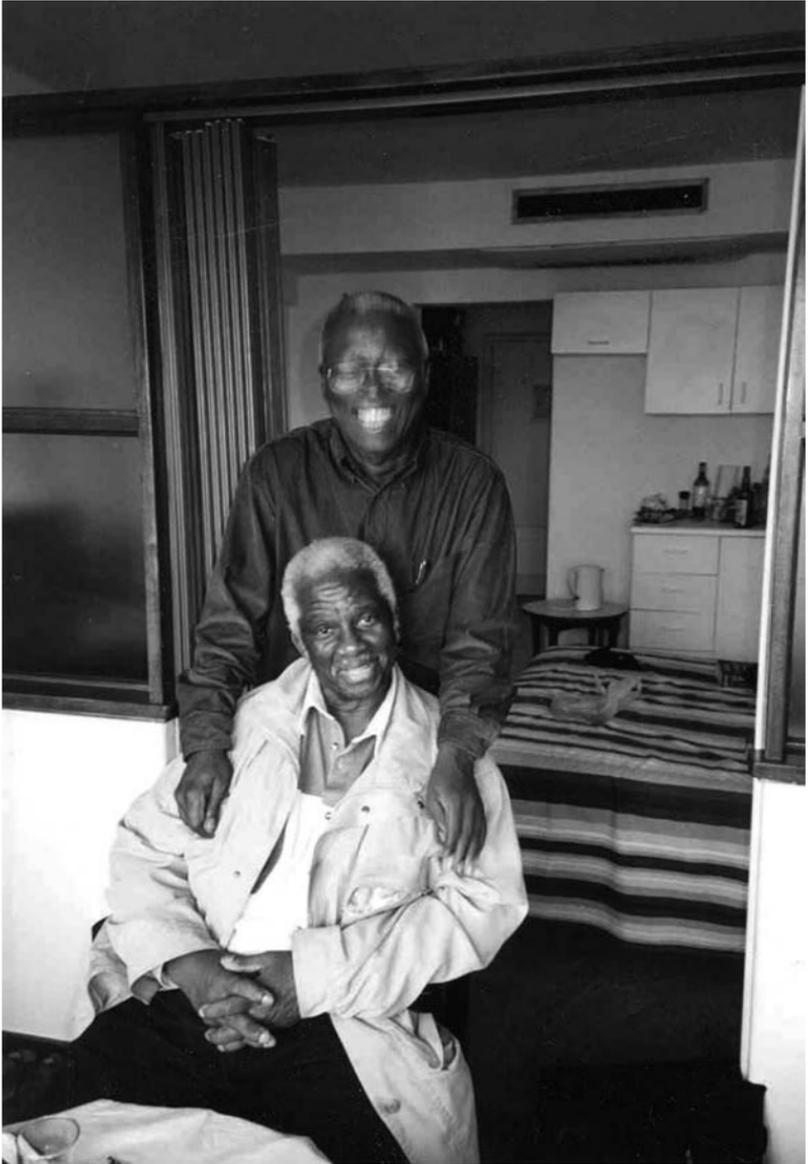
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❧ THE NOVELIST

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5 Lewis Nkosi with Mazisi Kunene (Lewis Nkosi)



6 At the Oslo Club, Norway, for the launch of *Mating Birds* (Lewis Nkosi)

9 “Bathing Area – For Whites Only” Reading Prohibitive Signs and ‘Black Peril’ in Lewis Nkosi’s *Mating Birds*

LUCY GRAHAM

She was dressed in a red-and-yellow flowered, off-the-shoulder dress of some soft flimsy material and a pair of red roman sandals, straps secured far above her ankles, focusing the eye on the clean sweep of her long shapely legs. Without so much as a nod, let alone a murmured ‘Good morning’ (which I would not have expected, at any rate), she stumbled past me to her favourite roosting place near the legendary billboard with its mocking warning: BATHING AREA – FOR WHITES ONLY. (Ndi Sibiyi, in Nkosi, *Mating Birds*, 1986)

Introduction

IN 1986 LEWIS NKOSI’S FIRST NOVEL, *Mating Birds*, was published by St Martin’s Press in New York, and was received with great critical acclaim.¹ In a lead review in the *New York Times*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., praised the novel’s “lyrical intensity” and “compelling narrative power,” asserting that it “confronts boldly and imaginatively the strange interplay of bondage, desire and torture inherent in interracial sexual relationships within the South African prison house of apartheid.”² Chosen by the influ-

¹ It is little known that *Mating Birds* was first published, not by St Martin’s Press, but by the East African Publishing House in 1983. This earlier publication was not widely distributed and did not reach metropolitan critical circles. At the time, the East African Publishing House was in financial difficulties, had extremely limited distribution, and was unable to market the book internationally.

² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Power of Her Sex, the Power of Her Race,” *New York Times* (18 May 1986): 3.

ential critic Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* weekly selection of the best new fiction,³ the novel was also later recommended by this newspaper as one of the top 100 books published in 1986. In the *Washington Post*, *Mating Birds* was reviewed by Alan Ryan, who called it “very possibly the finest novel by a South African, black or white, about the terrible distortion of love in South Africa since Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope*.”⁴ The novel received comparable praise in the UK. Norman Shrapnel reported, in a summary of *Mating Birds*: “So stark an outline can give no account of the subtlety and skill that have gone into the structure of this searching – and remarkably, given its dire theme, un-depressing – first novel.”⁵ From Hugh Barnes to Margaret Walters and Paul Pickering, who thought “the moral implications of *Mating Birds* are as disturbing as the writing is brilliant,”⁶ overseas reviewers seemed to concur that the novel was a finely crafted piece of work that offered complex insights into the distortions of desire in a racist and prohibitive society. In Holland, *Mating Birds* was a best-seller in a Dutch translation that went into two printings, and the novel was also lauded in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Italy and Germany.

In South Africa, however, *Mating Birds* was to endure a more ambivalent reception. Though the censors deemed the novel “not undesirable”⁷ and it received praise in *Insig* and the *African Communist*, many critics displayed attitudes that were more condemnatory than those of the official bowdlerizers. Hence there is a curious disjunction in the reception of the novel: while outside the country *Mating Birds* was almost unanimously perceived as one of the best pieces of writing to emerge in world literature, most South African critics seemed determined to find fault with the book. In the USA and in the UK, *Mating Birds* featured in a number of university courses soon after its publication, but South African English departments have to this day been extremely hesitant to include the novel in their curricula. The fact that the book was honoured in the USA (1986) with the prestigious international Macmillan/PEN Award makes this omission all the more glaring. Now, more than two decades since *Mating Birds* was first published, and after ten years of political democracy in South Africa, it is worth scrutinizing the

³ Michiko Kakutani, review of *Mating Birds*, *New York Times* (22 March 1986): 15.

⁴ Alan Ryan, review of *Mating Birds*, *Washington Post* (8 June 1986): 14.

⁵ Norman Shrapnel, review of *Mating Birds*, *Guardian* (1 August 1986): 17.

⁶ Paul Pickering, review of *Mating Birds*, *New Society* 8 August (1986): 29. See also Hugh Barnes, “Turns of the Screw,” *London Review of Books* 8.14 (7 August 1986): 24, and Margaret Walters, “Mating Birds,” *The Observer* (27 August 1986): 25.

⁷ See section 11, “Companion Piece,” below.

dilemmas the novel posed for readers of various political affiliations, and how the South African literary establishment in particular responded to a literary text which takes the form of a prison memoir, narrated by a black man on death row in Durban after having allegedly raped a white woman. I intend to demonstrate that in South Africa *Mating Birds* seems to have been an interloper in the historically 'whites only' territories of literary avant-gardism and erotic writing. In a doubly transgressive gesture, the novel not only presents an account of desire that subverts the perversion, or peculiar *père-version*, of apartheid, but it also performs a deconstruction of the mythology that has sought to retain and naturalize racism. As Jacqueline Rose, who has taught Nkosi's novel in a number of seminars, asserts, *Mating Birds* shows the ways in which apartheid is "sexual apartheid as much as, if not before, anything else."⁸

'What memory thrusts to the forefront of my diseased mind': Writing and narrative indeterminacy

Mating Birds is the story, written in the first person, of Ndi Sibiyi. Awaiting execution in his cell, Sibiyi has taken up the pen in order to write the story of his life:

I sit at a small wooden table by the grilled window of my cell. The table is heaped with cheap prison paper, and with the enthusiasm of a man partaking of the last meal before setting out on a long and arduous journey, I write the story of my life. I write of my first encounter with the English girl, of my subsequent arrest, of my trial and conviction.⁹

As Sibiyi acknowledges here, much of his writing is a reflection on his encounter with Veronica Slater, "the English girl" he met across the divide of a segregated Durban beach and eventually followed to her bungalow. Placed on Veronica's side of the beach is a sign which encapsulates apartheid legislation: "Bathing Area – for Whites Only" (143). Sibiyi claims that in keeping a series of silent trysts in which there is no physical contact, he and Veronica "defeated apartheid" (149–50). Yet immediately after the consummation of his passion with Veronica in her bungalow, Sibiyi is arrested for rape and later condemned to die.

The novel is clearly a self-reflexive meditation on the act of writing itself:

⁸ Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995): 107.

⁹ Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987): 24. Further page references are in the main text.

I write not in an orderly fashion, not even chronologically, but randomly, setting down what memory thrusts to the forefront of my diseased mind, with a hasty if confined sense of relief. Relief, if I may say so, not unlike sexual release. (24)

In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin claim that Sibiya's sexual encounter with Veronica corresponds to his subversive appropriation of the pen. With reference to what they call a divide "between the literate white and oral Black societies,"¹⁰ these critics note that *Mating Birds* "demonstrates the catastrophic meeting of the oral and literate worlds."¹¹ This line of argument, however, not only fails to question the essentialism and 'progression' implied in supposing a (w)rite of passage from 'traditional African culture' to the power of the written word, it also ignores the ways in which *Mating Birds* subverts any such binary. For not only does the black male protagonist in Nkosi's novel present a written account of himself, but to some extent he resists 'the talking cure', the powerful intervention of European psychoanalytic discourse, represented in the promptings of the Swiss psychoanalyst Dr Emile Dufré.

A criminologist by profession, Dufré visits Sibiya in prison daily, in order to record his case history "for the augmentation of scientific method" (23). Significantly, Sibiya does not tell Dufré as much as he reveals in his writing. When speaking to the analyst about the first time he met a white woman, for instance, Sibiya says that he originally encountered a white girl at missionary school. In his memoirs, however, he recounts an earlier experience, during his childhood in rural Mzimba, when the appearance of a white family at a local shop led him to stumble over himself in amazement, only to be helped to his feet by one of the white girls. This incident sets the tone for his later encounter with Veronica, as he literally bumps into her in a shop at the beachfront:

At the instance of our collision, something fell from her hand. A comb? A hat? A handbag? I cannot remember. I spoke then, "I'm so sorry! Please excuse me!" And I bent down to pick up whatever had fallen from her hand. "No, no! it's entirely my fault!" [...] Whatever else followed would be her fault. This she had acknowledged. (115/117)

Ashcroft et al. claim that "the interrelation between the desire to enter the literate world and the rape of the woman is significant."¹² If Sibiya has commit-

¹⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989): 86.

¹¹ Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, 88.

¹² *The Empire Writes Back*, 86.

ted rape, his assertion that his intercourse with Veronica was 'her fault' sounds like a fairly objectionable defence. Yet while Ashcroft et al., along with a number of other critics, refer to Sibiya's 'rape' of Veronica, their attempts to force closure on the matter of Sibiya's guilt can only be frustrated by the narrative structure of the novel.

In his first reference to the alleged 'rape', Sibiya writes:

Everything happened so suddenly in that seaside bungalow that I could hardly reflect at the time how much of what happened was wholly of the girl's bidding, how much the result of my own wayward impulse. (5)

By his own admission, Sibiya's obsessive thoughts may be distorting his memory of events. Aligning his narrative with that of Meursault in Camus' *The Outsider*, he suggests that the heat of the beach befuddled his mind and may have led him to extreme actions (9). He confesses that only Veronica can fill in the gaps in his memory and corroborate his story. The prohibition in the Immorality Act, however, means that he can never speak to her as an equal, and in her testimony, he claims, she is lying in order to hide her part in an illicit encounter. Thus the novel turns a mirror on the diseased mind of apartheid itself, and points to the difficulty of accessing 'truth' in a context where institutionalized racism has invaded the most intimate of spaces.

By choosing to leave the veracity of Sibiya's story uncertain, Nkosi has provoked responses that are guaranteed to bring into relief the fault-lines and conflicts of interest between academic feminism and anti-racist commentary. Sara Maitland, reviewing *Mating Birds* for the *New Statesman*, praises Nkosi's "commitment, passion and beautiful writing," but complains that Sibiya's account of Veronica's willingness sounds like "one of the classic defences of all rapists of all races under all regimes," and that Nkosi should have found a better way of exposing injustice than reverting to the "stock image of the pale temptress."¹³ In a polemical critique of J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and Nkosi's *Mating Birds*, the South African academic Josephine Dodd protests against the role of Nkosi and Coetzee in introducing South African writing to the rest of the world, claiming that these writers pander "to the prurient expectations of a First-World audience, supplying details of terrorist rape and interracial sexual excitement." Condemning what she sees as a replaying of "the 'women like rape' myth,"¹⁴ Dodd reveals that, along with the judge who presides over Sibiya's trial, she has already found Sibiya guilty.

¹³ Sara Maitland, "Small Worlds," *New Statesman* (29 August 1986): 25.

¹⁴ Josephine Dodd, "The South African Literary Establishment and the Textual Production of 'Woman': J.M. Coetzee and Lewis Nkosi," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 2 (1990): 118, 119.

At the other end of the spectrum are comments by Paul Pickering and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Writing for *New Society*, Pickering emphasizes the position of white women as “forbidden fruit.” Claiming that Veronica “uses and betrays” Sibiya, Pickering is clearly scornful of Sibiya’s desire for Veronica which continues at the trial “where she puts the noose around the worshipper’s neck.” He proposes: “In the end one is left wondering if we would respect Sibiya more if he had strangled the seductress Veronica.”¹⁵ Gates compares *Mating Birds* approvingly to Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*: “indeed this novel often reads as if Bigger Thomas had raped Mary Dalton before he killed her, then written a prison memoir from his cell on death row.” Nkosi’s novel, according to Gates, “re-creates all the tortures of an illicit obsession,” but Gates objects that the reader cannot tell finally “who did what to whom” and that “this novel’s great literary achievement – its vivid depiction of obsession – leads inevitably to its great flaw.”¹⁶

I would argue, however, that not only does the text of *Mating Birds* pre-empt the ways in which “hordes of anonymous readers” will “read, judge and accuse” Sibiya (24), but by virtue of its central indeterminacy the novel engages with an avant-garde tradition and avoids reductive positioning. In fact, Sibiya likens his non-linear narrative, with its gaps and absences, to a modernist text:

The story I told to the court, to the judge, and his assessors was essentially the same story I have been telling here on and off; the same story I later told to Emile Dufré, to my mother, to my friends and my relatives. But in telling and retelling it to the court I found in the end that the whole thing had become somewhat garbled, confused, it had lost any clear logical outline, and become a story without any apparent shape or form, like a modern novel whose plot resembles the shapelessness of emotion itself. (163–64)

Given the self-reflexivity, experimentalism and intertextuality of *Mating Birds*, it seems strange that, as I shall demonstrate, South African critics chose to judge the novel by the standards of literary realism. Indeed, it would appear that Nkosi’s novel, which to some extent breaks with realism and draws on the avant-garde strategies of European modernism, was an ‘outsider’ in the territory to which black South African writing had been relegated.

But the novel’s innovative and transgressive aspects are not limited to narrative form. For although Sol T. Plaatje had approached, with some delicacy,

¹⁵ Paul Pickering, review of *Mating Birds*, *New Society* (8 August 1986): 29.

¹⁶ Gates, “The Power of Her Sex, the Power of Her Race,” 3.

what he referred to as the "Sex-Relationship 'twixt White and Black" (1921), Nkosi, along with Arthur Maimane and Dambudzo Marechera, was the first among black Southern African authors to write intimately, erotically and explicitly of white female flesh. If, as Ashcroft et al. claim, it was believed that Western knowledge, and with it the power of the pen, would corrupt the black subject, then by such logic a black writer who took up a pen to narrate the intimacies of an encounter with a white woman's body would be steering close to blasphemy. In Nkosi's case, the writer of such fiction risked condemnation by the white literary establishment, and possibly also marginalization by the liberation movement in South Africa.

"The predilection for purple prose":

Mating Birds and the South African critics

In 1987, a South African edition of *Mating Birds* was published by Ravan Press in Johannesburg. Ravan used the same design for the dust-jacket as had been used in the St Martin's Press edition, an artist's impression in which race and the sexual encounter in the novel are allegorized, rather than overtly represented. On a beach, illuminated by a flaming sunrise or sunset, two birds copulate, rather violently. One of the birds is blue and the other is orange.¹⁷ Though the publishers have not chosen a blatantly sensationalist image, the 'porno-tropics' that evidently made for lucrative publication are still present, but translated here into symbolic images in which race is represented euphemistically.

The South African edition was reviewed by Stephen Gray, who described the novel as follows:

Mating Birds is an extremely strong and adult work. It is one of the most erotically successful novels that I know and yet the sharp, clear style cuts like pieces of ice. With regard to mature restraint – and dramatic effect – I

¹⁷ The first cover of *Mating Birds* (East African Publishing House, 1983) suggests the novel's imminent sexual encounter which is prohibited by apartheid, as the face of a black man stares from behind barbed wire, while a white woman sunbathes on a yellow beach in the foreground. On the cover of the Harper & Row edition (New York, 1987), however, one can barely make out that the hands of the prisoner, which cling to the prison bars, are those of a black man. The viewer is placed in the same position as the prisoner, who stares out through the bars. Floating among the clouds is a tantalizingly apparition, a girl in a bikini, and over her hips and lower body two birds, mating in flight, are superimposed. Though these cover images are far more explicit than that of the St Martin's Press/Ravan Press editions, it is only in the first cover design, used by East African Publishing House, that race is overtly represented.

know of no other recent South African work that is as masterfully composed and so cool and precise in its analysis of contemporary South Africa.¹⁸

Gray's review was published in the first issue of the Afrikaans magazine *Insig*, in August 1987. At the same time, the St Martin's Press edition of the novel had been embargoed by the South African censors. Oddly enough, as most of the books that reached the censors were referred by Customs and Excise when they entered the country,¹⁹ locally published books were less likely to be embargoed and sent to the Directorate of Publications. Thus, although Ravan Press in Johannesburg brought out a copy of *Mating Birds* in 1987, it was the St Martin's Press edition that was embargoed when it entered the country in that year. Within two months (between 31 July and 21 September), the Directorate of Publications decided that the novel was "not undesirable." Given its explicitly sexual subject-matter and the central incident of "interracial mingling," it may be surprising to hear that *Mating Birds* was not treated more harshly by the South African censors. By the late 1980s in South Africa, however, state-controlled dissemination was on the wane. Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* (1987) was already in circulation, and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act had been repealed. Moreover, Nkosi's novel had been well received overseas. This was taken to be an indicator of its literary merit, one of the main criteria for allowing otherwise contentious works to be released for circulation.

The decision to place no restriction on the circulation of *Mating Birds* was made on the basis of a report compiled by one of the Directorate's "expert" readers, Professor M.G. Scholtz, who was then based at the University of the Orange Free State. Although he expressed some discomfort at the representation of the Afrikaans lawyer, Kakmekaar, who prosecutes Sibiyi, Professor Scholtz attributes this unsympathetic representation to the 'anachronistic' depiction of South Africa in the novel. Similarly, Gray had claimed:

¹⁸ This translation is my own. The Afrikaans original reads: "*Mating Birds* is 'n baie sterk en volwasse werk. Dit is een van die mees eroties suksesvolle werke wat ek ken en tog sny die yl, helder styl soos stukke ys. Ten opsigte van volwasse beheer – en dramatiese effek – weet ek van geen ander onlangse Suid-Afrikaanse werk wat so meesterlik geskryf en so koel presies in sy ontleding van kontemporêre Suid Afrika is nie"; Stephen Gray, review of *Mating Birds*, *Insig* (August 1987): 63.

¹⁹ A publication could be referred to the Directorate in the following ways: a book could be intercepted on entering the country and referred by Customs and Excise; it could be referred by the police force; and it could be referred to the Directorate following a complaint from a member of the public. The first of these was the most common mode of referral.

To read *Mating Birds* now in South Africa is a bizarre experience [...] The fact is that Nkosi writes about Verwoerdian apartheid and sets his novel in the days of Vorster, yet we have outlived this era [...] This strange anachronism may bother South African readers.²⁰

Citing Gray's comments that, "however, the focus of the work is elsewhere" and referring to the Macmillan/PEN Award, Professor Scholtz argued for the "artistic value" of the novel, and recommended that no restriction be placed on it.

Curiously enough, while outside the country *Mating Birds* had been read as an insightful examination of "the South African prison house of apartheid,"²¹ and had been praised in a dust-jacket accolade by Nadine Gordimer for representing "the human devastation wrought by racist laws in South Africa," South African critics generally claimed that the novel was lacking in "topicality." Johan Jacobs, for instance, complains that "the first fictional veil to go is that of topicality."²² Notwithstanding the fact that a number of white writers (such as Daphne Rooke and J.M. Coetzee) had set their novels in the past or in unrecognizable eras, Nkosi's novel was generally shelved by South African critics as an historical 'anachronism'. Expecting from the novel a factually accurate representation of contemporary life under apartheid, readers in South Africa seemed to be without regard for the ways in which such a demand both perpetuates and fails to question the bifurcation within South Africa between a supposedly 'white' modernism/postmodernism and a supposedly 'black' realism. Nkosi himself was well aware of this apparent segregation, and was later to demystify its origins in "Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa" (1998). In this essay, without dismissing "the urgent need to document and to bear witness," Nkosi nonetheless uses Emily Apter's "Ethnographic Travesties" to argue that realism is a "technically brittle" mode in which to address colonialism and apartheid. Attributing the persistent difference between black and white post-apartheid writing, furthermore, to "social disparity and technological discrepancy," Nkosi criticizes what he sees as "the disappointing breadline asceticism and prim disapproval of irony" in much black South African writing which chooses "petty realism" as

²⁰ This translation is my own. The Afrikaans original reads as follows: "Om *Mating Birds* nou in Suid-Afrika te lees is eintlik 'n bizarre ondervinding [...] Die feit is dat Nkosi skryf oor Verwoerdiaanse apartheid en sy roman plaas in die Vorsterdae, terwyl óns die era daarna leef [...] Hierdie eienaardige anachronismes sal waarskynlik Suid-Afrikaanse lesers pla"; Gray, review of *Mating Birds*, *Insig* (August 1987): 63.

²¹ Gates, "The Power of Her Sex, the Power of Her Race," 3.

²² Johan Jacobs, review of *Mating Birds*, *Critical Arts* 5.2 (1990): 121.

its narrative mode.²³ His objections are consistent with an earlier argument, published in an essay in *Home and Exile*, in which he objects to instances of “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative fiction.”²⁴

André Brink, who penned the most substantial response to *Mating Birds* in South Africa, however, belittles the novel by assessing it precisely in terms of “petty realism” and “journalistic fact”:

There has never been a death-row in Durban; South African court procedure is rather different from the account of it given in the novel; there have never been segregated lectures at any university; quite simply, a trial of this nature could not have attracted the kind of attention Nkosi claims for his protagonist, whose exploits are alleged to have captured the attention of the entire “civilised world.”²⁵

Staggeringly, Brink goes on to denounce Nkosi for “gross over-simplification” (16) and for “exaggerating the horrors of the South African situation” (17) – a condemnation that is at best incautious, given that Nkosi, along with Nat Nakasa, had personally witnessed the Sharpeville massacre before leaving South Africa. Attributing the depiction of South Africa in *Mating Birds* to Nkosi’s long-term exile, Brink, with surprising venom, launches an attack on what he refers to as Nkosi’s position as an “expatriate”:

Behind the mating birds of the narrative hovers a destructive bird of prey: the male that turns the “giggling” female into victim; the expatriate preying on the carcass of the land he has abandoned – as rapacious as any coloniser plundering virgin territory. (17)

In this comparison between a black author in exile and the “rapacious colonisers” who are Brink’s own kin, Brink simply fails to register the exigencies of the political circumstances that led Nkosi to leave South Africa on a one-way exit permit in 1961.

Unlike the censors and other South African critics, a reviewer for the *African Communist* (the journal of the South African Communist Party) lauded “the acuity of [Nkosi’s] perceptions of the South African scene.”²⁶ Com-

²³ Lewis Nkosi, “Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa,” in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy 1970–1995*, ed. Derek Attridge & Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998): 75, 77.

²⁴ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1965): 126.

²⁵ André Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics: Lewis Nkosi’s *Mating Birds*,” *English in Africa* 19.1 (May 1992): 16.

²⁶ Z.N., “A Sexual Fantasy,” review of *Mating Birds*, *The African Communist* 112 (First Quarter 1987): 90.

mending the author for writing “evocatively of African village and township life,” this reviewer also praises Nkosi for his “caustic comments [...] on court and prison procedures, the hypocrisy of judges and jailers” (90). But the critic for the *African Communist* is careful to conclude with the image of the political prisoners singing the songs of freedom that hearten Sibiya in his last days, without mentioning the “unruly birds” that Sibiya also finally sees “daily mating in the sky.” Toeing the line of what Nkosi has referred to as “solidarity criticism,”²⁷ the reviewer complains that the author of *Mating Birds* has spent too much time on “the development of the passion between Sibiya and Veronica,” on “a sexual fantasy” which, the reviewer feels, Nkosi “indulges to a point bordering on soft porn” (90). Without taking cognizance of the playfully self-conscious ways in which *Mating Birds* draws attention to its erotic (or even ‘smutty’) language – Sibiya writes, for instance, that the breeze “riffled through [Veronica’s] rich brown hair as through the wealthy pages of a smutty book” (8) – Brink and Jacobs have similar objections to what they refer to as the novel’s “predilection for purple prose,”²⁸ its “clichés of cheap soft-porn magazines,” “crude erotic fantasies” (8) and “sexist drivel.”²⁹ Quite strikingly, however, both Brink and Jacobs try to measure up to the highly sexualized imagery of *Mating Birds* at the same time as they condemn it. Brink proclaims that the novel “is not, of course, Nkosi’s first attempt at inserting the skeleton key of an interracial sexual relationship into the well-lubricated lock of the apartheid closet door,”³⁰ and Jacobs likens the entire novel to “nothing so much as the elaborate strip-tease with which the girl seduced the narrator.”³¹

Brink complains, further, that the image of the birds “is less cluttered when left uncomplicated by Nkosi’s sexual ‘supplement’.”³² Yet while he was writing the essay on *Mating Birds*, which sports the title “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics,” Brink was himself composing a novel, entitled *Cape of*

²⁷ In an interview in 1994, Nkosi explained that the liberation struggle in South Africa advocated ‘solidarity criticism’ which favoured “socialist-realist-type fiction as against texts that were seen as bourgeois, experimentalist or elitist”; Janice Harris, “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa: Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” *Weber Studies* 11.2 (Spring–Summer 1994). Black writers who used experimental or playful narrative strategies, or who glorified sensibilities that were seen as extraneous to the struggle, were denounced as irrelevant believers in art for art’s sake.

²⁸ Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics,” 16.

²⁹ Jacobs, review of *Mating Birds* (1990), 123.

³⁰ Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics,” 1.

³¹ Jacobs, review of *Mating Birds* (1990), 121.

³² Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics,” 3.

Storms (1993), in which Adamastor, the giant guardian of the Cape who appears in Luiz Vaz de Camões' *The Lusads* (1572), is recast as a black man who takes his name, T'kama – meaning “Big Bird” – from the enormous size of his penis. This may be meant to be postmodern, or ‘ironic’, but the joke is evidently at the expense of T'kama himself, as Sandra Chait has pointed out: “Neither the European woman nor Da Gama’s Portuguese sailors are made to look as ridiculous [...] the burlesque attaches itself entirely to the black man.”³³ When the unfortunate T'kama falls in love with a Portuguese ship-woman, he cannot consummate the relationship, as his “member” is too large. The narrative solution granted to T'kama is to have his penis accidentally bitten off by a crocodile, and then reconstructed into the form of a small clay tube. Unhappily, the text may imply, as Chait has concluded, that the sexual union of a black man and a white woman “flew in the face of nature” (19), or that such a coupling can only take place if the black man ‘reconstructs’ himself. Since *Cape of Storms* was published in the interim leading to the 1994 elections, one might also speculate that the novel’s peculiar imagery speaks volumes about the translation into sexual terms of a certain anxiety and wish-fulfilment in the face of black empowerment. On the whole, however, Brink’s book has been praised as a contribution to a growing corpus of ‘magical realism’, or to a ‘re-mythologization’ ushering in “the new South Africa.”³⁴

So how is it that, when Brink uses the image of an outsized black penis, he is being postmodern and ‘ironic’, but when Nkosi’s protagonist makes a playful reference to his “somewhat [...] oversized penis” the author is, according to Brink, exploiting “the image of the black male whose awareness of the body obtrudes on every page (including even the assertion of one of the crudest myths of sexist racism, the size of the black penis)”?³⁵ How, in short, does one account for the antipathy that South African critics expressed to-

³³ Sandra Chait, “Mythology, Magic Realism, and White Writing after Apartheid,” *Research in African Literatures* 31.2 (2000): 18–19.

³⁴ The imagery in Brink’s *Cape of Storms* was used as a major reference-point for a post-apartheid painting entitled “T’Kama Adamastor,” which was hung in the Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1999. The artist, Cyril Coetzee, received a substantial commission from a private donor. In this post-apartheid representation of the South African contact narrative, the placement of the ostrich evidently refers to the ‘Big-Bird’ image in Brink’s book. The making of the painting, with an essay by Brink, was documented in a glossy coffee-table-type publication, *T’kama–Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting* (2000), edited by Ivan Vladislavic.

³⁵ Brink, “An Ornithology of Sexual Politics,” 7.

wards *Mating Birds*, and the double standards by which the novel was judged? In a recent communication, Nkosi suggested:

for some white critics it was all right for white male writers to "narrate" on black bodies but for black writers to "narrate" on white bodies was a bit too much even for some "progressive" white critics; when you described a white woman's body too intimately in fiction you were actually "fondling" her body. Instead of being physically beaten unconscious like Joe Christmas (in William Faulkner's *Light in August*) you were "critically" ambushed and beaten unconscious by white critics.³⁶

Circling back on what was, in white writing, a fairly commonly represented sexual encounter between the races, Nkosi, as a black writer, certainly seems to have touched on a nerve.

"Through the inner sanctum of that royal hearth":
Reading past the prohibition and 'the peril'

In *Mating Birds*, Sibiya grants Dufré and the reader an account of a youthful dream or nightmare of forbidden desire. Presenting a self-reflexive figure for the novel itself, the dream, with its intensely sexual imagery, begs for an analysis by Dufré, and by the reader. In the surreal nightmare, a "gaudy Zulu monarch," along with "his *indunas* and other courtiers," presides in judgement over Sibiya (119). The Kafkaesque parody is evident in Sibiya's words: "What crime I have committed it is impossible to say" (119). Yet his trial is to follow, as the King's daughter, "like a well-trained stripper doing the Dance of the Seven Veils" (120), dances provocatively while Sibiya tries desperately to restrain himself, as he recognizes that this is a test which may have a fatal outcome: "I have been warned: at the very first sign of physical lust my head will go to the chopping block" (120). Driven to distraction by the proximity of the princess, Sibiya eventually surrenders to his desire: "I felt my boy burst through the inner sanctum of that royal hearth, and once I was joined to the princess, I was simply indifferent to my fate" (121).

Even as it presents a playful lampoon of oedipal politics, Sibiya's dream reflects upon the ways in which, in Nkosi's novel, the prohibition that is the ultimate law of the father becomes a figure for representing the law of the autocratic apartheid state. This is not, as Anette Barkowski has incorrectly suggested, in order to show that "South African race laws intertwine with all human laws, represented by the father."³⁷ Rather, *Mating Birds* confronts the

³⁶ Lewis Nkosi, unpublished correspondence with Lucy Graham, 2002.

³⁷ Anette Barkowski, review of *Mating Birds*, *Critical Arts* 5.2 (1990): 120.

peculiar *père-version* that petrifies in apartheid legislation, revealing, as Gareth Cornwell has asserted in a review of Saul Dubow's *Illicit Union*, that the foundations of racism lie not in rational scientific substantiation but in the complex "psycho-sexual dynamics of group identity and difference."³⁸

Although the alluring princess in Sibiya's dream is the daughter of the Zulu king, the imposed bar on Sibiya's desire for her suggests the ways in which, as Dorothy Driver has asserted, white women in South Africa have been "signs of that which was not exchanged"³⁹ among men of different racial groups. Indeed, for Sibiya, Veronica as "the bearer of a white skin" has been "an instrument in whom is revealed in its most flagrant form the rot and corruption of a society that has cut itself off from the rest of humanity, from any possibility of human growth" (180). In a chapter in *Tasks and Masks*, however, Nkosi also refers to "the ambiguous position of white women in a racist society":

Oppressors these women are, of course, in the general sense: they have the same power over the black servants as their menfolk, and no amount of buck-passing by some feminist spokeswomen [...] can entirely absolve women of their share of blame. And yet, recognising equally their special status as an "oppressed group" within a ruling class, white women sometimes feel themselves to be stranded in a kind of a no-man's-land (the pun should be forgiven) in which they are permitted some unusual insights into the nature of the war between the rulers and the ruled.⁴⁰

It is thus that Sibiya encounters Veronica lying "slack, motionless, roasting" in a no-man's-land on the beach, "inhabiting a marginal world between the despised, segregated blacks and the indifferent, privileged whites who looked upon us Africans as interlopers on a beach that should have been completely set aside for them" (7).

In a play on "the law of the father," and reflecting the internalization, in the psyche of the colonized, of a prohibition imposed by the colonizers, the bar on white female flesh is first articulated to Sibiya by his father:

Had the old man not often warned: "Never lust after a white woman, my child. With her painted lips and soft, shining skin, a white woman is a bait

³⁸ Gareth Cornwell, "Always Somewhere Else," review of Saul Dubow's *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, *Southern African Review of Books* (March–April 1996): 7.

³⁹ Dorothy Driver, "Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise," *Journal of Literary Studies* 4.1 (1988): 16.

⁴⁰ Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981): 88.

put there to destroy our men. Our ways are not the ways of white people, their speech is not ours. White people are smooth as eels, but they devour us like sharks." (6, 52)

Sibiya's transgression of this warning symbolizes his surrender to being 'devoured' or 'cannibalised' by European culture, and marks his severance, at a literal and discursive level, from the Zulu community. He writes of his discursive alienation from "his extended family" who visit him in prison:

To these people, I suddenly realise, my rapid speech, the constant shifts of tone and flights of fancy, the unexpected flashes of wit and irony, create an impression of emotional instability, of discontentedness, which leaves them in doubt as to my moral soundness. I do not speak like them [...] my ways are no longer their ways. (20–21)

Given the stereotype of the black man who desires a white woman, and the deployment of the myth of the black rapist in racist discourse, one may ask whether *Mating Birds* merely operates in terms of the signifiers constituted by racist ideology. Representations of white women under threat from black men have served historically, in South Africa and elsewhere (most notably in the USA), to justify oppressive racist measures, including the death penalty itself. As Sibiya notes: "there are no lessons to be learned from history, only images to be relearned and repeated. When I am gone there will be others, young blacks who will not see too many suns before they too are cut down" (181). Yet Sibiya's incarceration and imminent execution does not only reflect a context in which interracial sexual encounters have been addressed unequally by the justice system. His account of the alleged rape destabilizes the narrative that has put in place the prohibitive sign which segregates the space in which he and Veronica meet. Circling back, compulsively and somewhat inconclusively, to the encounter with Veronica in her bungalow, he continuously denies the allegations against him and draws attention to the reciprocal desire that developed, over a period of time, between the two of them. When his final written account of the incident reaches its conclusion, it presents the reader with the possibility, deferred throughout the story, that the bogeyman of racist thinking, the figure of the black rapist, is absent.

In a playful parody of 'black menace' rhetoric, the image of Sibiya put together in Veronica's testimony creates an ironic and even humorous disjunction between the articulate writer, Sibiya, and the stock portrayal of the rapacious black "beast":

I said, "What do you want?" very frightened by now, and the native just looked at me and grinned. It was a ghastly grin like the grimace of a wild animal and he just kept on touching me, playing with one of my breasts,

feeling me up. I'll never forget his eyes. They looked as if they were about to pop out of his head [...] he ran his tongue hungrily over his ashy lips, sort of smacking a bit as if he couldn't believe his luck. (156)

Rather than validating the typecasts of racist discourse, Veronica's name, which brings to mind the pious saint who accompanied Christ to Calvary and offered him a towel on which he left the imprint of his face, exposes the extent to which the image of the black rapist has been tied to an iconography in which white women have been cast as 'pure' and saintly bearers of culture. Despite what Sibiyá describes as her sexually uninhibited life-style and her willful seduction strategies, at the trial, dressed in virginal white, Veronica becomes the unblemished figure of a constructed cultural narrative, a woman, incidentally, whom Sibiyá's Zulu visitors will see as "pale as a piece of paper" (21), and on whose body the marks of Sibiyá's passion may be read.

Although some critics have objected to what they refer to as Nkosi's sexist and "stereotypical treatment"⁴¹ of a white woman, it should be remembered that descriptions of Veronica are set within a fictional memoir and thus cannot be attributed directly to the author of *Mating Birds*. Moreover, on an important level the novel emphasizes the necessity of overcoming the barriers of prejudice and stereotyping. Although at times in his anger he denounces Veronica as "a high class tart" and acknowledges that for her he is probably "the ultimate mirror in which she saw reflected the power of her sex and her race" (74), Sibiyá also describes a pivotal encounter on the beach in which they exchange a glance that acknowledges, rather than denies, each other's subjectivity:

I was compelled by something in the girl's eyes that was ludicrously simple, open, naked and undemanding, a sort of acknowledgment of myself as a person inhabiting the same space as herself. (9)

Ironically, under apartheid his desire for affirmation as a human being will lead Sibiyá, whose name in Zulu translates as 'we make fences', to an act that will condemn him to isolation, death and the beginning and end of writing – confirming, at a symbolic level, Frantz Fanon's observation that "historically, the Negro guilty of lying with a white woman is castrated."⁴²

⁴¹ Josephine Dodd, "The South African Literary Establishment and the Textual Production of 'Woman'," 126.

⁴² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; New York: Grove, 1967): 72.

Conclusion

What does *Mating Birds* have to offer the post-apartheid reader? Although the novel has suffered neglect and dismissal in the country of its author's birth, its reception history poses questions that have yet to be addressed within the South African literary establishment. Its transgressive discursive strategies and its subtle reckoning with the mind of apartheid present opportunities for studies that take into account literary engagements with the cultural imaginary. Situated as the antithesis to prohibition is freedom: the possibility for fulfilment, for expression, for liberation from tyranny. Nkosi's novel concludes with the songs "announcing the near dawn of freedom" that are "lustily" sung by the political prisoners (183), and also returns to the image which opened the novel, that of the mating birds, joyous in their freedom. At the same time as it is bonded to sexual obsession, the urgency of desire in *Mating Birds* is also associated with the yearning for liberation, for a more just future in which human relationships are not distorted by oppressive laws or racial prejudice. The extent to which post-apartheid South Africa, or any postcolonial context, has approached earthly justice may in part be measured by investigating the imaginative projections of freedom and identity that have characterized an earlier era.

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7 At Goethe Haus, Switzerland, “where James Baldwin finished his first novel!” (Lewis Nkosi)



8 Black designated beach, Durban 1960s
(copyright Local History Museum, Durban)



9 Native Administration Department, 1960s
(copyright Local History Museum, Durban)

10 The Return of the Native

Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds*
Revisited in Post-Apartheid Durban

LINDY STIEBEL

The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place.¹

Introduction

I SHOULD BEGIN by explaining my project in this essay. In 2001, Lewis Nkosi revisited his 'home town', and was based for a three month period at the university where I teach English literary and cultural studies. One of the first things I heard him speak about was something obviously close to his heart – it was a conference paper delivered on campus entitled "The 'Native' is Everywhere and Nowhere." In it, he described what it was to have been a 'native' under apartheid and how he decided to refuse to be one at a certain point in his life. He talked as well of his return to post-apartheid South Africa and how the visit made him look again at what it was to be a 'native' – both in the apartheid sense and in the sense of being native to a place, belonging to it.

In preparation for his visit, I had been reading *Mating Birds* (1983, republished 1986). This was Nkosi's first novel; one that gained the Macmillan/PEN Award and that was widely hailed as a "protest novel," with the *Guardian* commenting, however, that the novel was

more than just another protest novel. Its attack on apartheid is not moral so much as clinical. It is in exposing the mythology of segregation, that Lewis Nkosi's power and originality lie. (dustjacket)

¹ Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction" (1956), in Welty, *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (NY: Random House, 1978): 118.

My interest in the novel was to look at this “mythology of segregation” through the lens of place – in other words, what use had Nkosi made of spaces/places in this novel to underline or highlight his point about a system that denied interracial intercourse? Furthermore, how did Nkosi interpret these self-same places on his return visit in 2001, post-apartheid? The novel may have been a work of fiction but the places described in it existed then and now, and were well known to Nkosi, a son of Durban. So, with this project in mind – a retracing of steps, as it were – Lewis Nkosi and I spent some days revisiting a few of the places described in *Mating Birds*. The conversations I recorded as accurately as possible and, because place in this case was before our eyes, I photographed the contemporary scene, which I juxtaposed with archival material of the same places taken in the 1950s, which is where the novel is set.²

This essay, then, is a multi-faceted one: it is a literal revisiting of Durban spaces that appear in a fictional work set in the 1950s and written in the 1980s, from a post-apartheid and postcolonial perspective. The framing question throughout, as prompted by Nkosi’s conference paper, is always: What is it to be ‘native’ to a place (in the many different senses of the word ‘native’)?

First, perhaps, to situate Nkosi in a brief biography. He was born in Chesherville, a Durban black township, in 1936. He was a bright schoolboy with aspirations; but his road out of the ghetto was not an easy one. He told me as we were looking at an exhibit on the notorious ‘Durban System’, designed to control ‘natives’ for labour purposes, that, fresh out of school, he was lured by the offer of a job as a clerk in a fertilizer company to live in a black men’s hostel. The job, it turned out, was actually to be a manual labourer – he remembers “so little food,” no privacy, a “brutal” existence.³ He became a junior reporter on *Ilange lase Natal* newspaper, moved to Johannesburg to work on *Drum* magazine in 1956, and was awarded a Nieman Fellowship to Harvard in 1961. He was only granted a one-way exit for this Fellowship, so was, in effect, denied re-entry to his native land. From America he went to London in 1964, becoming literary editor of *New African* magazine from 1965 to 1968. He was granted British citizenship and took an MA degree in English literature at the University of Sussex in 1976. Interrupting his doctoral studies to take up a lecturing position, he then embarked on the academic career of Professor of Literature, holding positions at the Universities of Zambia, Wyoming and California (Irvine), among others. He now lives in Basel, Switzerland. In a sense, he has become the traveller, not the native – he

² My thanks to Lewis Nkosi for spending time with me going over old ground, but seeing it afresh from a new perspective; and also for sharing his insights with me.

³ Lewis Nkosi, “Conversations with Lindy Stiebel,” Durban, 2001.

holds British citizenship which asserts that he ‘belongs’ to Britain where his children live; he lives in Europe, the source generally of the settlers who came to Africa and necessitated ‘the native question’; and, as he ironically remarked, he recently spent time looking for his passbook (which all ‘natives’ were forced to carry under apartheid), which he needed to prove he is a native of South Africa in order to reapply for South African citizenship and a South African passport (finally granted in 2003)!

His published works include plays (*The Rhythm of Violence*, 1964; “The Black Psychiatrist,” 2001); essays and literary criticism (*Home and Exile*, 1965; *The Transplanted Heart*, 1975; *Tasks and Masks*, 1981); and novels (*Mating Birds*, 1983, republished 1986; *Underground People*, 1993 in Dutch, republished in English with new additions in 2002). Speaking of black South African writing generally, he summarizes his own writing project:

The novelists, dramatists and poets remind the public constantly what the public wishes to forget. Black writers in particular, feel an urgent sense of obligation to expose the wounds and to make the ‘knowledge’ public; but such an attempt by black writers only creates for the other side huge anxieties and discomfort.⁴

Before looking at questions of place and belonging in *Mating Birds*, it will be useful to see what Nkosi had to say about being a ‘native’ in South Africa, one who refused. First, he acknowledges the constructedness of the idea of the ‘native’— ‘native’ being a “category developed against the backdrop of British imperial culture which referred to indigenous populations in the colonies as ‘natives’.”⁵ As Nkosi remarked in his conference paper, the idea of the ‘native’ only exists at a time of colonization. Mahmood Mamdani, on the same question, writes:

In colonial discourse, the problem of stabilising alien rule was politely referred to as ‘the native question’. It was a dilemma that confronted every colonial power and a riddle that preoccupied the best of its minds.⁶

The word ‘native’, Nkosi pointed out, is usually associated with origins, but in apartheid South Africa the word came to mean “illegitimate or interloper.”⁷

⁴ Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks* (Harlow: Longman, 1981): 77.

⁵ Pal Ahluwalia, “When Does a Settler Become a Native?” *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2001): 64.

⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Kampala: Fountain, Cape Town: David Philip, 1996): 3.

⁷ Nkosi, “The ‘Native’ is Everywhere and Nowhere,” Third International CSSALL Conference, University of Durban–Westville, 6–7 July 2001.

Settlers positioned themselves as belonging in certain spaces and thus afforded certain rights, while ‘natives’ were allocated separate spaces with correspondingly fewer or no rights. Mamdani goes so far as to see apartheid or institutional segregation not as exceptional to South Africa, but “actually the generic form of the colonial state in Africa.”⁸

How did Nkosi, specifically, respond to his positioning within the apartheid state as a ‘native’? There were two required characteristics of the ‘native’, he stated: one to be mute and the other to be invisible. He quoted instances of how, when walking down the street, he might be bumped into by whites: his response? – “It wasn’t their fault; I hadn’t realised I was invisible.”⁹ As a young intellectual writer who lived by words, the required muteness was less tolerable. Correspondingly, this is how he recorded his refusal to be a ‘native’: from when he started to speak out/back – a transition he dates at around the age of eighteen. Albert Memmi, the native Tunisian writer on colonization, outlines how “the intellectual lives more in cultural anguish [during colonization] [...] Those who understand their fate become impatient and no longer tolerate colonization.”¹⁰ The two solutions for the colonized, according to Memmi, are to assimilate to the colonizer or to revolt against the colonizer and make a decisive break: “After having been rejected for so long by the colonizer, the day has come when it is the colonized who must refuse the colonizer.”¹¹ Fanon, in his poetic style, expresses the refusal thus: “The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes.”¹² Nkosi’s personal refusal was expedited by his decisive physical break with South Africa in the 1960s, returning for the first time only thirty years later.

Mating Birds

In *Mating Birds*, however, the protagonist Ndi Sibiyia (onto whom Nkosi acknowledges he has projected much of himself at a similar age) is stuck in the role of ‘native’: mute to the outside world, nearly invisible, but in a state of anger. When the book opens, he is on Death Row, condemned to hang for

⁸ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 8.

⁹ Lewis Nkosi, “The ‘Native’ is Everywhere and Nowhere,” 2001.

¹⁰ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, preface by Jean–Paul Sartre, tr. Howard Greenfeld (*Portrait du colonisé précédé du portrait du colonisateur*, 1957; tr. 1967; London: Earthscan, 1990): 86.

¹¹ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 194.

¹² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; tr. 1967; London: Pluto, 1986): 140.

the rape of a white woman, Veronica Slater. The narrative recounts, from a first-hand perspective, Sibiya's life in rural Zululand, his shift to the city with his mother after his father's death, his few years at the University of Natal before being expelled for organizing demonstrations, his growing obsession with the white woman, which leads to her alleged rape, his trial and subsequent sentencing.

The whole tale is profoundly predicated on spaces regulated by the apartheid state – thus certain beaches are allocated to whites, others to blacks; Cato Manor settlement is black while Veronica Slater's bungalow is in a white area; the only place where the lovers can (accidentally) meet is a place of commerce, the corner café. Thus, as Ahluwalia remarks on the importance of concepts of space to identity-formation, "Space is a construction to which identities are assigned."¹³ In this sense, to fight for a space is to fight for one's very identity; especially if it is a place where one was born, one's natal place.

Sibiya, to begin with, does not transgress physical or racial boundaries. In Durban's history, one of the most contested spaces was the beachfront, with the choicest central beaches labelled 'white' and those to the north assigned for 'black' use. To the eye, no visible boundary existed, but to all intents and purposes an impenetrable wall, such as the Berlin Wall, segregated the swimmers of one beach from those of the other. Nkosi, in conversation, says Snake Park beach, where the narrative is centred, "could have been any beach of the time"¹⁴ where a 'black' designated beach bordered on a 'white' one [see photograph 7]. Sibiya describes it thus:

I can see it all quite clearly: the beach, the children's playgrounds, the seafront hotels, and the sweating pink-faced tourists from upcountry; the best time of all is that silent, torpid hour of noon when the beach suddenly becomes deserted and, driven back to the sea-front restaurants and the temporary shelter of their hotel rooms, crowds of seabathers suddenly vanish, leaving behind them not only the half-demolished cheese and tomato sandwiches but sometimes an occasional wristwatch, an expensive ring, or a finely embroidered handkerchief still smudged with lipstick from a pair of anonymous lips. Not infrequently, the tourists leave behind them an even worthier trophy – a young body lying spent and motionless on the warm white sands to be gazed at by us, the silent forbidden crowds of non-white boys in a black mutinous rage.¹⁵

¹³ Ahluwalia, "When Does a Settler Become a Native?," 70.

¹⁴ Nkosi, "Conversations with Lindy Stiebel," Durban, 2001.

¹⁵ Nkosi, *Mating Birds* (1983; Johannesburg: Ravan & London: Constable, 1986): 3–4. Further page references are in the main text.

What marks these beaches are the noticeboards reading “Bathing Area – For Whites Only,” which fills Ndi “with rage” (6). The girl, Veronica, who suns herself so provocatively close to him, yet who is protected by the invisible boundary, together with the muteness and invisibility of the ‘native’ who watches her, can also be read as a space whose identity is longed for. Ndi says:

I am certain what I felt for her was not exactly sexual desire for a body I must have known I could never possess, the race laws being what they are in South Africa; no, it was something more, something vaster, sadder, more profound than simple desire. Mingled with that feeling was another emotion: anger. (7)

Ndi notes that, like a “good native” (8), he should not have stared at the woman lying in her bikini but that he was unable to avert his gaze:

I was compelled by something in the girl’s eyes that was ludicrously simple, open, naked, and undemanding, a sort of acknowledgement of myself as a person inhabiting the same planet as herself. (9)

When Fanon asks “What does the black man want?” Homi Bhabha suggests an answer – Fanon, he says, shows “the black man wants the objectifying confrontation with otherness.”¹⁶ This is the biggest prize Veronica offers Ndi: her gaze, which registers his existence. This mutual gaze repeated on the public beach is used with intensity later in the book: “For minutes on end we stared deliberately into each other’s eyes. Obviously if we could not use words we could use looks” (146).

Both Memmi and Fanon would have read into Ndi Sibiya’s lust for Veronica Slater a greater desire to possess her identity – in other words, perhaps Ndi, far from refusing to be a ‘native’, wishes for assimilation with the colonizer.¹⁷ The fact that he despairs of this process is cause for his frustrated

¹⁶ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, xviii.

¹⁷ Memmi and Fanon both comment on the position of the colonized black man fantasizing about the colonizing white woman:

The extremism in that submission to [the coloniser] is already revealing. A blonde woman, be she dull or anything else, appears superior to any brunette [...] A mixed marriage is the extreme expression of this audacious leap.

(Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 187).

Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*.

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*

anger. Ndi, in turn, explains Veronica's flaunting of her (out-of-bounds) body before him as a signal that she needs his desire to affirm her power:

It was as is she could not live another day without the sustaining need that there was a 'native' somewhere who desired her to distraction (or shall we say to destruction!); a black man who in his impossible dream of gaining possession of her was prepared to throw his life away in a stupid wager against the state, against Fate itself. (74)

In some ways, then, Veronica's voluptuous body is itself a contested site of struggle. Nkosi makes Ndi frequently stress the *whiteness* of her skin (despite all the tanning), as if her body were a symbol of colonial conquest and by a black man, a 'native', entering this space, albeit covertly, some retribution could be sought to assuage the anger. André Brink, in an article that sees *Mating Birds* as a book flawed by "private sexuality," maintains that "the whole narrative turns her into a space to be inscribed by his [Ndi's] lust."¹⁸

Ndi Sibiyá acknowledges that "the girl became a kind of sickness for me" (67); and, as a mark of his obsession, he literally treads "the same old ground again and again" (170), as he is required to do in his court testimony later. The central location in this book remains the beach where the pair reappear wordlessly day after day. When Nkosi revisited Snake Park Beach in 2001 (see photograph 10 below) and stood on the invisible line that separated the two beaches, he remarked that, though Durban beachfront had "utterly changed," the sea remained constant, mingling its waters as it always had. He remarked on what happened to certain kinds of desire when prohibition was removed: he told the story of seeing on this visit a young man sitting on the low wall at the back of the beach, indifferent to a young bikini-clad white woman sunning herself close by. He commented, too, on the wordlessness of Veronica and Ndi's beach liaison, saying that the girl did not have any words to say to him, a 'native'. However, when they bump into each other at the café, then they automatically speak to each other in order to apologize: "'No,

Now [...] who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man.

Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization [...]

I marry white culture, white beauty and white whiteness.

When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.

(Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 63).

¹⁸ André Brink, "An Ornithology of Sexual Politics: Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds*," *English in Africa* 19.1 (May 1992): 17–18.

no! It's entirely my fault!' She spoke in a lowered tone at once courteous and surprisingly shy for a white woman addressing a native" (115). Nkosi sees this as a poignant moment in the novel: "they are just human beings after all," he said to me.¹⁹

Part of the repeated spatial cycle that mirrors the obsession's patterns is the path to Veronica's bungalow, which Nkosi today describes as being near present-day Kingsmead Cricket Stadium. The "green-paned [later "painted," 170] bungalow that stood discreet and isolated among a clump of trees and undergrowth" (131) contains an interior characterized by whiteness – the bed with "unembroidered white quilts," the bathroom a "palace of white marble" with a "soft white rug" underfoot and a "bright white-wash look" to the walls (134–35). Though Sibiyi has entered the heart of whiteness, he remains a 'native'. Veronica uses this subject-position, his invisibility as a native when he is standing outside the bungalow, to shield him (perhaps?) from her white friend's suspicions: "'What does the kaffir want? Do you know him?' And Veronica lied. 'Some vagrant native, I suppose. How am I to know every stray native?'" (133).

On the fateful day when they eventually make love in her bungalow, Ndi follows her over the familiar terrain – again we watch the two separately traverse the yellow sand, cross the beach road and the wasteland beyond it, go through the rickety gate of the green-painted bungalow set in a clump of trees. This time the interior of the house, though still white, is actively menacing – Ndi describes how "a macabre ghostly white light seemed to pour into the room"; Veronica's body is "vulnerable, white"; she has "white fragility"; the lovers roll into "a small patch of sunlight" in the oppressive, nauseating heat (170–77). Veronica's account in her court testimony is diametrically opposed to Ndi's – to protect her 'name', her status as colonizer, she must insist it was rape and that Ndi is unknown to her, an intruder, all of which the white court is described as being predisposed to believe. She describes her bungalow as "dainty, picturesque" but of "unfortunate solitariness" (152); that the day in question was crushingly hot, that an unknown native ("your Lordships, I am not in the habit of studying the face of every native who crosses my path!" 158) raped her. The rape scene is described in much prurient detail in the courtroom, which, Ndi abstractly notices, is bathed in white light, symbolic perhaps of the smallness of his chances of being acquitted, a black man: "Above all, there was the light, white, searing, and blinding, which filtered through a side window of the court, a light strong enough to dazzle the eyes" (161).

¹⁹ Nkosi, "Conversations with Lindy Stiebel," Durban, 2001.

The trial necessitates a daily trip from the prison, Durban Central, to the Courts. When I read the description of the route I was puzzled – it could not be factually correct, given the positions of the Supreme Court and prison. Nkosi had changed any possible route between the two places to include a scenic descent from the Ridge, a steep hill that affords a magisterial gaze over the city:

Every day the sedan invariably took the same route, which surprised me for what it revealed of the appalling laxity in security arrangements. From the Supreme Court, a large Victorian building, old and gray with the accumulation of bird droppings, we would drive down through the gardens with only one stop at the traffic lights. Nothing is better than the view of the Indian Ocean from the brow of this hill, but the court building itself is a disappointment [...] From here the road leads down to the sea, through the racecourse and the city's main shopping area. On a clear day you can see the ocean and the palm-fringed esplanade. It is a calm sea, reflecting nothing of the city's turbulence, nothing of its minor fractious wars, nothing of race riots and conflict. From this point you can see the docks and beyond them the stretch of white sands of the Durban beach, shiny like pearls in the day's blazing sun. (37–38)

When I asked Nkosi why he had changed the geographical route so obviously, such that any native Durbanite would notice the lapse, he gave an interesting answer. It was “artistic licence,”²⁰ for he particularly liked this view from the Berea and Ridge over the city and harbour, coming down the hill. The view *is* particularly fine and the air on the hill slightly cooler than in the humid city bowl, which is why this area has been extensively settled by whites since the beginning of Durban's colonial period. I was reminded of what Mary Louise Pratt termed the “monarch-of-all-I-survey”²¹ convention frequently used by nineteenth-century explorers and travel writers. For a nineteenth century British (white, Christian, male, non-native) adventurer, to survey the immensity of the colonial holdings the preferred position was from a high vantage-point, the bird's eye view. This position adopted by the viewer is a powerful one, for the land appears passively laid out before the viewer (as in the quotation above, “a calm sea,” “white sands of the Durban beach,” “the Indian Ocean”), yet one may not be seen in any equivalent manner:

²⁰ Lewis Nkosi, “Conversations with Lindy Stiebel,” Durban, 2001.

²¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992): 205–206.

Like the supervisor in the Panopticon, the writer who engages this view relies for authority on the analytic arrangement of space from a position of visual advantage. The writer is placed either above or at the center of things, yet apart from them, so that the organization and classification of things takes place according to the writer's own system of value.²²

The irony, then, lies in giving Ndi, a black prisoner in an apartheid judicial system – in other words, severely disempowered – such a proconsular view over Durban from the vantage-point of one of the oldest and most well-to-do 'white' suburbs. A little further in the passage from the novel quoted above, Ndi refers wistfully to the "big liners steaming out of the bay for the distant shores of Europe, America and the Far East," which promise dreams of "escape from South Africa" (38) – a solution which his creator managed to achieve, but not Ndi, the protagonist.

The only other time in the novel that the bird's-eye view is used for landscape description is under very different circumstances. Ndi recalls his early years spent in the rural district of Mzimba near Eshowe in Zululand as a pastoral idyll:

On a clear day you could see the white plumes of smoke rising for miles around in a shimmer of brilliant sunshine from the brown clusters of village huts, the broken furrows of red earth marking the dongas where the rain had bitten deeply into the earth. The entire landscape is dominated by the Tugela River, which for seventy miles flows down the narrow, wooded gorges, past vast undulating hills, past the rolling plains upon which herds of Zulu cattle graze solemnly while gazing into the limitless blue of the horizon [...] I can remember clearly the vast homestead nestled on the side of a hill, the huts set around the cattle kraal, which is the natural forum of a large Zulu family. A short walk up the incline of this hill and we could look down on one of the most beautiful stretches of countryside in all of Zululand. From the edge of the plateau, visible from about a hundred miles inland, the sea looks perfectly calm. (42–43)

This is a typical 'traditional native' scene of the countryside, which felt the effects of colonization through a system of indirect rule: in other words, rule through 'native' (meaning in this case 'rural') institutions governed by tribal chiefs.²³ Ndi recalls this scene now as an adult, but he recalls it as an insider,

²² David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 1993): 16-17.

²³ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.

then, one who belongs, unlike the fleeting glimpse of the deceptively tranquil city which he describes as a transient passenger in a prison-van. As a child, he did belong to his extended Zulu family, firmly rooted in the rural landscape. In terms that remind one of Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), Nkosi gives Ndi words that describe a self-sufficient, literally and metaphorically 'well-grounded' community: "The land was fertile, we had cattle, we grew enough to eat and to spare" (43). Plaatje writes of the Baralong people: "Their cattle [...] ran almost wild and multiplied as prolifically as the wild animals of the day. Work was of a perfunctory nature, for the mother earth yielded her bounties and the maiden soil provided ample sustenance for man and beast."²⁴ Both these passages from *Mating Birds* and *Mhudi* sound the same elegiac note – both societies discussed would soon be uprooted: the Baralong by Mzilikazi, who broke away from Shaka, and Ndi's community by forced removals – specifically, that of the village of Manzimhlope, "to be moved to an area fifty miles inland to make way for a new white settlement" (60). Ndi's family is moved by his father to his maternal aunt's village so as to pre-empt any forced removal.

So Ndi's sense of belonging physically to one spot is broken, a process which is exacerbated by his father's decision to get him educated and, finally, after his father's death, by his mother's decision to move with him to the city, Durban. For his family, his education at the Lutheran Seminary alienates them from him: "Henceforth I would remain one of the Sibiyas only in name, but in every way that mattered I would become a 'white man'" (87). In terms of his sense of belonging to a set of beliefs, he confesses: "I am lost. To be more precise, I'm doubly lost. Unlike my father, I believe in nothing, neither in Christian immortality nor in the ultimate fellowship with the ancestral spirits" (47). He can describe Zulu traditional practices (48) using Zulu words, but he no longer subscribes to them. He feels native neither to the traditional Zulu world nor to the white urban world – he is the black intellectual in limbo.

Cato Manor township, "the sprawling, fetid black slum five miles outside the center of the city" (90), is the urban counterpoint to rural Mzimba in this novel:

The tin shacks of Cato Manor clung precariously as if for dear life to the hillsides and slopes overlooking a stream called Mkhumbane, whose greenish slimy waters flowed eastward and southward on its sluggish journey toward the Indian Ocean, embracing to its already heavily polluted bosom all the scum and filth of innumerable shacks without proper

²⁴ Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (1930; Broadway: Quagga, 1975): 21.

sewage, without proper toilets or plumbing, on hot days as unbearably hot as over-heated ovens, on rainy days as leaky as open sieves. (90)

Here the elevated perspective yields no paradisaical vista that is worth possessing – Cato Manor’s great advantage, however, despite the poverty of some of the shacks, was its proximity to the centre of Durban, and so it, too, was earmarked for forced removals in the 1960s. Although its hilly aspect could not yield a ‘good view’, Lewis Nkosi remembers how the hills had a strategic purpose in the past. Lookouts posted on the hills could warn illegal beer brewers and consumers if police vans were approaching: “‘Kwela! Kwela!’ [police vans into which blacks would be ordered to jump – *kwela*] would warn others to hide in the hills.”²⁵ It is in Cato Manor that Ndi’s mother makes the transition from rural beauty to urban shebeen queen and, finally at the trial, to a “stooped, stumbling figure [...] already in black mourning clothes, covered up in a blanket” (164) supported by family members bussed in from Eshowe, the old home. They are there for Ndi’s mother in her hour of need; they do not understand the person her son has become:

I am not to be trusted; my ways are no longer their ways. They have come to the view that I am now as foreign to them as the white girl they have been observing in the witness box with whom I am said to have coupled [...] I have become a stranger, a shadow with whom they have nothing in common. (21)

To Ndi, they now adopt the characteristic of a ‘native’ that Nkosi earlier observed: muteness. He is no longer native to them in any reachable way; he speaks volubly to them on their prison visits to see him but he is incomprehensible to them, as incomprehensible as the whites by whom he is being judged and punished.

I will mention one last place that appears in this novel, not because of its prominence in the book, but because of its symbolic importance in Nkosi’s visit in 2001: the building that was once the headquarters of Durban’s Native Administration Department, now KwaMuhle Museum, which houses various exhibits recording the apartheid years. The Department for Native Affairs embodied South Africa’s institutionalized segregation at its complex worst, for it was here that the ‘natives’ came to apply for permission to remain in Durban for work purposes. The long queues outside this building during the apartheid era testified to how tortuous this process could be (see photograph 11 below).²⁶ Ndi would have stood in these queues, as must have Nkosi, as both

²⁵ Lewis Nkosi, “Conversations with Lindy Stiebel,” Durban, 2001.

²⁶ All African workers were obliged to register either as ‘togt’/day labourers or

had a number of jobs as young men – Ndi even worked for a while “as a clerk for the Bantu administration” (101).

How appropriate that this once-feared place should now be a place of remembrance and also a space for Durban citizens of all races to speak out in workshops and performance. Fortuitously, when Nkosi visited Durban in 2001, KwaMuhle Museum had just installed an exhibition on the “Politics of Space: apartheid architecture, urban design and spatial policy.” The exhibition details, by means of photographs and commentary, how architecture, urban design and spatial policy were harnessed to ensure separate spaces for blacks and whites; with the eighteenth-century British jurist Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon providing the ideal policing model for black spaces. In other words, spaces were designed over which absolute surveillance was possible, so much so that people in effect would ideally feel themselves always watched, and thus keep themselves in check. In a sense, the invisible boundary line between the black and white beaches described earlier operated in this fashion.

Nkosi was fascinated by this exhibition, which reminded him graphically of the past times through which he had lived. He wanted photographs of the segregated beaches, of the house in a black township which he said was very similar to the one he was born in in Chesterville. On seeing the photograph of ‘natives’ queuing at the Department of Native Affairs building (see photograph 9 below), the very building in which we were then standing, he commented on the “wonderful change” in the building’s history: its function of “proscribing, restricting” blacks was now reversed. The building was now a “free” space encouraging black expression – in fact, he discussed the possibility of staging his play “The Black Psychiatrist,” in the KwaMuhle Museum courtyard with the education officer there. He saw this change in the building’s function as an “entirely appropriate reappropriation of space.”²⁷ The ‘native’ was now encouraged to speak in this space and was no longer required to be mute. However, much as he applauded the abolition of racial apartheid, Nkosi commented on what he saw currently taking its place: what he calls an “apartheid of poverty.”²⁸ Be that as it may, before leaving the

monthly contract workers within five days of entering the towns. Both had to pay a registration fee, and every ‘togt’ worker was required to wear a metal badge with his registration number. Any African entering the town had to obtain a five-day ‘visitors’ pass which allowed him legal entry into the town only for the purpose of seeking employment or visiting relatives and friends (2001 caption, “The Politics of Space” exhibition, Kwa Muhle Museum).

²⁷ Lewis Nkosi, “Conversations with Lindy Stiebel,” Durban, 2001.

²⁸ Nkosi, “Conversations with Lindy Stiebel,” Durban, 2001.

exhibition, Nkosi took the opportunity to demonstrate literally the demise of institutionalized apartheid – he took great delight in lounging on the ‘Whites Only’ bench at the exhibition, a ‘native’/non-white no longer (see photograph 10 below).

Conclusion

This essay has endeavoured to take cognizance of Stephen Slemon’s encouragement to delegates at a recent literature conference to look at “the [necessary] return of the native within our postcolonial frameworks of interest – the native, that is, as locale, the native as ‘local’.”²⁹ I take that to mean looking at the spaces with which we are familiar or even over-familiar and thus blind to, with fresh eyes; evaluating “the organisation of space and place as a geography of belonging and identification,”³⁰ or otherwise, as the case may be. Furthermore, I have tried to unpack another meaning of ‘native’ in the apartheid sense of the word, a meaning which applied to all colonized indigenous people at a certain time. To do this through the lens of a fictional work, with the author’s contemporary comments on the real spaces the fiction dwells upon as a further filter, is like trying to peel an onion of many layers. It makes the eyes water, but sharpens the senses.

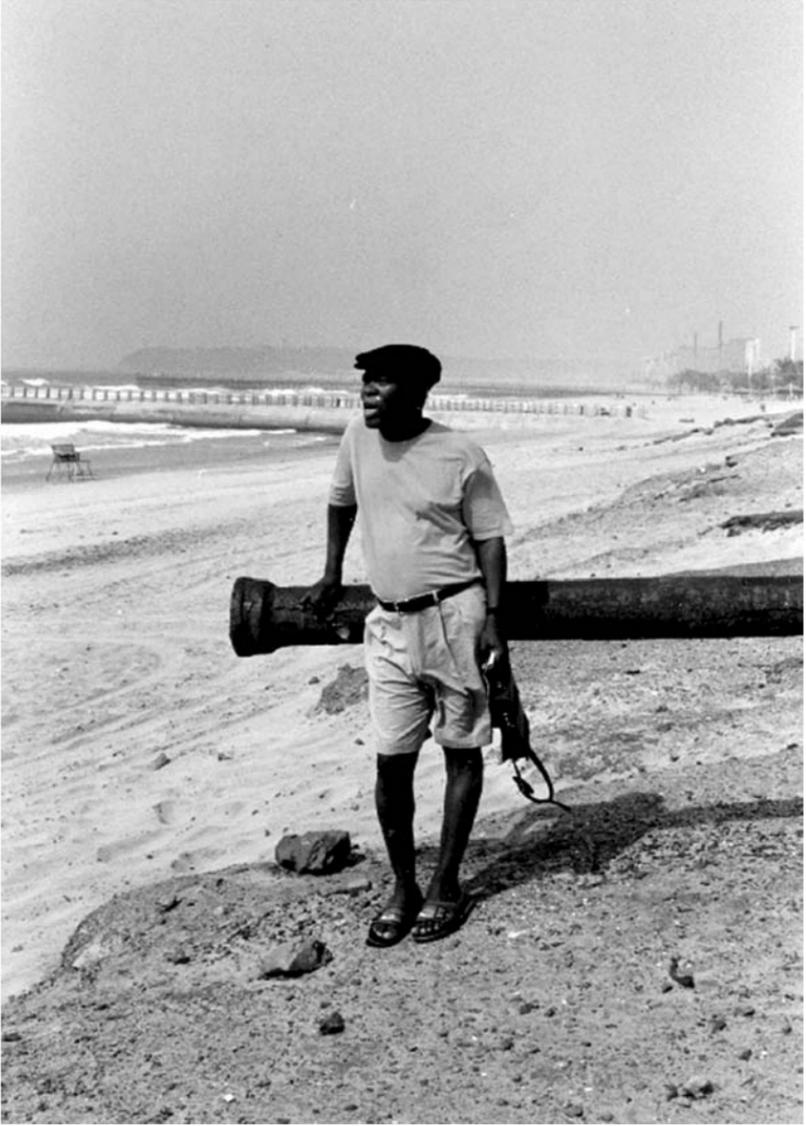
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²⁹ Stephen Slemon, *Newsletter-Press ACLALS International (Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies)* (Canberra, 2001–2002): 2.

³⁰ Lawrence Grossberg, “The Space of Culture, the Power of Space,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Ian Chambers & Lidia Curti (London & New York: Routledge, 1993): 175.

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10 Lewis Nkosi, Snake Park Beach, 2001 (Lindy Stiebel)

11 Companion Piece

South African Censors' Report [1987] on *Mating Birds*¹

Report on Lewis Nkosi's Novel, *Mating Birds*²

LEWIS NKOSI'S NOVEL *Mating Birds* takes place during the era of John Vorster, but against the backdrop of the apartheid system of Verwoerd. The central character in this novel is Ndi Sibiyi, a black man sentenced to death by hanging for his 'rape' of Veronica Slater, a beautiful white girl. Veronica Slater, however, is no angel, but someone with a dubious reputation; it is suggested that she sells her body to the rich and that she regularly attends orgies, where amongst other things, she dances naked. According to Sibiyi's version of the 'rape', Veronica was an only too willing 'victim', who enticed him in numerous ways, thereby nurturing and fuelling his obsession for her.

In prison, Sibiyi documents his life story, from the early years in the homeland of Mzimba, where his father was chief, to his later years in Cato Manor and his 'rape' of Veronica in her hut house near the Durban beach. The court case that follows, as well as various interviews that the criminologist of Swiss-German descent, Dr Emile Dufré, conducts with the black

¹ Directorate of Publications Report on *Mating Birds*, file no. P87/08/15. Application to the Directorate of Publications for an investigation and decision on *Mating Birds*, published in 1986 by St Martin's Press, New York, was made by J.S. Enslin, Controller of Customs and Excise on 31 July 1987. What follows is the Report by the "Reader or Expert" commissioned by the Directorate of Publications, Professor M.G. Scholtz of the University of the Orange Free State; and the final report of the Chairman of the Committee set up to consider the expert's report and the committee's findings. The Chairman was E.H. Scholtz.

² Translated from the original Afrikaans hand-written report by Darryl David, Afrikaans Department, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

aggressor, occupy a considerable and central part of the novel. These interviews help make the novel more convincing as a type of case-study that gives the reader an insight into the psyche of Ndi Sibiyi. This, in turn, makes the obsession that Ndi has developed for Veronica clearer. It also makes the climax of the novel, namely the 'rape', clearer to the reader. As a result of the above, the realistic way in which Ndi relives and narrates the crime can therefore never really shock the reader, because it is something that the reader is prepared for from the very beginning of the novel.

No doubt the many years that Nkosi spent in Europe and Zambia are probably responsible for the anachronistic view of South Africa and for his 'take' on what the prevailing situation in South Africa is like. The characters and their experiences of South Africa and its apartheid system are therefore more in keeping with those from the Verwoerd era. It is this, no doubt, that is responsible for the caricature-type presentations of especially the Afrikaner. The name of the state prosecutor, Kakmekaar, for example, needs to be understood in this light. This anachronism diminishes the power of the novel, which deals with the pain, suffering and humiliation of all who transgressed the Immorality Act. I am sure that most readers of today would agree with Nkosi that sex across the colour line is no longer a crime, and rightfully no longer punishable by law.

This section of the report will be concluded by a quotation of the last two paragraphs by Professor S[tephen] Gray in his more comprehensive review of *Mating Birds* which appeared in the first edition of the journal *Insig* (August 1987).

But the focus of the work lies elsewhere, so that the community that brought about the crime becomes the accused. In the best tradition of contemporary psychological fiction, one reads with amazement and with horror how the charge against Sibiyi is transformed into a charge against the system that produced him.

Mating Birds is a strong and mature work. It is one of the most erotically successful works that I know of, and yet the crisp, clear style cuts like shards of glass. With regard to artistic control – and dramatic effect – I know of no other recent South African work that is crafted in so masterly a fashion and so clinically precise in its analysis of contemporary South Africa.

In America, the novel has been awarded the Macmillan PEN Prize, which should already be an indication of the artistic merit of this work. The somewhat crass references to whites, but more specifically the Afrikaner, are within the context functional and therefore justifiable. It is also less harsh than many other works that are freely available in South Africa.

In light of the above, I would like to recommend that no restrictions be placed on this novel. It therefore cannot, in my opinion, be prohibited according to any article of the Publications Act.

Professor M. Scholtz, University of the Orange Free State

Report by the Chairman of the Committee

The Committee investigated the publication under discussion and unanimously decided that it is *not undesirable*.

Motivation

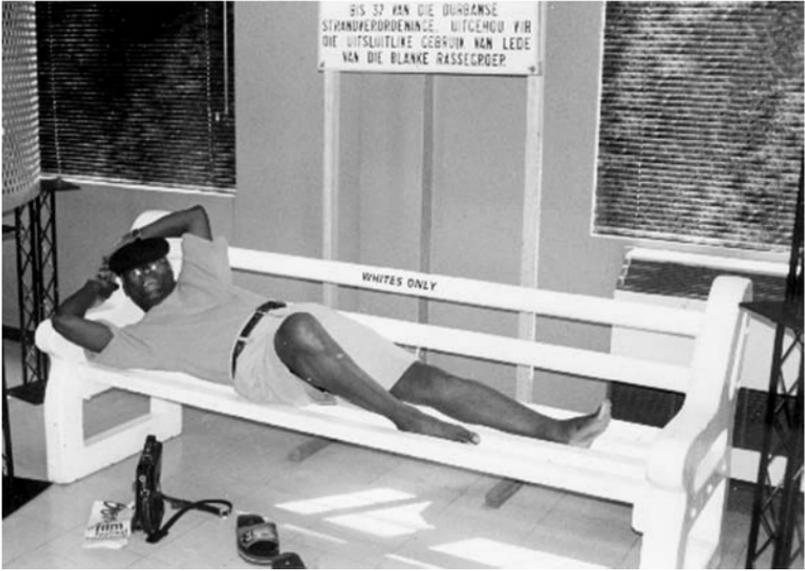
The favourable reaction that this novel has received locally from literary critics (see *Insig* – August 1987), as well as praise from overseas, speaks for itself as regards the book's artistic merits. The book is set in a time when the Immorality Act still stood and, as one of the committee members put it: "Everyone in the RSA will know that much has changed since the 'Verwoerdian' era and will be able to make the necessary mental adjustment [...] those who would be led to believe that this is still an accurate representation of the existing situation live outside our borders and the reach of the publication laws."

A revolutionary will find nothing in this publication that he has not heard before in the line of grievances and complaints and nothing to inspire him to subversive action. Therefore it cannot be found to be undesirable in terms of Article 47(2) (d) and (e).

Decision

The Committee has decided that the publication under discussion is not undesirable. (E.H. Scholtz, Chairman of Committee, September 15, 1987)





11 Lewis Nkosi, KwaMuhle Museum (formerly Native Administration Department), 2001 (Lindy Stiebel)



12 Lewis Nkosi and friend while working for *Drum* (source: *Southern African Review of Books*)

12 Mammon and God

Reality, Imagination and Irony in *Underground People*

ANDRIES OLIPHANT

“I try to serve God and Mammon,” he joked, “and I don’t know how God will come off.”¹

“Remember ... revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all faith, of all devotion, of all action.”²

1

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE, for me that is, to read Lewis Nkosi’s fiction without relating it, either implicitly or explicitly, to his critical writing on South African fiction. This is partly because his withering comments on the aesthetic deficiencies of black South African fiction of the 1960s, if one has read them, function as long-standing challenges to South African writers and to the critic himself. It calls out to critics to examine how Nkosi, the critic of narratives by other writers, manages his own narratives. Furthermore, Nkosi’s own fiction foregrounds writers and writing. It is done in such a way that his critical writing, which belongs to the metafictional order of literary discourse, is palpable in his fiction.

This foregrounding is evident in both his novels. In *Mating Birds* (1986), the focal figure’s mother regards reading as a form of occult knowledge and believes her son has the promise of one day becoming an illustrious writer and a real “devil with the pen.” Awaiting execution, the main figure ruefully ponders the fact that this literary promise will never be realized. Molapo, the

¹ Cornelius Molapo, citing Henry James, in Lewis Nkosi, *Underground People* (2002).

² Sophia Antonovna, in Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (1911).

main figure in *Underground People* (2002) among other things, is a poet. Nkosi's fiction, then, with its emphasis on writing, explicitly activates a self-reflexive process which runs from the fiction back to his ideas on writing and thus to his critical work. His literary criticism, while fully engaged with the writing of others, serves to prepare the ground which his own fiction will seek to occupy. In the light of this, readings which move from the fiction back to the critical writing seem inevitable and necessary.

Nkosi's critical views, articulated with candid directness, are perhaps best captured in his essay "Fiction by Black South Africans" (1965). Striking in its affinities with James Baldwin's assault on the American protest novel,³ the views in this and other essays by Nkosi are seminal to South African literature. Repression and censorship saw to it that his views were kept out of South Africa since the early 1960s. When debates on the relationship between politics and literature flared up in the 1980s after a decade of new politically engaged writing which began in the early 1970s, they took place with scant reference to earlier debates on these matters. It fell to Njabulo Ndebele (1991) to bridge this rupture by indirectly putting some of Nkosi's ideas into circulation through his own critical writings, which expand Nkosi's views.

The main point of Nkosi's critique is that South African fiction written in the wake of apartheid relies on the plots and racial themes presented to authors by social realities. These plots and themes, he asserts, lack fictional mediation and formal sophistication. Nkosi writes:

What we get from South Africa – and what we get most frequently – is journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction.⁴

This critical position is frequently misread as a summary rejection of social or political themes in fiction. It is actually concerned with the aesthetic properties of fiction. Some models of the aesthetic Nkosi invokes are European novelists such as Dostoevsky, Kafka and Joyce.

The most important element found in these writers, and something that Nkosi missed in South African black fiction at the time, is what he calls "imagination." In support of this, Nkosi cites Robert Langbaum's claim: "The

³ James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Zero* 1 (Spring 1949): 54–58, and *Partisan Review* 16 (June 1949): 578–85. Repr. in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1955): 19–28.

⁴ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1965; Harlow, Essex: Longmans, 1983): 132.

imagination [...] remains, for us, the faculty which accounts for literature as revelation, as a maker of values.”⁵ While this meaning and function given to the imagination could come straight out of the kind of the vocabulary of a romantic poet such as Wordsworth in his preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*, we must, however, infer that the “values” referred to here are the values of literary aesthetics. Nkosi’s essay, I should point out, is considerably removed from the romanticism which attaches to Langbaum’s utterance. It focuses on narrative art as fiction and not fact. The imaginative construction is for him the hallmark of the novel and the short story. Facts are the data of journalism and other types of prose narratives subject to empirical verification. The narratives which Nkosi assails are, in his reading, texts by black South Africans in which “invented” stories, events and characters, constructed by dint of imagination, are absent.

If in his own fiction Nkosi returns to the very same themes of “racial violence, social apartheid and interracial love affairs,” this is not puzzling unless one misreads his essay as a plea for a literature of pure fantasy with no reference to politics or one which focuses on the personal, the private and the intimate only. Since his criticism is not directed at social and political plots and themes *per se* but at their unmediated incorporation into narratives purporting to be novels, there is no contradiction between his critical and creative practices, but a graphic continuity. In *Mating Birds*, for instance, interracial sex is the starting-point for a complex exploration of the relationship between the body, silence, speech and power in a racially divided society of subjugation and domination. In *Underground People*, a polarized society in the throes of revolutionary conflict and imminent change is brought into view by means of irony.

In accordance with his insistence that fiction is not journalism, sociology or history, but a distinct form of imaginative writing, Nkosi, in the essay mentioned above, accords a special place to irony. This is the trope favoured by formalist poetics for its effect in moving literary language away from the literal, descriptive or analytical approach of factual and scientific forms of writing and towards the ambiguities of the semantically saturated mode that is regarded as the proper and distinctive language of poetry and fiction. Nkosi concludes his essay by singling out stories that are inscribed with the wit and irony which for him characterize “modern European writing.”⁶ Nkosi’s insistence in holding up European literature as the model of writing for black South African writers may seem to be afflicted by a colonial blindness. It is, however, consistent with his view, expressed in the same essay, that Africans,

⁵ Langbaum, quoted by Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 132.

⁶ Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, 138.

“not always to their benefit,” have the “ability to absorb alien influences and manners and adapt them to their particular tradition” (133). This process of abrogation, he points out, is found in the widespread borrowings from European languages by the African languages as well as the semantic transformations performed on English words by African speakers.

However, Nkosi’s labelling of fiction by black South Africans as “primitive” (131) and concerned with the mere telling of a story without any comparable European awareness of a long literary tradition, is a slippage which suggests the uncritical acceptance of the cultural hierarchies of colonialism. A blatant and familiar feature of colonial cultural discourse, in South Africa and elsewhere, is its relentless denigration of African traditions by a putatively superior European tradition, replete with examples of literary tradition compared to colonized cultures with no tradition of literature or art to speak of. In South Africa, this view of African languages is recorded in all the early literary histories by colonial scholars.

It is nevertheless clear that for Nkosi “imagination” and “irony” are two important features of modern fiction. These attributes, we shall see, are boldly brought into play in *Underground People*.

2

Underground People is, if anything, an imaginatively conceived novel written in an ironic register. Where the tone in *Mating Birds* is tragic, and the irony muted, *Underground People* is a novel of ironic laughter. Where the focus in *Mating Birds* falls on a single sexual encounter, recalled by the central figure from the confines of prison where he awaits execution, *Underground People* has a much wider scope and many focal points organized around a central story with a double narrative. This is the story of a staged disappearance of the main character in a society in turmoil. It brings a diversity of fictional figures into contact as the narrative unfolds along the pattern of a crisis escalating into armed conflict. Although the narrative deliberately blurs temporal specificity, the novel is set in the late 1980s, during the State of Emergency, reminiscent of the State of Emergency of the 1960s, which at that time crushed the mass uprising.

The narrative connects these two periods by making sometimes ironic and at other times seemingly descriptive references to the earlier period. The most striking are the comical references to the popular 1960s dance “the jitterbug,”⁷ which the central figure Molapo dances. References to *Drum* magazine

⁷ Lewis Nkosi, *Underground People* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2002): 25. Further page references are in the main text.

and some of the segregation practices, most notably the laws which prohibited selling or serving liquor to Africans, which hark back to the 1950s and 1960s, are descriptive examples of this historical layering. This method shatters the traditional coherence of time and place associated with realism. To the unsuspecting reader, these references may come across as inept and awkward anachronisms. While they jar with regard to historical context, their function, however, is to embed the heightened crisis in South Africa of the mid-1980s in the crisis of the 1960s, and the other way round. Through this unconventional manner, which recalls James Joyce's *Ulysses*, two periods are evoked simultaneously.

This multiplicity also applies to the localities in which the events of the narratives are set. Events take place in Johannesburg, London and rural South Africa. The South African localities are further differentiated in terms of the spatial coordinates of colonialism to locate some events in Johannesburg with its mainly white central commercial district and the black townships on its periphery. Other events are set in the northern rural region of Tabanyane with its white town, mission station and native reserve. This spatial order is, of course, part of the narrative's explicit concern with the occupation, appropriation and racial demarcation of indigenous territory as represented in the land conflict of Tabanyane. At the same time the London–Johannesburg and Johannesburg–Tabanyane localities signify the spatialities of home and exile.

The narrative, likewise, is multidimensional. It consists of two main inter-related plots with several subsidiary lines which flow from these to merge at the end of the narrative. The main narrative centres on Molapo. He is manipulated by leaders of the liberation movement to go underground by returning to his place of birth in Tabanyane to lead a popular uprising. Coupled with this is a second narrative strand. It involves Anthony Ferguson, a white South African working for the London-based Human Rights International, who returns to the country after an absence of fifteen years, on a mission to search for Molapo. There are several other subsidiary narrative lines and incidents related to the two main narratives.

The subject of the political crisis in South Africa is filtered through the double themes of revolutionary theory on the one hand and revolutionary action on the other. Poised at a moment in South African history where two outcomes are possible – the intensifying of violent conflict as the means for liberating the country, or non-violent negotiated settlement between the liberation movement and the white minority government – the novel connects these possibilities to the themes. All these layered facets of the novel are filtered through irony. Hence, the tenor of the narration, so typical of irony, oscillates between the serious and the comic.

The above suggests a tangled and complex novel with many facets. Constructed around the opposition between action and inaction, the novel generates a range of other oppositions, such as: theory and practice; fidelity and infidelity; resistance and submission; wealth and poverty; home and exile; courage and cowardice; truth and falsity; appearance and reality; public and private; poetry and politics, to name the most obvious ones. The discursive instrument that instantiates and disrupts these oppositions is irony.

In line with the Greek sense of the word *'eiron'*, which, as glossed by Cuddon,⁸ signifies dissimulation or deceit, the novel is based on a contrived, underhand and cunning way of duping an unsuspecting Ferguson. The doubleness of the narrative and its range of oppositions relate directly to this trope, insofar as irony involves saying one thing while intending the contrary meaning. While its main epistemological structure is the play between appearance and reality, it also produces the oscillation between the serious and the comical that characterizes the novel.

By way of illuminating this, I shall briefly examine how the two principal figures in the narrative are presented. In the "Prologue" to the narrative, Molapo's disappearance is set in the wider context of repression in the late twentieth century across the globe. However, this is quickly qualified by the fact that Molapo's "disappearance" is not accompanied by the usual images of "pathos and drama" circulated in the media, "such as the unequal struggle against heavy odds, the drama of attempted escape, pistols being fired, crowds gathering in the street, mourning relatives" (8). Molapo's wife, Maureen, has left him. He lives on his own, which makes a staging along the lines set out above impossible. Furthermore, far from being a heroic figure or an innocent victim, Molapo is described as "an incompetent teacher and a dabbler in poetry and politics" and not cast in "a particular heroic mode" (9).

He is the chairman of a local branch of the National Liberation Movement. His main role is to address crowds in Soweto. We are told: "The theme of his speeches was nearly always the same: the deepening political crisis in the country and the need to prepare for armed struggle." "Soft-spoken" and "not a ranter," he spoke in public indirectly about "a possible bloodbath as a prelude to momentous change" (9). In shebeens, however, he indulges in revolutionary extremism by citing the theories of Fanon, Guevara and Bakunin, in which "the cleansing virtues of violence" are extolled. His audience viewed him as the "the grand poet of the struggle, the inimitable stage manager of its *mise-en-scène*, the creator of, and panderer to, their lust for meaningful action" (9).

⁸ A.J. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991): 457–62.

All this is imaginary. The ‘real’ Molapo is not a revolutionary firebrand, but a “gentle person who spoke in soft, casual, at times deeply ironic tones” about the intersection of “love and revolution” and the final reconciliation of “the incorrigible private” and the irrevocably public.” Far from being a man of action, he is a figure constructed by and through literature and art. He is an “intellectual who lived for the most part in the richly tapestried world of ideas, fond of books, music and painting” (9). He is a poet and a politician, who excels in neither. He justifies this double life with a “healthy scepticism about his own talents.” He is given to citing his “favourite American novelist, Henry James, against himself: ‘I try to serve God and Mammon,’ he joked, ‘and I don’t know how God will come off’” (10).

His comrades on the executive committee of the National Liberation Movement have a less flattering view of him. He is seen as a crank. They regard his insistence on “immediate action” as dangerous and contrary to their own caution and self-discipline, and merely tolerate his speechmaking for its role in “raising the consciousness of the masses.” To them he is little more than a demagogue.

So when they were in good humour the representatives of the movement referred to him simply as ‘Molapo the poet’ with the emphasis on the poetry rather than his politics: but when they were in bad humour they dismissed him as that ‘Dube windbag!’ (11)

We are further informed that although his oratory made him seem dangerous it was really harmless. In a situation where the possibilities of a negotiated settlement increase, the leader of the movement decides to deploy him away from the main scenes of political intrigue to the remote rural village of Tabanyana, where a land and succession dispute has ignited a struggle between a collaborationist chief and his people. Although Molapo was born in the village, he is an urban intellectual who reads Hegel’s idealist treatise *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and is therefore ill-equipped to lead an armed uprising. He is psychologically manipulated into taking on the mission by Joe Bulane, a senior member of the liberation movement, by a mixture of flattery and the sexual humiliation of claiming to have made a cuckold of him.

This radical rupture between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ with regard to how Molapo is presented is also evident in the way Anthony Ferguson is constructed. Ferguson regards himself as an authority on investigating and solving cases of disappearance. Yet he is duped into believing that Molapo was held by the authorities. On the day when he leaves London for South Africa on his mission to find Molapo, he is warned by an old friend, a Fleet Street journalist, Stephens Mayfield, who recently covered the Stonybrook Riots, not to go “‘blundering about the townships’” on his own “‘like a first-rate

idiot!” (12). Ferguson responds by pointing out that he is a South African, adding: “‘Stephens, just remember one thing. I know more about that country than you’ll ever find out in a lifetime of nocturnal visits’” (13).

To this, Stephens, after being told by Ferguson that he left South Africa fifteen years ago, retorts: “‘There you are!’ Stephens chuckled triumphantly, as if that clinched the argument. ‘My dear boy, you have no idea how much South Africa has changed in the all these years you have been away. What the country was fifteen years ago bears absolutely no relation to what it is today’” (13). The irony of this exchange, where the South African is warned by someone who has never been to South Africa, will be borne out by the narrative when Ferguson finds himself trapped in the crossfire between the South African Defence Force and Molapo’s men in the mountains of Tabanyane. Before this, other ironies will emerge.

While Ferguson is ostentatious about the reason for his visit to South Africa, it soon seems to take on a secondary significance, since what he was really looking forward to was to see his sister, an international model living in opulence in Johannesburg, and to be at her marriage. Living in luxury in Johannesburg, he forgets about Molapo. At the same time, his view of South Africa, as a society headed for a bloodbath, is quickly unsettled by conversations with his sister’s future husband and her friends who are involved in talks with the exiled leadership of the liberation movement, with the view of achieving a peaceful solution to the conflict in South Africa. This is confirmed when he eventually gets around to meeting Joe Bulane and a legal advisor of the National Liberation Movement for a briefing on the disappearance of Molapo. Even so, he is still misled into believing that Molapo’s disappearance is the sinister work of state-security services. It will only be later, when he and Bulane travel to Tabanyane in an effort to persuade Molapo and his men to lay down their arms and surrender, that Ferguson will learn that Molapo’s disappearance was not what it seemed.

The denouement of the narrative takes place in the mountains, where Molapo and his insurgents find themselves surrounded by the South African Defence Force. Bulane, disguised in a tattered coat and plastic dark glasses, accompanies Ferguson, who agrees to intercede and avoid the massacre of Molapo and his combatants. When Ferguson eventually meets Molapo, the moment is replete with absurdity when he realizes that what he has been searching for was not lost after all. “What *was* lost forever for both of them was home and security, always a return to a home that was finally not home; for him to Johannesburg, for Molapo to Tabanyane” (259). This loss of home is a loss of a stable order of meaning in which the opposites of home and exile, appearance and reality no longer reside in any fixed system of meaning through which the ‘real’ can be easily separated from illusion and fantasy.

Bereft of such signifying comfort, both Molapo and Ferguson are tossed about by the demonic irony of the world they find themselves in. It is an unpredictable world that seems to exist in language which offers no foothold, but only the shifting verbal play of ideology, theories, fantasies and deceptions. The action which Molapo calls for results in his being sent on a mission which the movement knows is doomed to fail. His engagement with the world, if one could call it that, as we have seen, is filtered through literature, art and philosophy. When he is sent to lead the uprising, he is so ill-prepared that the whole exercise takes on the comic qualities of satire.

The senior leaders of the movement who orchestrate his disappearance are also no more experienced in practical politics than is Molapo. Bulane is a schemer and manipulator who, when they travel to Tabanyane, puts on the comical disguise of a gardener and behaves obsequiously for fear of being recognized by the military as a leader of the liberation movement. Thus the contrast set up between these two figures at the outset of the novel, where Bulane wields manipulative power over Molapo, is destabilized by the ironic twist at the end.

Molapo refuses to surrender. He insists that Bulane stay with him and his men and face the South African Defence Force. As the soldiers close in on the insurgents, Bulane speaks: “‘Mr Ferguson, perhaps we should leave now.... We have done all we could’” (162). Molapo replies: “‘Not you JB.... You stay right here with us and fight side by side with the people you helped recruit. You know what they do in the army with officers who desert their troops. They shoot them, JB’” (262). With this, the ironic reversal of positions between Molapo and Bulane, as well as Ferguson’s own, is achieved.

3

Viewed from a literary-historical perspective, *Underground People* is a late version of a strand of South African fiction concerned with the outcome of the political crisis in the country. This literature, which thematizes the conflict inscribed in South African history from the earliest phase of colonization, a conflict that escalates with the passage of time, dominated South African literature from the middle of the twentieth century up until the mid-1990s. Nkosi’s ironic register is trained on the crisis of the period just before the transition from minority rule to democracy. In its ironic play with appearance and reality and the imaginative energy which drives the narrative, it dramatizes the release of the literary signifier from the choking grip of history and social reality to suggest a space where meaning is neither given nor transparent, but constructed and perilously made. The threat to escalate the violence made by De Kock at the climax of the novel when he advises Ferguson

to get out of the way because the war in South Africa “has only just begun” also does not escape the pervasive force of irony. The same applies to his description of how the insurgents will be defeated, which echoes the utterances of Colin Powell during Operation Desert Storm: “‘First, we will cut them off!’ He joked, punching the fist of one hand into the palm of the other. ‘Then we will move in and kill them! Who said that, Mr Ferguson? You get no marks for guessing correctly.’” Confused, Ferguson replies: “I don’t know. A politician during the Roman Empire” (256).

By ironizing the positions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ alike, Nkosi’s novel imaginatively engages with what, at the outset of his essay on fiction by black South Africans, he terms the “realities of South Africa.” That reality turns out to be illusory and far less obvious than what any naive reference to the ‘real’ might imagine. This complex treatment is so pervasive that the reader, like some of the characters, is required constantly to check whether certain passages are meant literally or ironically. In this, *Underground People* stands apart from the work Nkosi found so much fault with some four decades ago. It is also distinct from much other fiction published in South Africa since.

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13 Beyond the Literature of Protest Lewis Nkosi's *Underground People*¹

RAFFAELLA VANCINI

IF THE AIM OF LEWIS NKOSI in drafting *Mating Birds* was originally to write a 'short story' rather than a more extensive novel, there was at the same time the intention on the part of the author to engage in, and give life to, a full-length novel, which became *Underground People*. However, the first project became a novel in every respect, while the second text was momentarily set aside, in favour of the completion of *Mating Birds*. Outlined in rough in 1978 when Nkosi was at the University of Sussex studying for a degree in English literature, *Underground People* had as its objective the exploration of a theme which immediately revealed itself to be more complicated and delicate for the author than he could face during his years of academic study. The complexity of the novel's content emerges clearly from the definition that Nkosi himself gave some years later when the novel had still not yet been published: "The theme itself is the life that was lived by the oppressed, the people who were all around you but were invisible as far as the apartheid State was concerned, except when it wanted to use the whip."² He then had said to himself: "This novel is going to be too much work. Do a short story instead."³ The result of this choice was the publication of *Mating Birds* in 1986.

¹ This essay is drawn from a dissertation written in Italian. Translation from Italian to English was done by Lori Barausse, Department of French, German and Italian, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

² Kevin Goddard, "Lewis Nkosi interviewed by Kevin Goddard, Johannesburg 3 December 1991," in *Out of Exile, South African Writers Speak*, ed. Kevin Goddard & Chris Wessels (NELM Interview Series, Grahamstown: NELM, 1991): 34.

³ Janice Harris, "On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa: An Interview with Lewis Nkosi," *Weber Studies* 11.2 (Spring-Summer 1994): 23.

As stated by the author, it was only after this date and thanks to the success of the positive reviews he obtained from his first novel that Nkosi returned to occupy himself with *Underground People*. As he had predicted, the completion of this second book was not easy; this can be seen by the long, ten-year ‘gestation’ to which it was subjected – twenty years in total, if its first origins are taken into consideration.

When Nkosi returned to South Africa in 1991 for the first time after thirty years in exile, *Underground People* had just been completed, but it was still in manuscript form and required re-adapting and editing. It would take three more years before the novel was finally published by Ambo of Amsterdam, in a Dutch translation by Robert Dorsman.

More than eight years went by before he found an editor (Kwela Books, 2002) who was willing to publish his novel in English. With regard to the delay of publication of the English version, it would appear that this was due to numerous problems regarding publication rights. It is true that all of Nkosi’s earlier texts are out of print and even his last novel had to overcome serious difficulties before being published. It is tempting to speculate that after the liberation of South Africa, editors were not so interested in publishing the works of black South African authors. The editor-in-chief of SERIF in London, who could have published *Underground People* in 1994, does not concur with this assumption. He maintains that the novel was a “complete mess” and that Nkosi refused to allow his novel to be cut and for the necessary alterations to be undertaken to make it “legible.” Quite to the contrary, Nkosi was in agreement to re-write the novel; as we can see in the following:

It is a huge, untidy novel that obviously needs serious cutting, and the people that we have concluded an agreement with, who want to publish the novel, are going to identify those passages in the novel which they think can be excised without distorting the work as a whole. I myself have certain sections that I think can easily go, to make it tighter and perhaps more effective.⁴

Obstacles with regard to the drafting of *Underground People* had existed. This can be seen between the lines of a statement given by Nkosi to Janice Harris in 1992 in which we can read the following: “in the earlier versions” of the novel, “you can see the resemblance to *Wild Palms* by Faulkner, two plots move in parallel lines but keep touching at certain nodal points.”⁵ Different adaptations had preceded the final layout of the text and this is indicative of

⁴ Goddard, “Lewis Nkosi interviewed by Kevin Goddard,” 34.

⁵ Harris, “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa: An Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” 23.

the difficulties encountered in the search for an adequate form. A further complication was tied to the choice of proceeding with two different plots in the text at the same time, for, as confirmed by the author, “you move from one story to the other at different moments in the book, and that was an exhausting and wearying experience. I would like to leave it like that, but still eliminate a lot of the furniture that goes into novels when you are writing them.”⁶

It is not clear which exactly were the cuts made in the novel preceding the first publication in 1994, as the text was in Dutch, but it is evident that at least its structure was left unaltered in the subsequent English version. In fact, the narrative unfolds around the vicissitudes of two individuals who follow parallel journeys until they meet at the end of the novel. The first individual is a black South African, Cornelius Molapo, born and raised in Tabanyane, a graduate of Wits University and teacher at Orlando High School in Dube. The second is Anthony Ferguson, a white South African who left the country for the UK and works for a human-rights association whose main office is in London. From the moment that Ferguson is despatched to South Africa on behalf of Human Rights International to investigate the disappearance of a man called Molapo, the two men will become irrevocably connected.

The plot might seem ordinary and predictable: an individual belonging to a movement in opposition to the government is taken from his residence by the South African police, and a member of a human-rights organization runs to his rescue. This was a recurring situation in South Africa during the time of clandestine opposition movements (movements that were obliged to go ‘underground’, hence the title of the novel). In reality, Nkosi succeeds in escaping from the stereotype of protest literature, to detach himself from what he himself had, during his years of literary criticism, defined as the compelling temptation to use “the ready-made plots of violence, chicanery, and racial love tragedies as representing universal truth, when, in fact, actual insight into human tragedy may lie beneath this social and political turbulence.”⁷ He does this by privileging the interior motives of his characters more than by lingering on explicit accusations of the terrible state of the law in force.

Thus Nkosi subverts the stereotype of the reactive, threatening and dangerous character to understand his position within a regime that had exploited him: the picture that emerges is that of Cornelius Molapo, a person who is more interested in poetry and ideals than in politics, who reads Hegel before going to sleep, who like many others is separated from his wife, Maureen, who dances the jitterbug and even plays cricket. That such an ordinary indi-

⁶ Goddard, “Lewis Nkosi interviewed by Kevin Goddard,” 34.

⁷ Lewis Nkosi, “African Fiction Part 1,” *Africa Report* 7.9 (October 1962): 3.

vidual like him manages to mobilize the international community is a curious phenomenon, which distinguishes him from the many people who disappeared. From the very first pages of the novel he is described as “an incompetent teacher of languages and a dabbler in poetry and politics,” “an intellectual who lived for the most part in the richly tapestried world of ideas, fond of books, music and painting.”⁸ Nkosi builds up an image of Molapo purposely inclined towards idealism, a man that thinks of himself as a great poet, who declaims his romantic version of the growing political crisis and the necessity to arm for the fight, describing it “poetically as the gathering clouds of revolution” (9). In this way, he comes across from the very first instance as a non-subversive, harmless character easily manipulated by the National Liberation Movement (NLM), the banned organization to which he belongs.

The NLM constructs evidence to show the apparent responsibility of the police force in the disappearance of Molapo: “The Liberation Movement protects the secrets of his (Molapo’s) whereabouts by letting everyone think he’s in detention. Since the South African government was always doing things like that, it was a nice way of putting the government on the spot.”⁹ At the same time, the NLM convinces Human Rights International to intervene and find the ‘prisoner’, thereby diverting the attention of the government to Molapo and allowing them to carry out their plans undisturbed.

With much sophistication, the author manages to bring to the surface the ‘sins’ of the NLM, a fanciful version of the ANC, that, like the former, is shown to include two types of ‘underground people’: those that were branded socialists, and those with a nationalist imprint. There existed in the inner circle of the ANC a more extremist wing, the ‘armed wing’ [Mkhonto we Sizwe] that had started various acts of sabotage, described in narrative form in this novel. There was also a communist component in the ANC, like the socialist one at the heart of the NLM. Nkosi describes its origins in 1992:

The Party (the Communist Party) had first operated as a separate entity, but after wholesale banning of political organisations in the 60s many leftwing organisations, including the Party, decided to merge with the ANC in order to offer a united opposition to apartheid.¹⁰

Nkosi shows in this novel hypocrisy and duplicity emerging from the movement, led by its spokesman Joe Bulane, the ‘Central Committee man’. He is a slippery and false character, with a hard and arrogant attitude, so much so that

⁸ Lewis Nkosi, *Underground People* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2002): 9. Further page references are in the main text.

⁹ Harris, “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa,” 37.

¹⁰ “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa,” 37.

his bullet-shaped head seems entirely appropriate. Educated and tempered by the socialist ideas of the Russian Revolution, Bulane fully represents the split that exists within the NLM. He convinces Molapo that the latter was chosen by the clandestine organization for an important mission thanks to his intelligence and integrity (even if he is not persuaded of this); however, unbeknown to him, he is pushed to undertake this mission to make the movement known overseas and to ensure that Bulane's name and reputation prevail in the nationalist wing. All of Bulane's talks are geared towards convincing others of Molapo's incarceration by the police, about his capabilities and his qualities, when in reality he despises him for his weakness, though he envies him for his oratory. Frequently, the character's true opinions are in italics, as if the author wanted to highlight the hypocrisy. Bulane says of Molapo, for example:

A man of exceptional intelligence and political courage. What's more, a great poet of the masses.... *just a windbag! A tin! A talkative empty vessel making a lot of useless noise!...A bad poet, in love with words but incapable of linking his poetry to historical process.* To Ferguson he said: 'I can't tell you, Mr Ferguson, how much Molapo is missed by the entire leadership'. And he thought: *I blame the leadership for allowing it to happen; ... A bad choice in any case: people like Molapo, always in love with adventure for its own sake, were a danger to the entire Movement, like loose wheels spinning off the main vehicle.* (131)

Molapo is selected by the NLM to go to Tabanyane, his place of origin, to attempt some sort of intervention with the people rebelling against the local chief, Sekala Seeiso. The Movement wants to give the impression that it is aiming to obtain mutual collaboration from princess Madi, daughter of the elderly tribal chief, deposed by his usurper brother, who had become an ally of the South African government, which at the time was looking for land to confiscate from black people. What will become clear to Molapo and the reader is that, for the NLM, "the Tabanyane mission is a propaganda exercise, from the start doomed to failure" (55). These, then, were the real plans of the Movement:

Sekala Seeiso's victory, if he succeeded in crushing the Tabanyane resistance with the backing of his Pretoria masters, would be temporary, but the long-term objectives of the National Liberation Movements, which was to fan discontent all over the country, would be realised. The Movement itself could never be defeated, but would only grow more popular with every brutal attempt at suppression. (64)

That an organization which should be fighting for liberty thinks only of internationalizing its own ends is absurd; even more absurd when it is discovered, towards the end of the novel, that the socialist branch has acted in competition with the nationalist wing. Joe Bulane declares on one occasion, during a meeting of the NLM:

No revolution has ever been accomplished without initial failures. We have to move slowly and carefully, but we must be seen to be moving all the same. We cannot allow a bunch of adventurist bourgeois nationalists to seize control of the Liberation Movement because of our cautious inactivity. (199)

It is understandable that Nkosi should depict the socialist side of the organization as opportunistic, if one thinks of the hostility that he has always felt towards aspects of socialist and communist ideology in general. During the course of his career as a critic, he has spoken out harshly about the so-called ‘solidarity criticism’ (imposed by the communist faction) and of the kind of ideological blackmail to which authors were subjected – authors who had to clarify the way in which they were aligned against apartheid and exalt the heroes of the resistance against the government, in order not to be labelled as ‘believers in art for art’s sake’. Nkosi does not contest that the communists and their propagandist newspapers contributed to heightening the national consciousness, but maintains that “they suffered from the well-known malady that seems to afflict the Party in most of the countries: they tended to see the African struggle in South Africa as subordinate to Soviet power politics.”¹¹ This influence of Soviet politics in the South African liberation struggle is distinctly present in the novel. Joe Bulane, head of the central commission of the NLM, was moulded by Soviet ideology, and is certain that what he learned has to be applied to the South African context. That is why he places fundamental importance on making the interests of the community prevail over those of the individual. JB, as he is popularly known, explains to Molapo: “‘Corny boy, we must never permit ourselves to forget that in comparison with the exploitation and suffering of our people, personal problems are of no consequence at all!’” (50).

At a certain point in the text, Molapo asks JB: “But without love...what good is the political struggle?” to which Bulane replies: “Without freedom...what good is love?” (57–58). This is a passage on which Nkosi seems to have set great store. In an interview in 2002 he declared, with sarcasm: “My contribution to the struggle literature was to have a representation of

¹¹ Lewis Nkosi, “Propaganda in the South African Struggle,” in *Southern Africa in Transition*, ed. John A. Davis & James K. Baker (London: Pall Mall, 1966): 231.

guys physically fighting inside the offices over a woman.”¹² It is not absurd that he should say this, for it reveals what the novel does not want to be – a ‘protest’ text that excludes a love theme so that it does not fall in the category of ‘non-committed’ books. On this subject Nkosi has stated:

I was really attempting to deal with the private and the public within the same novel. I was conscious of the fact that, as black South African writers, we have always been so much more committed to the public sphere in stories we write that we neglect to see how certain pressures of the personal, of the private life, can affect ways in which we perceive the political.¹³

The private lives of the characters have great importance in this novel, which explains the regret that the author had expressed in the past over the writer who “falls into the trap of giving us only glimpses of the vast machinery of political suppression, rather than of the workings of human character.”¹⁴ In *Underground People*, Nkosi goes beyond protest literature, because he places more importance on the characterization of the main protagonists within the struggle than on the usual cold reports of the terrible deeds that happened during the ‘struggle era’. The development of the characters in *Underground People* is detailed and penetrates deeply into the sentiments of the characters. Certainly each one depicts a social type, but Nkosi does not limit himself to this; he links their public to their private life, so that they do not only look like a means of transmitting the usual anti-apartheid political message. Molapo is simultaneously one of the ‘underground people’, and he is a man in love with a wife who left home because she was unhappy; a sensitive man who lives in the memory of his first encounter with Maureen at a local wedding. The fact that he is not depicted as a hero but only as an eccentric person gives originality to this novel. Andries Oliphant writes:

In placing an eloquent figure with an inclination for fantasy at the centre of the narrative, in which he is a pawn, the novel boldly enacts the licence of fiction and breaks with the dull dirges on the historical crisis in South Africa.¹⁵

¹² Maureen Isaacson, “Once exiled, return can only be symbolic: Maureen Isaacson speaks to Lewis Nkosi about his new novel *Underground People*, emigration and return,” *Sunday Independent* (10 November 2002): 18.

¹³ Harris, “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa: An Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” 33.

¹⁴ Nkosi. “African Fiction Part 1,” 3.

¹⁵ Andries Oliphant, “Underground Irony,” *Sunday Times* (24 November 2002), Lifestyle: 12.

In actual fact, the novel is anything but a lament on the situation that prevails in South Africa – so little so, that even characters who are usually considered bad or evil are also described with their more human and fragile traits. This is a change introduced by Nkosi: years ago, in *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, he had praised Mphahlele for writing “something positive about black experience in South Africa instead of writing as so many of his compatriots do as though everything the blacks did in the country was a reaction to white oppression.”¹⁶ Actually, in *Underground People*, black people react not only to whites but also to the NLM, which, instead of helping them, betrays comrades of the same race. Thekwane, the ‘comrade leader’ of the freedom fighters in the mountains, and Molapo decide to side against the politics of the Movement at the same moment as they continue the fight at Tabanyane without the Movement’s permission.

Nkosi, during the launch of his book in Cape Town, had this to say:

My sense of what was wrong in South Africa at the time remained. But leaving helped me come to terms with the fact that we did not own injustice. I began to see the larger world not limited by race.¹⁷

This wider vision explains why the white characters in the novel, including those that are apparently evil, seemingly have their own hidden sensitivity. For example, Adam de Kock, the Chief of Police in Tabanyane, is not only the person who is in charge of following the traces of the guerrilla fighters, but also a man who has failed in all his personal aspirations. He is the Boer fallen into misery after the arrival of the British in the country, relegated to a hot and desolate farm with an ugly and impossible wife, and a man who had recently been left by his young lover. Similarly, JB reveals part of his deeper inner self: he has given up his wife and child in Russia to follow the ideals of the Revolution, and at times he fights in order not to show the pain that is provoked by their absence.

It is these hidden, intimate views of these characters that make them people and help the reader understand their actions and the decisions that they take. In this regard, the comments of some critics can seem rather illogical – such as: “although Anthony may be an interesting character, and important to the conclusion, too much space is devoted to his life and foibles.”¹⁸ It is really

¹⁶ Lewis Nkosi, “Fiction by Black South Africans” (1966), in Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, 134.

¹⁷ Oliphant, “Underground Irony,” 12.

¹⁸ Sheridan Griswold, “*Underground People*,” *Arts/Culture Review* (10 January 2003), online: Fonte Internet, <http://www.mmegi,bw/2003/January/Friday10/87676387132.html>.

the lack of these elements that, as stated by Nkosi in an essay on Alex La Guma, limits a literary work and stops the author “from exploring in depth the relationship between his characters and developing the many levels of perceptions to which the situations seem to lead.”¹⁹

The space dedicated to the memories of Ferguson and his poor past, seen in this perspective, explains the sense of maladjustment that he feels after fifteen years of being away from his country. Maybe it is because of having lived his youth in the “poor white suburb” of Braamfontein, under the eye of a shiftless father and the “obsessed brooding devotion of a doting mother” (14), that Anthony is attached to his malicious and fascinating sister, Hazel, in a morbid and unstable relationship. The man is profoundly in turmoil over the presence and the beauty of his sister: “Anthony kept glancing at his sister with the same foreboding he had once experienced those many many years ago, when all night long in the nearby fair the enclosed lions roared in their cages” (96). These forbidden thoughts come back in a dream in which “he was vaguely aware of someone moving about in the dark, someone taking off her clothes by the starlight, someone bent over him, touching his face; no doubt a childhood dream” (118).

In addition, the conditions that the apartheid regime forced Ferguson to live with resulted in an emotional upheaval that provoked him to leave South Africa. Here the descriptions of his emotions are fundamental. They help the reader to comprehend the problems of the South African emigrant, a theme that is very dear to Nkosi, who was also destined to a life beyond the borders of his land of origin. Coming back after many years, the writer admitted with sadness that his return could only be symbolic.²⁰ For, inasmuch as he lived the events of his land by keeping himself constantly informed from overseas and writing about South Africa all his life, something irremediable had been lost: the direct contact with his people and their customs. He was already aware of this during the time of *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, when he stated:

A writer needs his roots; he needs his people perhaps more than they need him in order that they should corroborate the vision he has of them, or at least, to dispute the statements he may make about their lives [...] a Black South African living in exile continues to regard himself as an ‘outsider’ in the society in which he finds himself. He remains committed to a country thousand of miles from where he lives, with the memory of

¹⁹ Lewis Nkosi, “Alex La Guma: The Man and his Work” (1968), in Nkosi, *The Transplanted Heart* (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope, 1975): 114.

²⁰ Isaacson, “Once exiled, return can only be symbolic,” 18.

certain sensations [...] growing dimmer and dimmer. For a fiction writer, obliged to rely on the memory of these sensations – the colours of the landscape, the smells of plants and flowers, and the peculiar accents of a people among whom he or she has grown up – the problem acquires truly tragic dimensions.²¹

It was Nkosi's firm conviction that "whatever is important [...] is that we [writers in exile] must continue to be the unsilenced voice of the repressed millions of South Africa" – but that it was, however, possible to do so only and always "from the 'perspective' of an outsider" (96).

Returning to their places of origin, Ferguson and Molapo find themselves looking at things from a new perspective; symptomatic of this are the notable communication problems that they immediately encounter. The former, face to face with Joe Bulane for the first time, feels out of place:

he no longer had any idea how to react to these constant shifts of mood, tone and content. He was beginning to feel dangerously exposed in his ignorance, like a tourist out of his depth, liable to react with light-hearted frivolity to expressions of unfathomable inner anguish, tempted to respond with a chuckle to serious statements... (132)

It is as if Nkosi wants to show that it is the permanent living in a country, more than being born in that place, that determines the felt citizenship of a person.

The transformation of Molapo in the novel begins once he comes into contact with his countrymen, with the needs and the difficulties of every individual of Tabanyane, fighting not for a political ideal but to defend his own land and with it his own origins and his identity. Molapo's contact with the leader of this people, Princess Madi Seeiso, proves important in this regard. She is described by the author as

A diehard conservative in everything but her people's right to land and self-determination, for the princess 'restoration' of these rights, and not revolution, was the limit of Tabanyane ambition. She was not impressed with the National Liberation Movement's agenda of creating a new social order in which no one would own anything and everything would be held in common. (155)

²¹ Lewis Nkosi, "Art Contra Apartheid: South African Writers in Exile" (1980), in Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London & New York: Longman, 1983): 94–96.

The princess not only maintains that it is not right that her people are used as a “tool of the NLM in its struggle to achieve world revolution” (155), but, above all, that it cannot be possible to erase the importance of one single person.

The great fault of such socialists as Bulane is that they do not take into account the suffering of each person; “our struggle,” he states, “is not against occasional disappearances of individuals like Comrade Molapo.... No, what we wish to see eliminated in our county is the great social iniquity of a system resting on unrequited toil and unpitied suffering” (132). JB leaves Molapo on his own after, having joined the guerrillas in the mountains, he obtains unexpected success in directing a delicate operation in the withdrawal of arms along the border. He had even hoped for the failure of the operation, as this would have caused a major sensation and greater publicity for the NLM, besides being a let-down for the nationalist wing. In this way, Molapo is initially a pawn for the NLM, which intends to use him and then abandon him when he is no longer required.

Molapo will learn that politics, whether concerning the NLM or the government, are in some way always corrupt, far removed from the ideals implicit in the fight for liberation. When he realizes that the NLM does not care about the particular story of the population of Tabanyane and that it “was about to suspend the armed struggle in favour of extended negotiations with the government on the future shape of the country” (225), Molapo chooses to ignore the instructions of the Movement to suspend the rebellion. He goes ahead with two simultaneous attacks on the police station and the factory of Jordaan, the farmer who exploits black workers and who is the leader of the reserve police unit of Tabanyane.

It is when Molapo detaches himself from any external dependency that the true liberation struggle begins. Nkosi makes him behave consistently with the ideals that he, Nkosi, had expressed during his career as a critic; one of these was that South Africans had to count first and foremost on themselves. Many years before he embarked on *Underground People*, in 1971, Nkosi wrote:

What is needed – and urgently needed among African politicians in Southern Africa – is a new mood of self-reliance. This does not mean that liberation movements in Southern Africa can do without outside assistance. But it does mean that in psychological terms a radical change will have to come about that will not make outside help a cornerstone of the resistance movement. [...] Consequently, there will be no revolution in South Africa until the black people of the republic are sick to death of

what they are going through. A successful South African revolution cannot be launched from abroad.²²

Thus, one of the substantial errors of Joe Bulane's allies was that they counted too much on the help of humanitarian associations like the Human Rights International in their negotiations with the government, while a war of liberation was taking place.

Initially, when he becomes part of the group of guerrillas formed by the uncompromising Thekwane, the NLM trainer positioned in the 'Malaita location' near Tabanyane, Molapo is only an obstacle in the way of the local strong men. They blame him for weakness in tackling the steep mountainous paths and for his intellectual air, for which they dub him "tishera": ie teacher, instead of captain. But Molapo wins the respect and trust of his comrades in arms, even the most hostile, Phiri, who had considered him a weak man, seeing in the colour of his light skin a sign of despicable closeness to the Western world. Molapo is able to draw on his resources of determination and takes the situation in hand when no-one else would have known how to act. Returning from an important mission, he finds a white South African couple copulating in a mountain refuge of the guerrilla fighters: he decides to keep Kristina Kemp, the receptionist of the Meerdal Hotel, and her lover, Gert Potgieter,²³ one the most ruthless farmers of Tabanyane, hostage, whereas the other guerrillas, following their instinct and conditioning, would have killed them after raping the woman.

But it is not the overturning of the power of the white man, a theme not new in South African literature, that Nkosi is interested in. His aim is not protest, as has been stated more than once. In this instance, he wants to underline the fact that in the novel, as in life, unexpected situations can present themselves that can take a story in unforeseen directions. In *Underground People* Nkosi, through the many situations that he describes, invalidates the Marxist theory which states that the events are predetermined: ie that situations must take a certain turn. In an essay written in 1991, Nkosi affirms:

²² Lewis Nkosi, "On South Africa: The Fire Some Time," *Transition* 38 (1971): 30.

²³ Potgieter is based on a real-life individual. He was one of the most notorious and ruthless exploiters of black workers. Nkosi spoke about this both in a report on the conditions of South Africa commissioned by Amnesty International and in a short story titled "Potgieter's Castle." See also "Farm Jails," in *I Will Still be Moved: Reports from South Africa*, ed. M.V. Friedmann (London: Arthur Barker, 1963): 61-71; "Potgieter's Castle" (1964), in *Come Back, Africa!*, ed. Herbert L. Shore & Megchelina Shore-Bos (New York: International Publishers, 1968): 129-41.

What I wanted to do with *Underground People* was to try and explore several themes; one was contingency in history – how an odd happening that has nothing to do with say what a Marxist would consider to be the forces of history shaping events, but what one might call an accident in history could determine the course events take.²⁴

The finding of Potgieter and Kristina by the mountain fighters in their secret refuge is the most evident example of such contingencies in the story. For the guerrillas, having hostages with them was a complication, to the point that they become hostages themselves when they express the intention of not killing them. Referring to this episode in the novel, Nkosi writes:

They question themselves; What are we going to do with these two white people? We can't travel around with two white people! So that was what I wanted to explore – contingency in the unfolding of history, and using a specific image or a specific incident because it is easy to philosophise these things but it is less easy to discover one small incident that illustrates it.²⁵

Therefore, in the same way that Nkosi refrains from theorizing about the ideas he wants to transmit but embodies them in his characters instead, he cites practical examples to define his historical concepts. The story must not only be told as it is preached by Bulane. Molapo succeeds in his mission despite his failure being predicted with certainty, and he continues to fight in the face of all such predictions. The NLM plan for dealing with the two hostages is introduced, and Anthony Ferguson is sent without warning to the forest of Taba Situ to persuade the guerrillas to surrender. This dilemma posed by Nkosi – the possibility for man to, more or less, modify the outcome of events – can be seen in an earlier passage of the novel:

In the wilderness, faced with the intractable laws of nature, attempting to manipulate the course of events with regard to Time and Destiny – you'll no doubt recall Marx's very perceptive remark to the effect that we do not make history just any way we want – some kind of belief then becomes necessary. Marxism, a belief in History, a faith in a God so long as He is on your side! Admittedly, it takes a certain innocence...!²⁶

²⁴ Brian Worsfold. "In Conversation with Lewis Nkosi," in *Festschrift from Lleida for Professor Doireann MacDermott*, ed. Worsfold (Lleida: Publicacions Estudi General de Lleida, 1990): 69.

²⁵ Worsfold, "In Conversation with Lewis Nkosi," 69.

²⁶ Nkosi, *Underground People*, 72.

These words of an emissary of the NLM speaking to Molapo tell us that man, in moments of difficulty, will believe that he cannot change events, for he will see in the forces of nature and history elements that are too powerful. In this context, Nkosi underlines a great ambiguity of Marxist thought: we cling to history and God only when we are too weak to think that we possess the capacity to resolve complicated situations, and it is easier to believe in the relentlessness of destiny.

According to Nkosi, even in reality history could have taken another turn, had leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu not risen to the challenge.²⁷ If the emergence of two such courageous and capable men was fundamental for South African history, the release of Mandela on 11 February 1990 after twenty-seven years of imprisonment can be considered another important historical circumstance that influenced the course of events for South Africa. And it also influenced the writing of the ending of *Underground People*, which was modified after the liberation of the South African leader: “the unfolding event in South Africa,” Nkosi asserted, “had a direct effect on how my novel was progressing toward its conclusion.”

My original ending was dependent on the fact that Mandela was still going to be in jail when the book came out. In the novel [...] at one moment I envisaged that the guerrilla leader would attempt to effect an exchange of the hostages for the release of a famous African leader. Well, I had to change that ending after Mandela’s release; it didn’t make sense anymore.²⁸

In actual fact, in the first part of the novel, Jocelyn Bard, a financial consultant and family friend of the Fergusons, alludes to the hypothesis of an exchange: “I can also say that such an agreement [between the NLM and the government] would result in the release of Dabula Amanzi in exchange for the suspension of the armed struggle by the NLM” (116). But the possibility of an exchange is not even entertained by Joe Bulane, who is too limited by his narrow-minded communist mentality to see the potential of possessing an important tool such as two hostages to use as a means of negotiation.

The ending of the novel, then, had to be altered in the English version. Nkosi seems particularly proud of the conclusion of his work, of its suggestiveness rather than explicit approach to depicting the horrifying details of the denouement. “And in the novel you don’t actually read about bodies lying around, no description of any massacre except the voice of the Chief of Police

²⁷ Isaacson, “Once exiled, return can only be symbolic,” 18.

²⁸ Nkosi, in Harris, “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa: An Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” 32.

shouting at the man from Amnesty International.”²⁹ The dramatic effect of the situation is reduced by the pathetic attempts of Bulane to distance himself from the facts when, driving through the mountains of Taba Situ with Ferguson to convince his men to surrender, he realizes that admitting to be one of them could also mean losing his life. Clumsily disguised as a westernized ‘native’, realizing that he will not be able to convince Molapo to surrender, his only thoughts, tellingly, are for his own survival.

Nkosi’s style is suggestive throughout the novel, requiring the reader to make the links. This is the case, for example, with Comrade X, the emissary of the NLM who is the first to inform Molapo of the NLM’s intention to give him up as missing, so as to divert the attention of the government. Only a few phrases – and at first it is not easy to notice the connection – make one understand that the man is the same one that De Kock speaks about a few pages later – a spy who informs the government of the underground movements that are threatening them. There are two elements that identify him as the same person: his peculiar way of talking via quotations, hashing and re-hashing his words; and his way of coughing and spitting on the floor, and stamping his foot. Even the word “jitterbug,” for example, carries weight in the novel. If De Kock had given enough importance to the fact that this dance had arrived at the ‘Malaita location’ that the reader already knows is the stronghold of Thekwane, he would have understood that it could only have been brought there by Molapo and his men. In the same way, he would have known for sure that those responsible for the explosion at the central police station and at Jordaan’s farm were the same, if only he had noticed that those responsible for the deed had harmonized a ‘jitterbug’ theme.

Perhaps these carefully planned details make one finally conclude that, notwithstanding all of Nkosi’s efforts to humanize his characters, there remains a certain coldness in this work. Everything is perfectly calculated, gauged, studied in its finest details. The author does not even show prejudice towards his more negative characters. This is consistent with Nkosi the critic, as his essential aim has always been to write a work that would depict events as objectively as possible. The author had justified the flat style of some of Mphahlele’s short stories like “In Corner B,” with his “honourable attempt to remain ‘cool under fire’” as it was extremely important to him that he maintain “an equilibrium in a dangerously melodramatic situation.”³⁰ One can argue that the distanced impression that Nkosi’s writing conveys is a result of his attempt not to allow himself to be influenced by grudges and revenge.

²⁹ Nkosi, in Harris, “On Tradition, Madness, and South Africa: An Interview with Lewis Nkosi,” 33.

³⁰ Nkosi, “Fiction by Black South Africans,” 136.

Underground People is a sophisticated novel describing a period in South African history from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Its reception has been mixed. Andries Oliphant has stated that “*Underground People* has been revisited from the post-apartheid perspective so that the ending, which suggests an escalation of war, becomes ironic.”³¹ In reality, the perspectives from which these events are seen differentiate this book from the protest novels of the past. Nkosi has taken a theme which is not new and inserted it into a context that is part political thriller, part detective story. This stylistic choice is in line with what the author wrote in 1980:

the literature which draws the deepest responses from the public is that literature which speaks not only of freedom, but is itself, in the choices it makes and the techniques it employs, the clearest exemplification of that freedom.³²

It is true that the ending of the novel, which makes one believe that the struggle must still continue for a long time, might seem ironic, or even subversive, post-1994; but it is also true that Nkosi introduces a symbolic image which pre-empts the end of hostilities in the last words of the novel – “and from the summit of an isolated yellowwood a dove started to coo quite mindlessly” (263). The dove, the symbol of peace, announces the end of this struggle and so brings to an end Nkosi’s attempts to make one not forget what was done to his land. He does this not through protest, but by using what he knows best: literature as a form of art, for which he has fought all his life.

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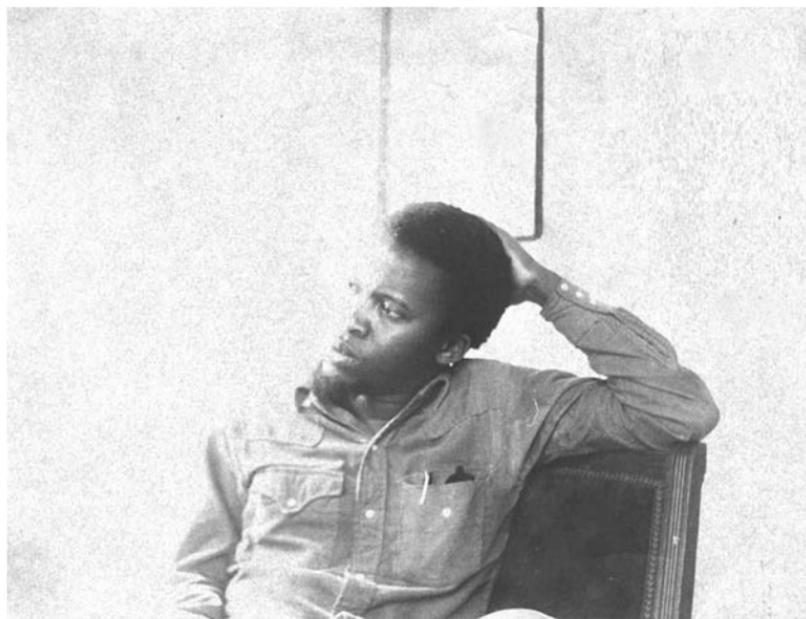
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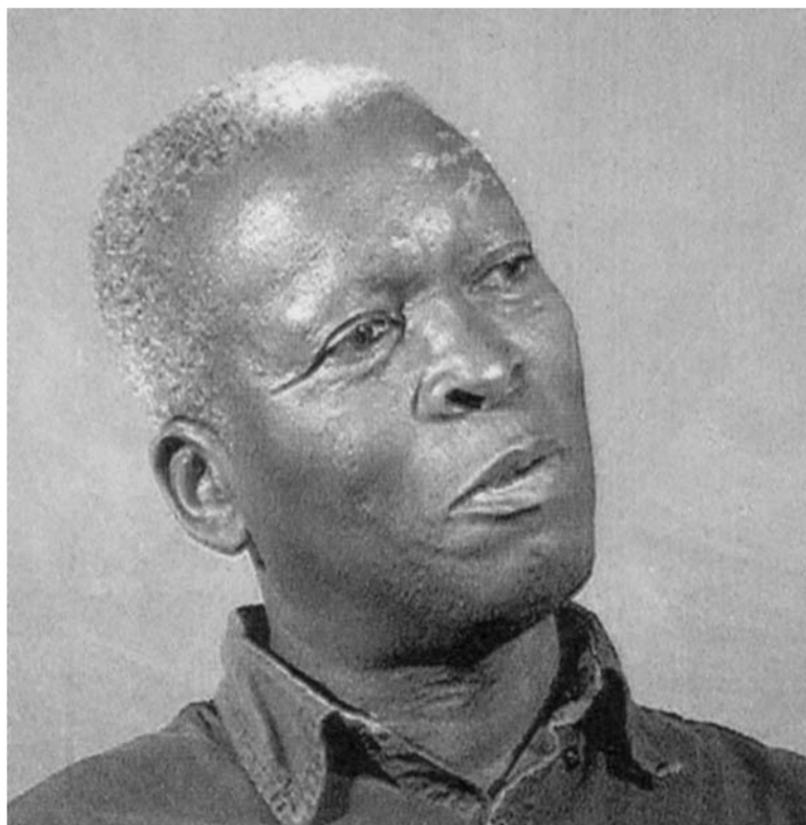
13 Young man, Marylebone Street, London (Lewis Nkosi)

PART TWO:
LEWIS NKOSI IN HIS OWN VOICE



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❧ INTERVIEWS



14 Interview with Lewis Nkosi (David Basckin and Zoë Molver)

14.1 Interview with Lewis Nkosi

25 October 2002, Durban, South Africa

Conducted by ZOË MOLVER
Filmed by DAVID BASCKIN

Introduction

LEWIS NKOSI proved to be an unwilling film star. Humble in his response to our approach, he reluctantly agreed to be interviewed on film. After a discussion in which we made clear our purpose and delineated the potential audience, we chose to complete the interview within the next few days. On the afternoon of the shoot we arrived at his comfortable B&B to find him dressed urbanely in fawn fedora, soft dark-brown cotton shirt buttoned at the neck, albany trousers and highly polished brogues. He was nervous and tentative, both unfamiliar modes in our experience of him.

At the studio we shot the entire interview in one take, allowing the camera to focus exclusively on the subject. The interviewer was limited to an off-camera voice. To eliminate the talking-head cliché inherent to this kind of work, we decided to transform the questions and the questioner. This we did by contracting Markus Dieterbeck, composer and a *cappella* conductor, to set the questions to music, each question to follow a different musical form or style. In the final edit, these were dropped onto the timeline, creating the splendid illusion that Lewis was chatting with a full choral lineup.

Transcription of interview

ZOË MOLVER (ZM): *Lewis, why do you write?*

LEWIS NKOSI (LN): I suppose one could put the same question to animals if one could speak to the animals. Why does a donkey start braying? Is it because it's hungry, is it because it wants to communicate with other donkeys, is it because it's in distress, is it because it's feeling comfortable, happy? I

don't know how an animal is happy; birds are always singing, but sometimes chirping so loudly it doesn't sound quite as if they're simply expressing joy, as most people suppose. Sometimes it seems as if it's a cry for help. I think all of these answers are valid when it comes to writers. If one wants to use those answers as metaphors for why one wants to write, then there's the obvious need to represent the world both for others and to oneself.

It's very odd how, after I've written a play or a story, the characters seem for me to take on their own lives, their own identities, and I'm often saying to my friends, "Oh! Gloria Graham would have reacted badly to something like that." I've obviously created a parallel world to the one that exists, and both worlds are valid, but the one that pleases the writer the most is the one that he has created, and then it becomes independent of himself or herself. So there's no easy way to answer the question. One is simply expressing oneself or trying to represent something, or trying to share an experience of being; all of these answers seem to me to be possible.

ZM: *In retrospect, was there any point in your life when you knew you wanted to be a writer?*

LN: I have several moments when I think, yes, that must have been the moment, and then I think, no, there was another moment. So there are several moments and the writer can't actually put his or her finger on it – or others possibly can, but I can't. I remember once at a Zulu wedding – I can't remember where the village was, it might have been my aunt's place near Estcourt – and they had a Zulu ceremony in which people were singing praises for the chiefs who were gone and so on. And there was a young man who went into the arena and he was so skilled with words and also doing a dance at the same time, because he was carrying sticks and a shield. He was applauded so much, and he himself was so thoroughly moved, that he broke down and wept, and I think I insinuated some of that in my work, *Mating Birds* – the poet with whom Ndi Sibiya's mother falls in love – and that to me was both distressing and impressive. I was so distressed that the art of reciting something could move someone to the point of tears, and obviously that left a mark and people always said, "Oh! I wouldn't like to go into an experience like that," but it's also tempting because you know that it must have been something wonderful for him to do a thing like that, that moves him to tears.

And then, later on of course, most writers are imitators of their elders. When I started reading and I saw that it was possible to create worlds through language, then I thought, this is something that I could possibly manage. And I remember specifically the moment when I bought Peter Abrahams' book *Tell Freedom*. Well, first I read excerpts of *Tell Freedom* in *Drum* magazine and I was still at high school, and there was a moment in which Peter Abra-

hams says, “Now I have broken the ice, I have become published in England and elsewhere, which means that any black boy or girl can now write, like myself.” And I thought, oh, he’s writing just for me, I mean: this is what he’s saying to me, and I thought that *ja*, I want to be a writer. When I went to work, straight out of boarding school, I was supposed to help with the household budget, and I remember that my first wage as a clerk on this building-site was about two pounds, and with the first cheque I went and spent it all at Adams Book Store in West Street by buying *Tell Freedom*. My uncle couldn’t believe that someone could be so foolish and I realized what I’d done but that was too late – I had the book. So, those are some of the moments – I’m sure there are others. When I look back, I will think: perhaps this one was more persuasive towards making me think, yes, this is a possibility for myself – to be a writer.

ZM: *Has the impulse to write changed over the years? Are there different things in play now, in your mature years?*

LN: I doubt it. I want to think that this is the case, because I think that people should grow and develop and become wiser and I’m often thinking that writers are extremely foolish. But, you know, when I look at other writers and look at my own writing I find that I’m always repeating myself. It’s extraordinary how often one fails to notice this fact, and yet it is the truest fact about writers. They repeat themselves endlessly. So, yes, I suppose you discover new subjects or nuances that are worth exploring, but they are always linked to the roots of your first impulses, whether sexual or otherwise. And those pristine images keep penetrating into the very core of what you think is the newest kind of writing you are doing.

ZM: *Have any specific writers, artists or theorists influenced your writing or thinking?*

LN: It’s both complex and very simple. Furthermore, to presage an answer to that, one recalls Ralph Ellison’s statement when he was accused of being influenced too much by certain white American authors (since he was a black American novelist), and saying, “Well, you know the good thing about being a writer is that you can always choose your ancestors,” whereas in real life you are landed with these families, these ancestral influences, and there’s nothing you can do about it.

I’ve already mentioned Peter Abrahams, who was a Coloured South African, so it would appear to most people the most natural writer to have influenced a young man. Yet when I look back to my school days I was a voracious reader and I was consuming writers like Alexandre Dumas. I remember that our school had most of his novels and I read everything about the Three

Musketeers until there was nothing else to read, and there was the son of the Three Musketeers or something like that! And the power of those tales about Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dickens and so on. All of these tales exerted their own force upon me, so that you thought, yes, if there were European writers creating stories like that, why not us, where are our writers who are able to do an equivalent performance? So that was a spur in itself; it was a bit competitive to do what other writers elsewhere had been able to do. Then, of course, later, much later on, when one had been at school and university and in certain forms of training, you discovered writers who became even more important in terms of craft. So I graduated to Henry James, Conrad and, of course, my real ancestor, William Faulkner. And it's obvious, why William Faulkner, because William Faulkner was writing about the South, and I came from another South, and so those two worlds seemed to coincide. And it is curious: why a writer like William Faulkner? because he was so entangled in the relationships between black slaves and the white citizens of the South of the United States. He was so suggestive in the ways of handling these situations and the language he developed to handle these situations that he became one of the greatest influences. Even in South America, you'll find that most of the South American modernist writers will mention their 'father' is William Faulkner; so is he mine.

ZM: *Lewis, do you have a favourite Faulkner novel?*

LN: I've just been reading the novel that people think is so complicated, and I read it almost every year: *The Sound and the Fury*, and of course *Light in August*, then *As I Lay Dying*. In fact, in my forthcoming novel [*Underground People*] – maybe I shouldn't tell the reader this – I make a joke about Faulkner, because I parody certain passages in him. So a white young woman coming back from a ballet school in Cape Town comes to Johannesburg, and there are neighbours watching the whole dramatic return of this prodigal child. There's a man over the fence, a horticulturalist with a bristle moustache, a man called William Faulkner, who never visited this young woman's father when he lay dying because he was too busy reading a bad American novel called *The Sound and the Fury*. So I was having a lot of fun with my father or grandfather!

ZM: *What is your writerly response to criticism?*

LN: You mean, what is my response to criticism if it is directed at me, or criticism generally?

The problem with being both a novelist and a critic is that you think you know so much more about your own work than the people who are criticizing you, so you don't really need to be told what's wrong with what you're doing.

For example, I think even when I'm cheating I know when I'm cheating, so I don't need to read reviewers telling me that. The moment, then, when I find a reviewer saying something stupid, then I'm thinking, well you're not even able to read properly. For example, I expect critics first of all to pay attention to language, because for me language is one of the most important things about writing, otherwise why do any writing? So when you find critics who are busy dredging up certain ideological issues, saying, "Ah, Lewis Nkosi didn't have any demonstrations in his novel against apartheid, the only time you have some sense of resistance to apartheid is when these voices are singing in prison," and I'm thinking, how extremely idiotic – I mean, writers have different ways of expressing resistance, they don't always have to have demonstrations, what the French so nicely call *manifestations*. What I'm trying to express, really, may sound arrogant, but I often don't learn very much from critics writing about my work. How I learn from criticism and how I apply it to my work is when I read about the kinds of writing I'm interested in, the people who are impressive to me, and then their weaknesses are sometimes pinpointed, and then I say, "Ah, Lewis, you too must try to avoid such pitfalls, because you must from time to time fall into them." So, I think any writer must spend an awful amount of time reading criticism, because it's a way of exchanging ideas, of talking about things that we do. It's like plumbers, if they want to exchange ideas about pipes and so on. But I don't think I spend a lot of time learning directly about my own work because someone has been writing about it.

ZM: *Thinking about your own students, do you think they are inundated with theory?*

LN: Well, we've all been through.... I think the word 'inundated' is perfectly appropriate. I recall teaching modern literary theory at the University of Zambia and we were all into new French theory, structuralism and poststructuralist theories, and there was a young Zambian who had just returned from France, and his lecture was on how the author was dead, following Roland Barthes' dictum and Foucault. The students were so depressed. And a student came into my office – and, really, this young man liked to chat with me – but the way he came into my office that day was like he was in mourning, and he said, "Prof, is it really true that the author is dead?" I felt like holding his hand and saying, there's more to it than that, you shouldn't be terribly upset about it!

I think theory has its points, but I think that a direct confrontation between the student, the reader as such and the text is the initial encounter that one must encourage, and only after that must one ask why certain effects are

being employed by different writers, and then you can go into the history of these effects and can talk about the death or non-death of the author.

ZM: *Whom have you influenced, in terms of theory and novelistic practice?*

LN: I think, obviously, I'm an ageing author and critic, and I started quite early writing especially about black literature in this country from abroad. Although most young people didn't have the opportunity to read me, I was always writing about the black literature in South Africa, so if I have had any influence it must have been through my critical writings. In fact, I think that I'm more known or acknowledged as a critic than as a writer of fiction, and I, for example, must say that the influences I have had may at first even seem negative; but I'm not worried about that. I think that I stirred up a lot of anxieties, even anger, amongst people who practised literature in this country, because I had a certain position – maybe it was overstated. For example, most people became impressed with Albie Sachs stating that writers must stop saying that words are bullets. In actual fact, I was the first person to say that and the first person to say it in an ANC journal, which was actually planned in my own apartment at the University of Zambia, and it was published – I think there was only one issue. I used exactly these words, how writers must stop talking, using words like, “well, our books are bullets,” because I said words are sometimes more, sometimes less, than bullets. So they cannot be used as substitutes for weapons, for arms. And I wryly suggested that the writers who say this often want to be seen as men of action, sort of modern André Malraux who should have been fighting civil wars in Spain or in our own country, or should have been in the front line of apartheid. And when you can't carry arms you want to sit at your desk and say that your words are bullets. So I said all of this, and at the first conference in Johannesburg, the *New Nation* Conference, after the huge outcry when Albie Sachs repeated these words, I said, “Albie, I am surprised at this outcry – I said this and there was complete silence after the publication of my article.” And he laughed and said, “But I learnt from you!” But there is a reason why it took Albie Sachs to stir up this kind of controversy and why nobody would pay any attention if Lewis Nkosi said it, because he is not an activist like Albie Sachs. Who cares what he said? Still, what I'm trying to suggest is that one may be even negative, but it is assimilated and passed on, even by people who later on seem as if they are the original articulators of those ideas.

My initial essay about black fiction in South Africa stirred up a lot of angst amongst black writers. It seems as if I was saying that we don't have much good writing and we might as well give up writing and do other things, but what I was trying to do was to shock our writers into recognition that writing is also a craft and it must be learnt, and there are other people who have

solved the problems that we thought that we were just encountering for the first time, but we were not, that people like Dostoevsky and Kafka and other modernist writers – James Joyce – had done all these things we hadn't even attempted.

And we kept just trying to tell stories as if this was all there was to writing. So my influence has been, if I may use a pejorative word, hideous; but it's been at work, I assure you.

ZM: *How do you write?*

LN: Someone said, "He writes by fits and starts. Some of the fits are interesting, some of the starts are boring." Some writers are very good at having a routine that is set up – "I wake up at 11 o'clock, drink coffee and start writing," or Hemingway saying that he would end at a certain moment in the text when he is still going, so he can resume the following day. I am so chaotic, if it's going well I can write for 14 hours, I can just go on. The problem for me is that I never learnt what a young writer should do, which is write straight through to the end of a novel or a short story or a play, instead of worrying about the perfection of each instance, of each fragment, of each segment of what you're writing. For me, I cannot move forward until I think for that one page it's really almost good enough to go into print. It doesn't mean that it will not be changed, but it does mean that I feel that the language is sufficiently effective for me to continue from that, so that I end up with a pile of papers thrown away. During those bad days of the typewriter when you had to start all over again and retype the page, I'd get to the middle of the page and realize something was wrong with the rhythm in that sentence, the connection was wrong, and pull it out, throw it away, start all over again. But by the end of the day you are exhausted and you have produced nothing, and this is not the way to go about it. I admire writers who are just rampant to go on, whether it's trash, the next page will probably be brilliant. Just go on, and then begins the process of revision. I think that's the best way to go about it; but then, writers have different temperaments. It's no good trying to do what other writers are doing.

ZM: *Do you have different projects on at the same time?*

LN: Yes I do have different projects going on at the same time. This is my best joke. For example, being a critic and a fiction writer and a playwright who writes for the theatre, it's wonderful, because if you have a block, you suddenly find that you can't go any further with the short story, at least for the moment, you switch, and this is really a cowardly way of getting out of trouble. So, for example, I had to do revision on my novel *Underground People*, when I returned to Switzerland from South Africa, and I was carrying

this little prose work by Johan van Wyk, *Man Bitch*, and I arrived in Basel and said, “I really have to get to work on what I have to finish.” I had a book on Nadine Gordimer commissioned and I’ve been missing deadlines for the past two years, I’ve got to get on with them. So what do I do? It’s taking so much of my energy and it’s so excruciating trying to find the right tone for each instance that I want to say something about those texts.

Ah, but there is Johan van Wyk and he’s written something new that I don’t know anything about, so I start reading *Man Bitch* and I see possibilities of saying something about the Durban waterfront and, sure enough, I start working on an essay for a Swiss newspaper on the world of Johan van Wyk, which was published. In the process of working on the world of Johan van Wyk, I finally started doing a whole lot of research on Durban in the eighteenth century, so I was creating new diversions for myself, so that I don’t have to sit down and just cope with the process of writing. Research is the most beautiful way of avoiding writing, because the ideas just jump at you and you have a wonderful time with ideas. But trying to create a world, an archaeology of those ideas, in such a way that you create meaning is the most painful, most exhausting process, and the easiest way is to discover a new project, so you do more research instead of writing. Yes, sometimes I really hate writing!

ZM: *What effect has living in Europe had on your writing?*

LN: This is very difficult to explain. First of all, I think if you leave your own country and you go to live abroad or live elsewhere, you discover certain things about your own country which you didn’t know before, or you suppressed the knowledge of, or you underplayed it. The first thing you realize when you live in London, for example, is that the blacks in this country didn’t discover suffering, it’s not very original, there are people who have gone through similar experiences and are still going through similar experiences – of not having shelter, of not having enough to eat and so on – so you readjust your perspective without diminishing your concerns about your own local situation. Secondly, you discover the fellowship of writers who have similar experiences but have come from somewhere else, and in a sense it removes what I call the paranoia that afflicts most of our writers in thinking that everyone is trying to get at me because I am black, or because I am an Afrikaner. Somehow it releases you into a wider world where you discover new communities, new alignments, and therefore you construct identities that are – how can I describe them? – that are shifting identities. There are moments when South African music is playing, when suddenly home is right there, in a pub or in your living room, but there are times when you are bored with the talk about the township, because you want to talk about Ireland and Ireland has

had similar experiences to your own. So, it's being international and local at the same time, it's being far away from home without being away from home. For example, I've never really written about anything but South Africa, and yet I've never experienced the illness that certain people talk about, the illness of what is called homesickness; and it is *really* a sickness. I sometimes miss the sea and the Indian Ocean, and how my people sing and so on, but I've never really had this experience of homesickness because I've always found other writers, other artists, other places which quickly become home to me.

I understand that some people feel very strongly about the soil and when they come home they kneel down and kiss the ground – I have nothing against it, it's just that I've never had this experience myself, I've never really felt, even when I came back for the first time after thirty years or so, I didn't feel like kneeling down and kissing the South African soil.

ZM: *How, if at all, does your early experience mediate your work?*

LN: This is a vastly complicated question, simply because I'm Freudian enough to know that you suppress some of those memories of what really shapes your conscious life. And it comes through in your writing again and again, and it comes as a surprise when you actually notice that this is linked to an early experience.

One of the earliest experiences which I want to put in my autobiography is this: Once when I was still a little boy and we were living at Hillcrest, we were sharing a single room, my mother, my grandmother and myself. And my mother, as I told people last year at the conference, was a beautiful young woman, she was still in her twenties, I think, when she died. And she had lots of beautiful dresses and we didn't have a wardrobe, so she hung those dresses on a piece of wood behind a curtain. One morning she was getting dressed for work and a snake got into the house and wrapped itself around the pole, and when my mother tried to pick up a dress, she saw this snake and she screamed. Usually the little boy is not allowed to see your mother half-naked – you are told, "Don't look!" But this time my mother had no time for this, she just jumped out of there, she was almost running out of the room. The men outside were called to kill the snake. And I've often thought, oh those long limbs have afflicted my fiction.

Again and again, there is this wonderful long-legged black girl, and I think how this has something to do with a snake in the garden or in the house or whatever. I saw this recently in my forthcoming novel, in Molapo's wife, this long-legged girl sitting on the steps of her house in the township after the separation from her husband. And suddenly I thought, Ah, this is Margie, this is my mother I am writing about – I didn't think so at the time. So there are a whole lot of experiences that mediate your writing, but they don't thrust

themselves to the foreground sufficiently for you to see that there is a connection between what happened in your childhood and what you are writing about. But that black woman appears again and again; she appears in *Mating Birds*, she appears in *Underground People*, and so on.

ZM: *What advice would you give a young writer?*

LN: Most of my students in the United States and Africa and elsewhere, whenever I've taught a writing class, they've asked, "Sir, how does one start writing?" And the answer is so simple, it's heartrending – you start writing by writing.



14.2 Nuruddin Farah and Lewis Nkosi

in conversation with ACHILLE MBEMBE at the *Time of The Writer Festival*, Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre in Durban, South Africa on 15 March 2003¹

ACHILLE MBEMBE (AM): I would like to welcome you to this final session of the 2003 *Time of the Writer Festival* – over the last few days we have had ample opportunity to think about the political dimensions of the times we live in. In this closing session, with the quality of the writers we have at hand, it seems appropriate to return to the time of *writing* itself, knowing very well that the time of the political, the time of the social and the time of writing are intricately connected – that they might even be connected in ways each generation will always be excavating, sometimes with totally unexpected tools, as we have just witnessed during the first session. Now, what do we mean by the time of writing? By the time of writing, it seems to me, we mean one of two things. One, the tales, the plots, the shapes and the forms writers invent, and, God knows, both Lewis and Nuruddin have invented tales, plots, forms and shapes – shapes and forms they invent to tell those stories of our time which are peculiar to our age. And in finding the forms that they do, the question therefore is: what new dimensions do they bring to language itself; what new dimensions do they bring to voice? Language and voice as two of the ultimate expressions of our being human in the world, and in this case our being Africans in the world. So let this set off issues that I hope both Nuruddin and Lewis will pick up on and run with.

¹ This interview was transcribed by Litzi Lombardozi. Permission to print the transcribed interview was granted by Lewis Nkosi and Nuruddin Farah; and the Director of the Centre for Creative Arts, University of KwaZulu–Natal, Mr Peter Rorvik. Minor changes have been made to the transcription in the interest of fluency of reading.

Secondly, the title chosen for the Festival this year is *Visions* – which suggests to us a role for the writer as ‘a visionary’. Some of us, including perhaps Lewis and Nuruddin here tonight, may wish to dispute that. Are writers visionaries? Should we consider them as the *sangomas*, the diviners of our time? But what that title nevertheless suggests is that the task of the writer is one of reflecting and one of reflection – reflecting or representing the real through a work of the imagination, and rethinking the same real in that very process. So, a play on the two words, reflecting and reflection. The question therefore is – how does that act of representing and reflecting – how does it work? For many of us this is an enigma. It is an enigma in the same way the real or the social itself is. It is an enigma in the same way the times we live in are – the times we are living in are an enigma. Now, and I would like to end it here, the specific theme for this very panel is “Africa – looking in, looking out,” and we have before us two writers whose entire existence up to now, whose life, I would say, has been one of journeying, one of motion, if not constant motion. These two men have been constantly on the move. They have lived in and out of Africa, both inside and outside of their countries, they have known Africa as their home, and have lived it through exile or displacement or maybe deliberate choice.

So the first question I would like to put to both Nuruddin and Lewis is – in what sense this life of journeying, this life in motion, has or not changed what they mean by the term ‘African’, what has it changed in terms of their understanding of their being African, African writers or being writers, meaning just a writer from anywhere else? In other words – and this is for Lewis in particular – we might also ask what is it to be a post-apartheid writer, and how does this intersect with being – in the case of Nuruddin, should we say – a post-national writer? I would like us to start from there and, as I said at the beginning, this will be a conversation and we will step in when necessary. We will try to make some time for the audience at the end to have a chance to ask some questions. So I wonder whether Nuruddin or Lewis – one of you – would like to start?

NURUDDIN FARAH (NF): Before I start, ladies and gentlemen I’m very sorry, the light is affecting my concentration and I was wondering if it could be dimmed slightly so I can ... thank you very much ... may the gods bless your house from which you come, thank you. Lewis, it’s your turn...

LEWIS NKOSI (NK): [*laughing*]: I’ve known Nuruddin Farah for a long time. He likes cutting corners, so I’m not surprised that he wants me to start off, so I can make a fool of myself first.

To pick up on the subject of exile – it seems to me to be one of those subjects that promise a lot and then when you’ve gone through listening to

people talk about it you say, “Oh my God, I’ve heard all of this. Is this all that we came here to listen to?” I have to say that it always strikes me that when you leave your country at the age at which I left mine (it was around the age of twenty-two), you really are like someone going to war – like Ulysses in Homer’s story. Ulysses travelling around – I don’t think he was thinking very much about what all this may mean in his life: that he may be reduced to a hog by a beautiful young woman and that he may suffer injuries here and there and drift on the oceans and so on. What you start off looking forward to is just that sense of freedom, which allows you to break away from a whole lot of things that have inhibited you in your life – and in this country I don’t need to spell out what *that* was – but it’s strange also how even your relations, your relatives, your family can in some respects act as a spur to exile. You think that I’d like to move away from here and go somewhere where I can be free to be, as most young people think, to be myself even though you don’t know what that self is going to be or what it should be. I was exiled a long time before I left this country. First of all I was exiled because I left for Johannesburg and I thought old Durban is such a boring place, I really ought to move away from here and I was so glad to get the chance to go to Johannesburg – life seemed to be elsewhere! – and now I am so glad to be back in Durban because I’m discovering a lot of things that I had missed out on, that I did not even reflect on, and this is the other side of exile. What exile equips you with is that extra sense of the importance or value of your native place – what it could mean to you. So, that’s just my start on that thing of exile. Nuruddin may have some more to say on this.

NF: Well I was ... actually, I’ll ask this: has any change been wrought upon your life because of the fact that you travelled away from home? I’ve interpreted that as meaning: since you and I both were supposed to have lived in Europe, I took that to mean – *when* did you discover that you were an African? So that the discovery of oneself as an African becomes the positive thing that comes out of the pain that is associated with exile. I don’t recall actually using the word ‘exile’ – but since you have used it I will go back again to where I was heading, which is: when did I, as Nuruddin, discover – or where did I discover and when – that I was an African, because one isn’t born ‘an African’? In the areas of the world in which I was born there were not many non-African – clearly visible non-African-looking – persons, because everybody was a Somali or Ethiopian, and therefore it was a matter of definition. And I would repeat the story that I once heard. An Ethiopian was once asked: when did you discover that you are an Ethiopian? His answer was fascinating – because he was also in Europe and in exile – and he said that he discovered that he was an Ethiopian when he went to Europe. Then he was asked: when, then, did you discover you were an African? He said he discovered he was an

African when he encountered other Africans in the diaspora, and the reason is that there was something linking them. Now, I'm taking this to mean that the situation in which we lived imposed upon us the thinking of ourselves as Africans, the thinking of ourselves as people who were isolated – not only from the other persons, Europeans and foreigners in the midst of whom we lived – but also other Africans, sometimes from the same place because of ideology, you know, that necessitated taking a position and looking at oneself afresh, and then thinking about one's writing and one's commitment to writing, and to the reasons why I wasn't in Mogadishu, or you weren't in Durban.

LN: Well, you know, I seem to recall instances when Africans met one another in Europe – and one thing that has to be said about this mutual discovery is that it is both an ecstasy, if you like, and also a partly tremendous irritation – irritation, because some of your fellow Africans are not behaving exactly as the people you knew at home. I remember once in Ibadan, wanting to buy the London *Observer*...

NF: Ibadan in Nigeria?

LN: Yes – because the paper arrived in those days on a Tuesday and I wanted to get a copy of the London *Observer*. And I went into this supermarket to get a copy, and there was a fellow-African there who happened to be Nigerian, in nature, by the way, and he was slightly dozing away because of the heat – the heat was mostly like Durban heat is this morning – so I said, “Have you got the London *Observer*?” and he said “No, we have not got it,” and he went back to sleep. So I instantly went to look on the shelves, and there were copies of the London *Observer*, and I, coming from a place that was very fast – in Johannesburg you wanted things to happen very quickly – and I wanted him to feel guilty that he hadn't made the effort to get me a copy of the London *Observer*, so I say to him, “Here it is,” and waited for his apology. So he just told me how much money it is, and I was astonished by that; but it also shut me up.

NF: Is it possible – and here I am throwing myself into cold water – is it possible that he was indirectly telling you that you should cease being a colonial asking for the London *Observer* in Nigeria?

LN: Well, he would have asked himself the question, whether the Nigerians should have brought the London *Observer* into Nigeria in the first place!

NF: Well, let me tell you something – usually people bring what is needed and what is bought from them. I once lived in a small little village outside Kampala, Uganda. And in this small little village that I lived there was a grocer – he used to bring the vegetables and meat from town and I lived in

that village for about a year and used to commute to Kampala. The interesting thing was, when I cook, I like to use no butter, no oil at all if possible, and just use lemon or other forms avoiding fatty things as much as possible, and I remember insisting that I wanted lemon, and by the time I moved out of that village, every grocer in that village had lemon. So, if you continued to ask for the London *Observer* with your South African colonized mind, it is possible that the Nigerians bowed to your request as respectable foreigners teaching at a university, because Es'kia Mphahlele was also probably there and several other South Africans, and not only that, but you South Africans also introduced all forms of liquor into Nigeria!

LN: This is news to me! But I want to pick you up on the colonized mind, and I am thinking that the reason I brought this up was not to denounce the Nigerian's so-called personality and so on, I was actually, on reflection, I won't say, absolutely thrilled, but I was very respectful towards a man who refused to feel guilty because he didn't feel like bothering to get up to go and get me a newspaper – it was too tiresome on a hot day – so that was my point I was trying to make.

I am also interested in people who like to talk too much about the colonized mind, because I think that even our literature is so colonized that we are, with due respect, we are not even writing for our own people at the moment – we write for the people who constitute our literatures in Africa, and where are those people? They are the reviewers in New York, Paris, Rome and London, and most African writers write with two audiences in mind – and one audience does not actually get much of a chance. The audience that you are writing for is the audience that reads your books, and the first people you probably think about, or who hurt you most, even when they write out of ignorance, are the reviewers who don't even understand the experience out of which you are writing your books. But no African writer is going to sit around telling me that he is so decolonized that in fact he ignores the outside world and he's writing simply for the African audiences, the African readers.

NF: Let us talk about writers and audience and let me put this into the ring because this is a challenge. I once went to a small little town in Mississippi – Oxford – where William Faulkner comes from and where he wrote his books. We went around, a friend of mine and I – those days were crazy days – and I thought I'd one day write about travelling, you know, through the Southern parts of the USA, and we asked people if they read William Faulkner. Quite often people simply were *shocked* at the thought of being asked if they would even bother to read William Faulkner, and yet Faulkner is the man who has given Oxford, Mississippi a name, where there is a museum, the streets are called William Faulkner – there are so many bookshops that sell nothing but

Faulkneriana. If you go away from Faulkner, then go to Dublin and you talk about James Joyce, who wrote in English, which is not the same as his mother tongue, then you ask the people in Dublin. [Yet] in those days when he lived, his books were not even available.

Shall I ask a question and say is it actually possible that a writer does not write for today? The audiences that are here are listening to us making fools of ourselves, but an audience that is not likely to see me, that does not know what a fool I am, but that will be born in another ten years, in another twenty years? That writing, as opposed to the oral tradition, is not for the immediate consumption of the hearer and the utterer so much as it is for putting things down in some form of storage? You can keep it for a very long time – and you know, even if you kept some food in the fridge after a few days it will begin to rot – but one hopes that books will continue to survive, at least some of the books about which we will talk about. Later on I hope to spend some minutes on the books we *know* will survive and the authors that *should* survive. So, is it actually possible that this ‘audience’ thing is a beast that has really no life other than in the mind of some person who does not really think very deeply about these matters?

LN: There are two ways of responding to your question – one way is to go back to what you were saying about William Faulkner – whom, in my love of the man, I sometimes called Willie Faulkner, just to show how intimate I am with the man. So, two black writers, black American writers who have been –

NF: They are called African Americans these days –

LN: Two black American writers [*laughter from the audience*] who have made a point of saying that William Faulkner is their ancestor from whom they have borrowed a lot in order to write their words [are] Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison. So even those young blacks who have not read William Faulkner are now able to have some intimation of what William Faulkner was about, and Ralph Ellison put it very bluntly: he said writers, unlike biological children, who cannot choose their parents, writers can choose their own ancestors and said that William Faulkner was one of his ancestors – so it filters down to the people who may not have thought a great deal of William Faulkner through their own writers. There is also a hidden power-struggle at work amongst creators of literature. This rage for representation – who actually represents me – brings out the question of authenticity: who is more authentic, who brings out the authentic experience if you want to be large in your expression – the expression, the experience of a race. All that kind of thing gets into the creation of works of literature – somebody wants to be *the* representative of the black society, the black culture and so forth and also to defend it against colonization. But, you know, really there are so many cross-

roads in the creation of literature. I often think of how I wanted to write a story of what happens on a Durban beach in *Mating Birds* and looking for some of the ancestors who might help me to actually come to grips with the theme of being obsessed and also the theme of accidental meetings. I went to novels like *Death in Venice*, Camus' *L'Étranger*. I didn't read a Zulu novel, like my Nigerian sister was saying earlier on. I was going to things like *The Great Gatsby* in order to remember certain things about some of my white sisters I had left in South Africa in order to think again how to create those characters. So even my imitations which came from imitations of Western literature were helping me to discover certain things about South Africa – then I remembered that in South Africa, instead of being an African, I was also a non-white and a non-European.

NF: In terms of the writer and audiences, if William Faulkner had no audience in his immediate little town and village and area in which he operated, but had a much wider audience, we would ask ourselves the obvious question – and that is, *when* did he gain this audience, and how did he gain it? I would venture to answer it in this way. I would say that a writer is actually less important, as a writer, than the territory that his writing covers. What has made William Faulkner last longer than many of these people, many of the other authors who were contemporaries of William Faulkner – who became a fad, fashionable for a couple of years, and then faded out – the reason why he stayed on is not because of the fact that he came from some small little hamlet called Oxford, Mississippi, where people didn't read, where people actually felt ashamed of associating themselves with him, but the larger territory of imagination that he covered with his writing. What I am saying also here in South Africa, with regard to yourself or to the other Nigerian and Kenyan younger writers, is that what matters is the territory: ie scenes which you tackle in your writing and which become part of the spirit of the time, the energy of the time, and so on, to the extent where, for example in Africa, if you were to say: "Let's think about Africa's encounter with colonialism," the name that comes to mind immediately is Chinua Achebe, and that is a territory which he has occupied. Every 'major' writer ... occupies a territory and that is what matters – not where he comes from, not who his audiences are, not even the language in which he writes – it's the territory that he has occupied with his writing that counts. So that somebody may actually publish fifty novels and yet may not be able to occupy as small a territory as Achebe occupies in a small little novel called *Things Fall Apart*, which is 158 pages long.

LN: [*aside*] Is that true?

NF: So, let's forget about these clichés that social scientists and other people have, and journalists, that every time you speak they bring out one hat over the other and they say audiences, who is your audience? They say who is this, who is reading you? So I'm saying I don't care who reads me now, I will care about the territory that I occupy and that even if nothing else makes sense now....

LN: What's the territory that you occupy, if you don't care about your readers?

NF: I would hesitate to answer that question immediately and the reason is that where I come from one is told one never should 'praise' oneself. I could mention the territories other writers occupy; I would not have the courage or the madness – the insanity – to say I did this great thing, I have written these trilogies, two, three, four trilogies or books – and so on.

AM: Nuruddin, if I may come in, what would you do with the issue Lewis raised a moment ago, about ancestry, ancestors?

NF: Every time I write a new novel, I am on a journey somewhere else and therefore different things impress me, influence me. I take it to mean that Lewis would mean ancestors mean influences on the writer – a sage, a wise person, a very moving kind of writing in a book which you find inspiring, to which you go back and from which you learn, from which you borrow, so an ancestor would be anyone; I could say that I have been influenced by many different writers in different stages in my life, but I would also say, for example, let's talk about territories. If you were to talk about territories, territories would be, for example, the Nigerian territory of civil war [which,] as our young Nigerian writer has mentioned, has not been adequately dealt with – there isn't a single novel about the Nigerian civil war – which has covered that territory in such a way that I feel sufficiently satisfied with what has been produced. It seems to me that the novel about the Nigerian civil war has not been written.

LN: One might go along with that, Nuruddin, but not in terms of what you are trying to say about territory. I mean, it seems to me a sort of mystical term – it's like saying, you know, World War 2 or World War 1 produced a certain *kind* of writer because of the traumatic wound that was inflicted on society.

NF: No, no. I'm not saying....

LN: No, wait a minute. You are talking about territory in terms, for example, of the clash between Africa and the colonialists, and I would argue that it is not only Chinua Achebe who has occupied that territory. You are talking about themes – those themes have been employed by several writers (one of

whom has not even been valorized enough like Léopold Senghor and his poetry) because you have to discuss not just the novel, you have to discuss poetry – Senghor’s earlier poetry was dealing precisely with the encounter between Africa and Europe, and there are many other writers, also in French. I mean, I’d say Mongo Beti, for example, was dealing ... was occupying that territory that you are talking about.

NF: Well that’s fine.

LN: So I don’t know – what you are talking about as a kind of yardstick, that you have to occupy sounds to me more like a journalistic cliché.

NF: Well, we will go back to William Faulkner, and we will say that the reason why William Faulkner is important is that he has written a series of novels about the South that has meant a great deal to most readers who have read about the South and that that is *the* territory which he covered. I am also saying that every writer, rather than worrying about audiences, and language, should worry about the content of books, rather than what language it was written in or whether the jacket of the book looks very beautiful or not. We spend a great deal of time on irrelevancies, at times.

LN: I don’t think we are talking about jackets of books. I mean, I cannot imagine any self-respecting writer, and I include Nuruddin here, who would devalue language, the very instrument which we use for expressing ourselves. So, instead of worrying about language or the audience, we should just worry about –what? Territory?

NF: About themes, the content of books, the ideas that inform the books.

AM: Nuruddin and Lewis, let’s take a moment, let’s pause on that notion, on the content of books, which I understand as being more or less the same thing as the content of the stories you write about, and maybe ask ourselves a few questions about the characters you create or invent, and the way they might have changed over time from your first book until the next one. Or Lewis, in your case, how they have changed over many novels. What do you understand today by the very notion of characters? How important are characters for a novel? Talking also about the content of books and stories, do you believe in the notion of the plot – for example, how do you construct your plots – from the beginning to the ending – what is it to enter a novel, how do you know when to stop? These are just indications of what we could discuss, not only about the content of books, but also the very craft of writing, since a number of us here are interested in that. I don’t know whether these are questions which appeal to any of you....

LN: I would say for myself that even when I tried to get rid of the notion of character – we hear a lot now in modern theory of our decentredness and all that kind of thing – I find I am very interested in the exploration of motives in the people I write about, and how they appear to one another, and how they influence events. So, from time to time, I am really looking at people in the streets, and suddenly I see exactly the man whom I have been wanting to write about: the way he has his pipe clamped between his teeth, the sound of his voice; and I may change all of that later on. But then there are other characters who keep cropping up in my writings, and one of them is my mother – who was a very beautiful slim Zulu girl – because she died young; she died in her early twenties. And Margaret keeps cropping up in my descriptions of African women. There's one in *Underground People* that I know is finally, finally, traceable to my mother – *why* is that so? And being who I am, [someone] who is interested in certain psychological and psychoanalytical theories, I remember once, when I was a little boy, we were sleeping in the same room with my mother and my grandmother, and my mother used to hang her clothes behind a curtain cut off from our view. And a snake got inside the bedroom and had wrapped itself on the rafters just about where she would get herself dressed. And my mother was just about to get into her working clothes and she ran out of there screaming like mad. And I was a little boy and I saw my mother trying to wrap herself to conceal her nakedness, and, I don't know why, but the story seems so archaic to me – the serpent and your mother – and all of it. So is that the reason why she keeps cropping up.

NF: Well, I have written two or three types of trilogies and because I am as long-winded as you can imagine (in the sense that, unlike some people whom I sometimes envy who write short stories – even though I have written short stories – I also write long trilogies), I always think about a trilogy every time I start working on a new novel! And because some of the trilogies have the characters that return, sometimes you are actually spared time, because what you need to do in the second volume of a trilogy is to go back to retouching the character in the way that a drawer/painter who has finished the work may retouch; so that you give him or her a few grey hairs or, you know, something of the kind, and then say what he or she had done in the time between them appearing in the first volume and then reappearing in the second volume. But I've also written novels that stand on their own and that are full of characters. Some of the things that I do very deliberately are: that I seldom give the same name to two characters who appear in two different novels that are not even from the same era or same period; the second is that I make sure that almost all the characters' names begin with a different letter of the alphabet, so that all you have to do is when you see M is not to confuse it with someone whose name begins with S. It makes life easier for me and I don't have to read every

time I go through it and I know that in draft form I can just use M or S, knowing that this particular character is the one. Characters also run away with one: it is possible that I would start knowing the character, then as I develop this particular character I discover that I don't know them anymore. There is also something that I am highly deliberate about and that is in every trilogy that I've written – I would usually have a novel with a central consciousness that is male, followed by a novel with a central consciousness that is female, followed by a novel in the third volume in which the central consciousness is blurred, so that you could not actually say who the central character of the novel is, even though there may be a certain character who appears more in the story and who occasionally sounds as if he is the voice of that particular text. To give you an example – *Maps*, for example, is a novel in which the central consciousness is not quite obvious, nor is it in *Secrets*. But in *Sardines*, as well as in *Gifts*, the central consciousness is female.

LN: The odd thing about characters, when I think about that, is how the more dubious ones (at least in my fiction), the ones that, on the face of it, you are least likely to admire, in the end amuse me so much that they even make me laugh when they are actually being despicable, and I say, "How can you be so despicable?" And yet, it is true that there is a sneaky affection for your creations even when they are vile. One remembers in English fiction, for example, that Satan in *Paradise Lost* is *much* more interesting than some of the angels. This is something odd about writers: that they can fall in love with the characters that are the least likely to be admired, or that don't seem to be admirable.

AM: Nuruddin and Lewis have been talking to each other for almost forty-five minutes, and I would now, with their permission, like to open the floor for a number of questions you might want to ask them. I would just recommend that you be brief and clear and, as much as possible, stick with the rich variety of issues they have put on the table. So, are there any questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER (AUD): To Mr Lewis Nkosi, my first question is, when are we expecting you back here, Baba, because the knowledge and experience you have – we need here. My second question, too, is also directed to you, Baba: what challenges are facing the post-apartheid writers? The last one, to both of you: you have been there, you have seen it, and you have experienced a lot – what advice do you give to young writers? Thank you.

LN: I will deal with the first one because it is both the easiest and the most difficult one. I happen to come every year to this country these days, when I'm given the chance to. I've been teaching at the University of Cape Town.

I've worked with the students at the University of Durban–Westville. If you can drum up some, you know, financial support for me [*laughs*], I will be back here in no time again next year to teach, or to run workshops, and so on. I didn't quite follow the gist of your last question about apartheid....

AUD [*repeats the questions asked earlier*]: What challenges are facing the post-apartheid writers and writers in general?

LN: I speak for myself here, because I really cannot speak about Zakes Mda and John Coetzee. I think that we all feel certain pressures differently. For myself – one of the things that I'm interested in from the post-apartheid perspective is not so much to do what most writers who were involved in the resistance writing want to do – they want to make notations of every era and provide the information that is necessary to understand this particular moment, so that the novels are really going to be a kind of almanac – I'm more interested in the whole history of what happened to us. Why did we become what we are? I'm also, of course, interested in difference, and it shows in my writing. I'm interested in the fact that this country has never created a space that one could even remotely call the nation. Having shared symbols, we have never had that – so exploring that aspect of our development is of interest to me. Take an easy example: the massacre of Piet Retief. That day was actually celebrated by the two communities differently. One was expressing gratitude to God for having defeated the Zulus, and the black community had a nationalist narrative to promote, in which case Dingane was really not so much treacherous as a hero of the people. So there are always two narratives in this country; it depends who is handling which aspects of that narrative – two narratives and counter-narratives, one shadowing the other. That for me is still of interest. I don't think we have exhausted that aspect of our development of our character –dare I say: as a nation, since these days we have an obsession with reconciliation.

AUD: I would like to go back to the issue of territory and to find out from Mr Farah: if a range of writers write about the same territory, what gives a writer's work (a writer like William Faulkner) more staying-power over any other writer who writes in the same territory; and my second question, to both writers (perhaps it may not apply to you but to the younger writers who are not as established as you are): to what extent are publishers your first audience, before the audience of readers? Thank you.

NF: Well, let me explain what I mean by territory. Perhaps it's a simplified way of saying that the books which certain authors write and publish at a given time appear as though they show the way, as though they are beacons, as though they were the guide to an understanding of certain complexities, so

that, for example, it is a kind of book that, when you read it, you say: “This is the book that I have been waiting for.” Now, it all depends on *how* you define it. It is possible that it is a novel that contains within it – or a book, or a poem, or something – that contains within it a certain energy and spirit that moves so many people, that says: “This is it – this is what I have been waiting for.” That’s why I say a novel like *Things Fall Apart* meant a great deal to a lot of people. And that is one way of looking at literature, that is one way I look at literature, so that, from then on, that almost becomes the yardstick by which you measure other books written on the same theme. It is something larger than the theme about which it has been written. I can think of other novels – I would say, for example, there are certain things that matter a lot in a given era, and if, in African fiction, you were to take *The African Child* by Camara Laye – when the book came out almost everybody said, “*This* is what we have been waiting for.” Naturally, it didn’t become the things we were waiting for afterwards, and the reason is that it didn’t include in it the experience of a young girl growing up – it was a *boy* growing up. Now, somebody may actually think that a novel like *The God of Small Things*, for example, has become to some people a cult book that matters a great deal, and the reason is that *this* is what we have been waiting for – *this* is the kind of novel that we ought to do. These are the things I am talking about – that territory – and it’s a territory to which we become attracted, and it’s very possible that, as Lewis said, it is all naive on my part; but I am too grown-up to change, and so I will accept it that way. If I may continue and simply say, [on the subject of] publishers as the first readers, you should actually say the author is the first reader, and then there is maybe someone else who reads the text before the publishers: ie a friend or a partner or someone else of your own choice who reads the book before you submit it.

AM: Thank you. Maybe Lewis has some advice?

LN: I’m not sure whether the question is how young people can gain entry into the publishing world or whether we are thinking of the kind of readers they should be concerned about – whether these readers are publishers or the audience for which you are writing your book. But if you are talking about the mechanisms of getting published, it’s always the same – it’s a damnable occupation for any writer. Instead of writing books and just letting them flow into the hands of people who are going to read them, getting publishers to take a good look at what you have written and give it sufficient consideration is always a struggle. But it changes from time to time; for example, there are fashions in publishing, there are times when people discover the so-called theme of apartheid, or when they discover post-apartheid. We now have Indian literature, [which] has probably always been there, but suddenly it’s a

fashion in Europe, as there was a fashion for South American literature – which has basically nothing to do with whether the literature was there before or whether it suddenly arrived on the scene. It has something to do with what the publishers are looking for at a particular time and what becomes fashionable and so on, and that is not to denigrate the writers who are doing the writing – I’m just pointing out that it is not just simply a question of getting the attention of the publishers, it is also that damnable thing called the market. We are all victims of the so-called market, so I don’t know whether this sufficiently answers your question about the publishers. Of course, you get agents if you are lucky, and you send things to people who advertise themselves as agents, and if they are sufficiently attentive to what you are doing, they will make sure to badger enough publishers until they accept what you’ve been doing. But there is no easy answer to that question.

AM: It is unfortunately time now to bring this session to an end, but before I do that and before I call on Peter to conclude the Festival, I would just like to ask Nuruddin and Lewis whether, in one minute, they have something they absolutely wanted to tell us and were not able to do so during the time allocated to them. If that is so, maybe you can each take one minute to do that.

NF: Well, it’s a pleasure to be here – my first visit to the Festival, and I have enjoyed myself. Thank you very much.

LN: I’m thrilled to be back in Durban for the reasons I intimated earlier on during my comments. For me, it’s not simply a question of sharing this experience at the Festival with you – it is also drifting about in the Durban streets and looking at some of those broken-down colonial houses and being sort of irritated by high-rise hotels (I should not be saying this, because they are accommodating me on the waterfront!). All those are new things they have put up there which are horrific, and we all know for whom they were set up. All the smells, and also seeing how parts of Durban that were out of bounds for people like myself when I was growing up – suddenly seeing how they are occupied by a new army, and we know that these new spaces are also an arena for forging new identities. Durban is confused and full of conflicts – but so is every big South African town. So, I thank the organizers of this Festival for having afforded me the chance to come back and dip my toes in the Indian Ocean. Thank you.

AM: Thank you, Nuruddin, and thank you, Lewis.

❧ A RETROSPECTIVE SELECTION

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15.1 Fiction by Black South Africans*

LEWIS NKOSI

WITH THE BEST WILL IN THE WORLD, it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds, with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa.

Where urban African music, for instance, has responded to the challenges of the disintegrative tendencies of city life with an amazing suppleness and subtlety, black writing shows the cracks and tension of language working under severe strain. Where African music and dance have moved forward, not through renouncing tradition but by fusing diverse elements into an integrated whole, black fiction has renounced African tradition without showing itself capable of benefiting from the accumulated example of modern European literature. To put it bluntly, nothing stands behind the fiction of black South Africans – no tradition, whether indigenous, such as energizes *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, or alien, such as is most significantly at work in the latest fiction by Camara Laye.¹

* Originally published in *Black Orpheus* 19 (1966): 48–54, and reprinted in *Introduction to African Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing*, ed. Ulli Beier (1967; Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1979): 211–17 (as “Fiction by Black South Africans: Richard Rive; Bloke Modisane; Ezekiel Mphahlele; Alex La Guma,” but minus the section on Rive), and in Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1965): 131–38, later enlarged as *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London & New York: Longman, 1983). [Ed.]

¹ See his story “The Eyes of the Statue,” tr. Una Maclean, *Black Orpheus* 5 (May 1959): 19–27. Repr. in *Under African Skies: Modern African Stories*, ed. & intro. Charles R. Larson (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1997): 13–26.

If black South African writers have read modern works of literature, they seem to be totally unaware of its most compelling innovations; they blithely go on 'telling stories' or crudely attempting to solve the same problems which have been solved before – or if not solved, problems to which European practitioners, from Dostoevsky to Burroughs, have responded with greater subtlety, technical originality and sustained vigour; and black South Africans write, of course, as though Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce had never lived. Is it not possible, without sounding either superior or unpatriotic, to ask how a fiction written by people conversant with the history of the development of modern fiction can reveal no awareness of the existence of *Notes From Underground*, *Ulysses*, or such similar works? For, make no mistake about this, it is not an instance of writers who have assimilated so well the lessons of the masters that they are able to conceal what they have learned; rather is it an example of a group of writers operating blindly in a vacuum.

This primitiveness or mere concern with *telling* the story may be supposed to have its own virtues. In contrast with Europe, for instance, where it is impossible to write without being conscious of the fossilized examples of literary tradition, this lack of self-consciousness may seem a welcome liberation from the burden of tradition; it could even be supposed to allow for a certain freshness and originative power in the writing; yet these are virtues which would be very difficult to locate in fiction by black South Africans. We certainly have nothing to counterpoise against the imaginative power of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or the placid grace of its style. Nor do we have anything to equal the teeming inventive genius of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. To read a novel like Richard Rive's *Emergency* is to gain a minute glimpse into a literary situation which seems to me quite desperate. It may even be wondered whether it might not be more prudent to 'renounce literature temporarily', as some have advised, and solve the political problem first, rather than continue to grind out hackneyed third-rate novels of which *Emergency* is a leading contender. For, quite seriously, it is difficult to see how any fiction that pretends to be serious can descend again to the level plumbed by *Emergency*.

What we do get from South Africa, therefore – and what we get most frequently – is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction. Thus a story like "The Situation"² by Bloke Modisane relies mainly on the 'inside' infor-

² Bloke Modisane, "The Situation," *Black Orpheus* 12 (1963): 10–16.

mation about the exciting underground life of the Johannesburg township of which the author happens to be in possession; and through the limited power of the documentary technique we are taken on a tour of the Johannesburg shebeen, we are offered glimpses of the motley company of thugs, pimps and their 'nice-time' girls; and we are made to feel the tension between rival gangs, which is as gratuitous as the tension generated in a western film by the presence of two fast draws in the same saloon; yet, even with the exploitation of the earthiest detail, the story still founders on a general lack of ideas; it collapses finally because, both in its method and in its theme, the story is a stereotype and the excitement is external – part and parcel of a dangerous social stratum – and does not come from the inner tension of creative talent confronting inert matter. At the end there is neither impact nor revelation but a kind of cessation. Yet without this power for so re-ordering experience, and for so transmuting the given social facts that we can detect an underlying moral imagination at work, it is difficult to see why we should give up the daily newspaper in favour of creative fiction, for the newspapers would tell us just as much about life.

In an interesting essay called "The Function of Criticism,"³ Mr Robert Langbaum ably states the case for creative literature; but in reading him I seemed to be reading a carefully inscribed charge-sheet against the kind of fiction I am taking about. Mr Langbaum writes: "The imagination [...] remains, for us, the faculty which accounts for literature as revelation, as a maker of values." Quite obviously literature as 'revelation' or as a maker of values is not likely to result from a type of writing which relies in its method on the technique of *cinéma-vérité* – a technique which consists largely in training the camera long enough on the passing scene in the desperate hope that art may result by accident. It might very well be that the vitality of African writing in South Africa lies mainly in the area of non-fiction. Certainly the profile of the Sophiatown ghetto in Bloke Modisane's book *Blame Me On History*, or Ezekiel Mphahlele's autobiographical essay *Down Second Avenue*, is far superior to anything these writers have attempted in creative fiction.

Even the way Bloke Modisane structures the book shows a dedication to a superior form of realism which succeeds partly because the author is alive to the fact that reality itself is elusive to the process of Time as an orderly sequence of events. It seems to me a pity that Bloke Modisane has not exploited

³ Robert Langbaum, "The Function of Criticism Once More," *Yale Review* 54 (Winter 1965): 205–18, with an allusion to Matthew Arnold's classic essay "The Function of Criticism."

his potential talent for satire, which he exhibited to advantage in his story "The Dignity of Begging":

One of these days when I'm on my annual leave, I hope to write a book on begging, something like a treatise on the subject. It will be written with sensitivity and charm, brimful with sketches from life, and profusely illustrated with coloured photographs, with easy-to-follow rules on the noblest and oldest occupation in the world: Begging!⁴

If Ezekiel Mphahlele has so far produced no profoundly moving work of fiction, he differs from the other black South African writers in his preoccupations, which, in his most recent fiction, reveal how keenly aware he is of the intractable nature of South African experience when it has to be contained within an artistic form; and this intractability has something to do both with the over-melodramatic nature of the political situation and the barrenness and infertile nature of tradition. It has always amazed me that bad writers should consider racial conflict a God-sent theme when prudent writers know how resistant this theme has proved to be to any artistic purpose. This is not only true in Africa; American Negro fiction, with the exception of Jimmy Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, has proved incapable of revealing half the depth and richness of Negro life as it is expressed by American Negro music, especially the blues. The main hope for Ezekiel Mphahlele as a writer is that he is aware of all these things, and latterly he has been moving in the direction of saying something positive about black experience in South Africa instead of writing, as so many of his compatriots do, as though everything the blacks did in the country was a reaction to white oppression.

He had already begun to do this, of course, in some of his stories based on quirky Newclare characters, though these stories were often little more than sketches; and of course his small volume of collected stories issued by Mbari Publications in Nigeria under the title *The Living and Dead* has some good examples of this type of fiction in "The Suitcase" and "He and the Cat." However, it is in his most recent story, published in the Johannesburg quarterly *The Classic*, that Ezekiel Mphahlele has given the best accounting for his talent.

Now, the most remarkable thing about Africans – this is not always to their benefit – is hardly their conservatism; on the contrary, it is their ability to absorb alien influences and manners and to adapt them to their particular tradi-

⁴ "The Dignity of Begging," *The African Drum* 1.6 (September 1951): 4–5, 21, and often reprinted: for example, in *Hungry Flames and Other Black South African Short Stories*, ed. Mbulelo Mzamane (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1986): 26–34.

tion. In a city like Johannesburg, for example, a study of the African languages as they are spoken today would reveal a great deal about this African willingness to borrow and to adapt foreign words and concepts, which are thereafter given a new dimension altogether. I am thinking of words like 'situation', which is a term of abuse for members of the African middle class trying to 'situate' themselves above the masses. And so is '*sitshuzimi*', which is an adaptation of the phrase 'Excuse me', also used in a satirical vein to refer to pretentious half-baked Africans trying to ape the ways of white folk by a repetitious use of similar phrases.

So far as I have been able to gather from such evidence as I possess, what Ezekiel Mphahlele has been trying to do is reclaim some of these words from the African languages back into English where they have their origin anyway; and simultaneously he exploits the new connotative element they have since acquired by their association with the African languages: in so doing, he manages to give them a slightly ambivalent satirical content which they would not otherwise possess. Or he merely makes African idioms and speech rhythms stand behind his English, something which Nigerians do all the time. The rearrangement of syntax, for instance, often achieves a comical effect similar to that arrived at by American Jewish writers, most notably Bernard Malamud. For instance, Africans in South Africa seem unable to think of a government as a faceless bureaucratic institution; they always seek to personify it before they can properly conceive it. Thus, in Ezekiel Mphahlele's story, an old woman rebukes a policeman, who is only too ready to hide behind the vast nameless authority of the Government, in this quaint, effective dialogue:

"Is this how you would like your mother or your wife to be treated, I mean your own mother?"

"I am doing the government's work."

"Go and tell that government of yours that he is full of dung to send you to do such things. Sies. Kgoboromente kgoboromente! You and him can go to hell where you belong."

This is as close as you can get to the quality of African speech in English transposition, and the effect, of course, is always slightly comical.

In this story, "In Corner B,"⁵ Ezekiel Mphahlele has gone further; he successfully exploits that vein of tragicomedy which has been so fruitfully mined in African song and dance and in the rudimentary urban African theatre, but which has not, to my knowledge, been usefully tapped in African writing. By

⁵ Published in *The Classic* 1.3 (1964): 10–21, and subsequently in Mphahlele, *In Corner B and other stories* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967): 108–26.

situating a number of episodes within the framework of an African funeral he achieves a number of ironies. First, he does this by juxtaposition; those who come to such funerals, still largely traditional, are often there to mourn as well as to enjoy a ceremony which is not without some festive gaiety. The juxtaposition is one between the African's very profound sense of piety in the face of Death as well as the well-known African tendency to turn sad religious occasions into moments, not of self-abnegation, but of sensual expression whose orgiastic force and redemptive lust are anti-puritanical in spirit. Protracted as the traditional period of mourning is in these African funerals, they have become in South Africa occasions for exploiting the hospitality of the bereaved family. They have become happy hunting grounds for sex-starved matrons and the iniquitous young, as well as helping to bring together numerous relatives from various parts of the country who use the funeral as an occasion for prosecuting familial matters. Thus, in Mphahlele's story, during the mourning we see surreptitious groups of carousing drinkers – "drowning de sorry"; there is a family quarrel between rival cousins of the dead man over the right of disposing the body; there is a copulation in the yard between a young couple who quietly rejoin the singing after this brief release of sexual tension, which, I imagine, is a need just as pressing as, if not more than, the need to express grief.

"Shh!" The senior uncle of the dead man cut in to try to keep the peace. And he was firm. "What do you want to turn this house into? There is a widow in there in grief and here you are you haven't got what the English call respectation. Do you want all the people around to laugh at us, think little of us? All of us bury our quarrels when we come together to weep over a dear one who has left; what *nawsons* is this?"

In the past, what had always put me off Ezekiel Mphahlele's writing was a certain dullness of phrase, much like the ponderous speech of a dull-witted person, so that it was often difficult to pursue the story to its ending. The gems were often embedded in a thick mud of cliché and lustreless writing: a succession of simple clauses, for instance, linked together by semicolons. The texture of the prose had the feel and look of sweaty labour, much like the stains of honest sweat on the cloth-cap of the toiling proletariat, but hardly congenial for being honest. For instance, in order to expose the inner thoughts of his character, Ezekiel would often reflect in this clumsy manner:

Now she was ill. She was about to have a baby; a third baby. And with nothing to take home for the last two months, his savings running out, he felt something must be done. Not anything that would get him into jail. No, not that....

And so it would go on. Somewhere along the line, the monologue of his hero becomes merged with that of the author. The danger with this kind of writing is that it can often become a substitute for action in the story or a substitute for a more ingenious solution to the problem of flashbacks. At his slowest, it contributed to a considerable amount of dullness in Ezekiel Mphahlele's writing. Yet some of these problems of style were clearly attributable to external causes: the strain of maintaining an equilibrium in a dangerously melodramatic situation. If one went too far the other way in an effort to match with language the violence of the streets, the prose became strained, brittle and frayed; so that the flatness in Mphahlele's writing was sometimes due to an honourable attempt to remain 'cool under fire'. It seems to me that in the latest work Mphahlele's writing has become tighter, more solid and assured as he acquires a more properly synthesized vocabulary to deal with the stresses of South African life; he has achieved greater authority and a better grip on his own particular idiom: the result is a happier fluency of tone.

Now, to return to Richard Rive, about whose work I had some mean things to say earlier on: if one approaches his latest work, especially his novel *Emergency*,⁶ with sorrow and despair, it is because of the promise his early fictional pieces like "Rain" and "Willie Boy" had aroused which now seems to have remained largely unfulfilled in this novel.

Some short while ago I published a rather mild reproof, in the Johannesburg quarterly *The Classic*, of what appeared to me to be Richard Rive's inexcusable lapses of style, and rather archaic mannerisms;⁷ but humility is not Richard Rive's strongest quality. I was surprised to read in the next issue of *The Classic* an intemperate reply in which the author accused me of "nihilistic criticism" done for motives "personal or otherwise," and haughtily objected that it would be ridiculous for him "to even try to make a case for the moon 'twinkling back respectfully'."⁸ The latter point is the one with which I heartily agreed. Of course, it is within the sphere of possibility – though not of probability – that I was spurred on to object to this form of writing by promises of financial gain from the editor of *The Classic* or that perhaps, when I reviewed his book *African Songs*,⁹ I was beside myself with rampant feelings of jealousy, though I would have thought our artistic inclinations lie in different and opposite directions. I would offer as a more probable reason, however, the fact that his first novel does arouse in one form or another some of the same objections to the faults I had criticized in his short

⁶ *Emergency: a novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964).

⁷ Review of Richard Rive, *African Songs*, *The Classic* 1.2 (1963): 41–42.

⁸ Richard Rive, "Letter," *The Classic* 1.3 (1964): 75.

⁹ *African Songs* (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1963).

stories. It is true that, such as they were, my objections were scarcely likely to be accepted by a coloured writer who lives within the insulated and sterile atmosphere of South African criticism, in which it is possible for minor talent to be inflated beyond sensible proportions and in which mediocre writing by black writers is painlessly endured. Indeed, it is impossible to see how some of the writing by black South Africans could ever be taken seriously in Europe and America if it were the product of a European or an American writer.

“Are you for American poetry or for poetry?” was Ezra Pound’s truculent question to Harriet Monroe.¹⁰ We need only to transpose the names of the continents to put this question with some profit to our own African writers, not because the roots are unimportant but because literature is more important. And as a work of literature, Richard Rive’s novel seems to me unfortunate. Its value can only be to add a footnote, and not a desperately needed one, to the political events leading to a declaration of the state of emergency in South Africa in 1960. The novel is wholly unimaginative, totally uninspired and exceedingly clumsy in construction. For instance, the gimmicky way in which he mentions various unrelated characters and what they are doing at some particular moment in time doesn’t work; it remains purely *that*: a gimmick. If Rive borrowed the technique from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the result of this borrowing was unfortunate, because *Emergency* lacks the imaginative force, the resonance, suggestiveness and energy of James Joyce’s novel; it also lacks strong clear characters, which provided focus for Joyce’s multiplicity of detail which made up his Dublin.

The main action of the story, as I said, takes place within the framework of political activity by left-wing and nationalist organizations which culminated in the pan-Africanist campaign of 1960, the riots of Langa township and the shootings of Sharpeville. The central characters are Andrew Dreyer, a product of the Cape Coloured slum of District Six, someone whom we may presume to represent in some limited fashion the author’s view of life, Abe Hanslo, from the better middle-class suburb of Walmer Estate, and Ruth Talbot, a liberal white girl, all of whom are students when we meet them at the University of Cape Town. During their university career and later, we see these three and a supporting cast of other characters gradually sucked into the vortex of South African politics. By the end of the book, the state of emergency has been declared and the trio is on the run, pursued by the Security Police; and it is Andrew Dreyer, finally, who makes the decision to stop running and to stay behind and face the consequences of his political activities.

¹⁰ In a letter from London to Monroe (18 August 1912) after she founded the magazine *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in Chicago; see *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907–1941*, ed. D.D. Paige (London: Faber & Faber, 1951): 43–44, here 43.

Apart from bad jerky writing, of which this novel has examples in great abundance, and long chunks of dialogue which add nothing to the understanding of character, the novel fails dismally to set us ablaze with excitement, despite the melodramatic nature of the events, because none of the characters have any massive presence as people. Richard Rive's main weakness is his inability to create realizable people in the manner in which another Cape Coloured writer, Alex La Guma, succeeds in a stroke. Right to the end of the novel all three main characters, to say nothing of the white ones, remain completely unrealized because Rive's use of dialogue is never to reveal his characters but to present argument about the political situation, which is his main interest. Thus the characters never use words which are uniquely theirs but words and argument which suggest the position of various ethnic or political groups they represent. While the situation is everything, the characters are flat and uninteresting. In Rive's novel, as indeed in most of the stories recently published in *Quartet* by four Cape Coloured writers,¹¹ there are no real full-blooded characters with real blood to spill; no characters whose fighting or love-making has the stench of living people: they are cardboard pieces, and cardboard pieces don't spill any blood. Embarrassingly, what comes out of the apartheid machine when it has ground to a standstill is not human flesh but cardboard pulp.

To say all this is, indirectly, to pay tribute to Alex La Guma, the Cape Coloured writer whose novella *A Walk in the Night* has been published by Mbari Publications of Nigeria and which most assuredly deserves wider notice abroad. Paradoxically, of all the black writers who have suffered the most at the hands of the South African Government, La Guma has been longest on the receiving end. He was one of the defendants in the protracted Treason Trial; he has been banned from attending gatherings of any kind and has been detained in prison several times. He is now under house arrest in Cape Town; his writings cannot, of course, be published or quoted in the country. This means he has been virtually denied the right to earn a living, as he has always done, through journalism.

If Alex La Guma tills the same apartheid plot which the other writers have so exhaustively worked up, what distinguishes him as a true novelist is his enthusiasm for life as it is lived. He has the artist's eye for the interesting detail; his stories and novels are sagging under the weight of real people waging a bloody contest with the forces of oppression; and, credibly, they celebrate their few moments of victory in sex, cheap Cape wine and stupid fights. The

¹¹ *Quartet: New Voices from South Africa*, ed. Richard Rive (London: Heinemann, 1963). The writers included are James Matthews, Alex La Guma, Alf Wannenburg and Richard Rive.

rooms they inhabit smell of decay, urine and sweat; they share them with “roaches, fleas, bugs, lice.” Their only triumph is that they are human – superlatively human; and this is their sole claim upon our imagination.

Another quality of La Guma as a writer is the suggestive power of his prose. “A Glass of Wine,”¹² for instance, is a superbly observed story with appropriate dialogue that relies on the speech idioms of the Cape Malay folk. The boy who was “tall and young and thin as a billiard cue” is really white though he comes to the shebeen to visit one of the coloured girls. As for the girl, instantly she comes to life before us as La Guma discreetly observes her: “She did not look at the boy, but knew that he was there, and looking at him in turn I could see the deep flush of his own face and the gentle lowering of the eyelids as he watched her.” There is marvellous irony here, which is beautifully sustained, right to the end of the story, when one of the drunks, unaware that the boy is really white, gently mocks the young couple: “With such love, blushing and all, these two must marry.”

At the end of the story there is a revelation, not only of the tragedy of the young lovers who cannot marry, but of the absurdity of life itself.

“You and your wedding,’ I told him as we went up the street. ‘You know that white boy can’t marry the girl, even though he may love her. It isn’t allowed.’”

“Jesus,” Arthur said in the dark. “Jesus. What the hell.”

In *A Walk in the Night*, La Guma follows the progress of Michael Adonis, a coloured boy thrown out of his factory job for talking back to the white foreman; and a supporting cast of thugs, derelicts, spivs, neurotic cops “doomed for a certain term to walk the night.” By the end of this night, Adonis has killed under an impulse a harmless old man; a neurotic policeman has shot a small-time thug; a penniless man has been ‘rolled’ for money; but, incontestably, life has also been celebrated in the cheap bars, speak-easies and wretched slum houses in the Harlem-like ghetto of Cape Town’s District Six. This impressive short work has distinct Dostoevskian undertones, which, I hope, is not too large a claim to make for it. It is inexcusable that European and American publishers, who are in such indecent haste to put into print any mediocre talent from Africa, have ignored this novel.

There are a few other black South African writers, like Arthur Maimane, Casey Motsisi, Dugmore Boeti, Harry Mashabela, Can Themba, whom I have not mentioned at length, though some of them write much abler prose than many writers on the continent; this is because the work of these writers has been largely in the area of non-fiction or because they have produced only

¹² In *Quartet*, ed. Rive, 91–96.

one or two short stories upon which it is impossible to make an estimation of their talent. Of these, Can Themba has perhaps the liveliest mind and the best command of the English language; but apart from his recent story published in *Modern Stories from Africa*¹³ he has been annoyingly shiftless, throwing off cheap pot-boilers when magazines demanded them. Casey Motsisi is perhaps our wiliest satirical talent in South Africa, but so far his success has been in the area of sketches which owe a great deal in inspiration to Langston Hughes' *Simple Speaks His Mind*.¹⁴ I have seen only one story by Dugmore Boeti,¹⁵ which was extraordinarily witty, and ironical, if also brutal; it also had the tough pitiless nerve which one has come to associate with the modern sensibility in European literature. One would like to see more writing by him.



¹³ Can Themba, "The Dube Train," in *Modern African Stories*, ed. Ellis Ayitey Komey & Ezekiel Mphahlele (London: Faber & Faber, 1964): 223–27.

¹⁴ Langston Hughes, *Simple Speaks His Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950).

¹⁵ Dugmore Boeti, "The Last Leg," *The Classic* 1.2 (1963): 25–31.



15 Chopin Park, Warsaw, Poland, 1988 (Lewis Nkosi)

15.2 Alex La Guma: The Man and His Work*

LEWIS NKOSI

AT 43 HE IS TALL, SLENDER, a brown man with black hair slightly greying at the temples. He is what is called, I suppose, a dark, taciturn man, though why “dark” and “taciturn” should always go together I’ll never know. At first meeting he seems cold and austere, what you probably expect a dour, very committed left-wing writer to be. This can be deceptive. At any rate, his best work is better than the dreary uninspired socialist realism which can be so catastrophic for the ungifted but doctrinaire writer. Some might say “doctrinaire” and “creative” are mutually exclusive terms. We won’t argue this for the moment.

First, a few biographical details. Brian Bunting supplies them in an introduction to one of his novels:¹ “Of the younger writers in South Africa today,” he writes, “one of the most promising is Alex La Guma, a Coloured man born and bred in Cape Town, the most mature and multi-racial of all South African cities.” I don’t exactly know what “mature” means in this context. Nevertheless, we shall let dear Brian fill us in on the details, as they say:

Son of Jimmy La Guma, one of the outstanding leaders of the Non-white liberation movement and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of South Africa, Alex has had politics in his life from the year of his birth, 1925, right up to the present day. As a young man he joined the Communist Party himself and was a member of the Cape Town

* “Alex La Guma: The Man and his Work,” *South Africa: Information and Analysis* 59 (January 1968; special issue: South African authors): 1–8. Repr. in Nkosi, *The Transplanted Heart* (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope, 1975): 107–15.

¹ Brian Bunting, foreword to Alex La Guma, *And a Threefold Cord* (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1964): 9–16.

District Committee of the Party until it was banned by the Nationalist Government in 1950.

On December five of the following year, he was one of the 1566 men and women of all races who were rounded up by the police all over the country and flown by military plane to Johannesburg to stand trial on a charge of treason. [...] In December 1962 Alex La Guma was served with a notice confining him to his house for twenty-four hours a day. The only visitors permitted him for five years duration of the notice were his mother, his parents-in-law and a doctor and a lawyer who had not been named or banned. Another provision of the law was that nothing Alex La Guma said or wrote could be reproduced in any form in South Africa.

The immediate consequence of this was that Alex La Guma's first novel, *A Walk in the Night*, published in 1962 by Mbari Publications in Nigeria, became forbidden reading for all South Africans. A few copies were smuggled into the country and passed from hand to hand. The book won instant recognition as a work of talent and imagination.

Perhaps I ought to add here that the South African government was only too pleased to be rid of La Guma in 1966 when he left the country on an exit permit.

On a journey with Alex: Boozed and brooding

As a political reporter in Johannesburg, I remember Alex La Guma as a quiet, brooding figure waiting in the Congress office as a temperamental actor might wait in the wings of the stage. During my periodic visits while the Treason Trial was in progress I don't remember him ever saying very much while I was present. Nevertheless, his weekly column in *New Age*, especially the impressions of the trial proceedings, was marked by a cruel wit, sharp discernment and mocking humour which made it highly readable. I think it was always this divergence of personality from what his work promised that always surprised me. To meet him in person and to discover that he was not at all like his writing was always disconcerting. What in heaven's name, you found yourself asking, was the source of all that gaiety and wit to be found in his writing? I never did find out. As if to complete the mystery, his wife, Blanche, seemed to emphasize this contrast, for she was livelier, gayer, more approachable. I had heard her once deliver before a national conference of nurse – she was a nurse at the time – a scathingly funny attack on the government plans to introduce apartheid in nursing. On the other hand, Alex La Guma remained impenetrable to me.

At this time, apart from occasional pieces in *Drum* and *Fighting Talk*, he had not as yet published any sizable work which could have had led one to

feel that this lack of contact was a major tragedy. In a way, my first real exposure to his talent was at the 1962 African Writers' Conference organized by Zeke Mphahlele and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Makerere, Uganda. Mbari Publications had just published his short novel *A Walk in the Night*, which provided the delegates with real fictional insights into what life in Cape Town's District Six and, by extension of imagination, in many other South African ghettos, was really like. About the same time his stories were beginning to find their way into journals like *Black Orpheus*, so that it was finally possible to consider his work together, to form an estimate of its quality and weight. When he subsequently arrived in London we met at my house but did not, as might be expected, discuss his work at any length, nor did we do so later when we travelled together in Scandinavia, Russia and the Middle East. What we did do with sufficient energy and witless enthusiasm was drink a great deal. The pattern was the same everywhere: Stockholm, Copenhagen, Moscow and Beirut. And each time we leaned over the bar, talking listlessly about home – remember Quentin's assertion in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* of that other South: "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there" – I had clues finally into the immense burden of love and pain for South African each one of her exiled writers carries within him sometimes without even knowing it. And Alex La Guma is, of course, a walking anthology of that incredible, episodic variety of life to be found in District Six.

So in the bars we sat in, in Europe and the Middle East, we found ourselves reminiscing with an almost credulous fondness about the people we had known and left behind in South Africa, their living habits, their courage, their optimism, even their petty stupidities. I cannot be too sure about this, but it seemed to me that it was by the criminal element, those outlaws of South African society, that we were most fascinated; it was the criminal daring of the under-dog and his ability to survive with humour that most bemused our recollection. And this was only natural. After all, the non-white criminal in South Africa acts out publicly what are the secret or frustrated wishes of the majority, which is to destroy the shackles that bind it to its despicable condition. The non-white criminal secures for himself a partial or temporary freedom by robbing a white bank (there aren't any black ones), forging bills, raping and murdering with impunity. He is the living symbol of that defiance against the social limits placed on the majority by a hateful regime which the middle class and ordinary workers would like to defy but have neither the courage, aptitude nor means with which to defy them. It is not by accident that in South Africa the black middle class, including intellectuals and artists, accord the criminal who murders or robs white people the stature of a hero. In

their most frustrated wishes he at once shows them the way and mocks their lack of daring.

So I was not surprised to see La Guma one night playing coppers and robbers with us in the lounge of the Hasselby Castle in Stockholm, where a writers' conference was being held, after we had had a few to drink. Zeke Mphahlele tried to calm him, but he went on toting his imaginary guns while confusing the rest of the writers by insisting on talking the kind of Afrikaans dialect which can only be heard in the streets of District Six. This affinity between the South African gangster and South African artist lies of course in the artist's ability to partially escape his confinement through his work.

Disagreements

Then, of course, we had our disagreements. When everything is said and done, Alex La Guma is a man fiercely and humourlessly committed to his ideology – communism. I was surprised to discover how conservative and uncritical he was in this commitment. Indeed, there are many independent Marxist thinkers who would be irritated by his brand of pious regard for everything Soviet policy-makers are doing as almost beyond any questioning. Perhaps this does not mean very much, but it was interesting, nevertheless, to find that it was easier to discuss the excesses of Soviet bureaucracy with Evgeny Evtushenko than with Alex. Once during a discussion with our guide, an intelligent young man from Moscow University, Alex expressed his general disapproval of what he considered lack of responsibility among the young generation of Russians. "Life has become too soft for them, that's why," he summed up.

Since this is fractionally true, it did not surprise me as much as his implicit endorsement of the trial and imprisonment of the two Soviet writers Sinyavsky and Daniel. At the time this happened, we were having coffee and some cognac in the offices of the Soviet Writers' Union in Moscow. They had been telling us about plans for translating and publishing works from Asia and Africa when Alex started to ask what appeared to be a leading question concerning the prosecution of the two writers. How, he asked, would officials of the Writers' Union answer accusations from those who believed that the freedom of writers was being abrogated in the Soviet Union by the prosecution of Sinyavsky and Daniel? I could not discover whether the officials of the Writers' Union were pleased at all that such a subject had been broached; but for ten minutes we listened in heavy silence to an exposition of the official line. This line was the familiar assertion that Sinyavsky and Daniel had not been prosecuted for the content of what they wrote: "They're not even regarded as writers by the Soviet people," said an official. What they had been

prosecuted for was “smuggling” their manuscripts out of the country. “Smuggling is considered a crime in the Soviet Union.” These officials did not think it strange that, in order to get them published at all, writers should find it necessary to ‘smuggle’ their manuscripts out of the country. At any rate, when this official was through explaining, I was astonished to hear Alex expressing his satisfaction with this answer: “I want to make it clear,” he said, “that I did not ask this question for myself, but for those who criticize the Soviet Union for not giving writers their freedom.” This may be true of those who are paranoically hostile to Soviet society, but with all the will in the world I could find nothing in what these bureaucrats were saying that deserved serious consideration by any artist interested in creative freedom, least of all by a South African writer who had himself been prosecuted and his works proscribed.

Late one night after an interview with a man from Moscow Radio, which had been accompanied by substantial drinking of vodka on our part, La Guma delighted us by unexpectedly launching into a highspirited rendition of the “International” which attracted some attention in the hotel, some of it clearly hostile, it seemed to me. After all, we *were* making a bit of noise. At any rate, Soviet citizens must be as accustomed to the “International” as the British are to “God Save the Queen,” and whenever “God Save the Queen” is played in a British cinema I have noticed that many people tend to leave. It was then round about midnight and the following day we were due to leave early in the morning for Beirut. However, in a dazzling lack of consciousness, attributable mostly to excessive alcohol, the Kenyan novelist James Ngugi and I suddenly got it into our heads that we wanted to meet ordinary Soviet people. We wanted to go to an ordinary coffee place or dance-hall where young people would normally go. Outside the Peking Hotel we hailed a cab and told the driver in English where we wanted to go. The man’s face remained quite impassive. So, thinking that the barrier was language, I performed a minor dance, a frug really, right there on the icy Moscow pavement, in order to convey some general idea of what we were after. This seemed to make the cab driver angrier. Shaking his head most violently, he began to motion us back into the hotel. Back inside, Alex had wisely gone off to bed. Giggling like idiots, we also followed him to bed. Throughout our travels my fond memories of Alex would be him sitting hunched forward over a bar-stool, boozed and brooding!

He is a very devoted father and husband. Both in Moscow and Copenhagen he would scour souvenir shops for presents to buy his wife, Blanche, and the children. Yet wonderful as that is, that he is a good father and husband, it is as a writer of fiction that Alex La Guma has to be taken most seriously. Beside this fact, all others are minor.

The man's work

The qualities which make La Guma's fiction so compellingly true and immediate are not simply its fidelity to its own source materials – which is a life of complete and naked brutality under a repressive regime – but the quiet exactness of its tone and the adequacy of its moral pressures. Since the publication of *A Walk in the Night* one has grown accustomed to the stunning precision of his observation and the bare-limbed economy of the prose. I would be prepared to wager that his style owes a lot to a naturalist like Zola and the spare masculine rigour of Hemingway, except that La Guma's determinedly stripped look of prose is, by comparison with, say Hemingway's, even less mannered when one recalls from what accomplished hell the author has been courageous enough to fashion it and how easily it could have degenerated into lusty melodrama.

Instead, La Guma is extremely cool. He shows the paces of a lithe dancer or a boxer in good shape. Every muscle is tight, spare, equal only to the job on hand. Equally tough-minded and self-assured, he does only what any good novelist does and no more, which is to *see* and to see clearly. After seeing, he records it faithfully, but it is his ruthless selection of what counts that makes him, finally, a superb artist. Incidentally, when I say he is a "seer" I really mean it in a banal, grammatical sense and not at all in the sense of unctuous idealism and delirious prophecy. Nevertheless, the selection and accumulation of detail about the lives of the Coloured people he writes about – all those gestures, accents of voice and seamed lineament of face, to say nothing of the suppressed wanton gaieties of District Six which loom behind the prose and which defy the surrounding drabness of much that is described – finally achieve for the author and his characters a moving nobility and tragic pathos which are stronger for being so quiet. Read, if you wish, through the bleak sadness of a story like "A Glass of Wine," the quiet yearning of "Nocturne," or follow the troubled odyssey of Michael Adonis in a novella like *A Walk in the Night*.

In that last book the characters are so real and the atmosphere so authentic that you can actually smell District Six. It is as though La Guma were holding a movie camera on Hanover Street:

Up ahead the music shops were still going full blast, the blare of records all mixed up so you could not tell one tune from another. Shopkeepers, Jewish, Indian and Greek, stood in doorways along the arcade of stores on each side of the street, waiting to welcome last-minute customers; and the vegetable and fruit barrows were still out too, the hawkers in white coats yelling their wares and flapping their brown-paper packets, bringing prices down now that the day was ending. Around the bus stop a crowd

pushed and jostled to clamber into the trackless trams, struggling against the passengers fighting to alight. Along the pavements little knots of Youths lounged in twos and threes or more, watching the crowds streaming by, jeering, smoking, joking against the noise, under the balconies, in doorways, around the plate-glass windows.

Nevertheless, what is often overlooked is the masterly and creative way in which Alex La Guma handles dialogue, which will yet be seen as his major contribution to South African English. What he gets into the English dialogue is really the Afrikaans accents and rhythms of the Cape Malay Coloureds' *taal* and he merges it with English more successfully than any South African writer has done, white or black. The only other writer who does the same, but backwards, since he writes in Afrikaans, is, curiously enough, another Cape Coloured writer: the poet Adam Small. Just listen to Michael Adonis' interior monologues in *A Walk in the Night* –

You ought to get yourself a goose, he thought. You've been messing around too long. You ought to get married and have a family. Maybe you ought to try that goose you met downstairs. Her? *Bedonerd*. When I take a girl she's got to be nice. Pretty nice. With soft hair you can run your hands through and skin so you can feel how soft her cheeks are you'd come home every night *mos* and she'd have your diet ready

– and so on. Like “Mais oui!” in French, that *mos* carries a lot of weight for Alex La Guma.

Nevertheless, something is beginning to worry me about each novel which comes out from La Guma. My misgivings apply even more strongly to his recent novel *The Stone Country*. What worries me is the almost wilful limitation which La Guma places upon himself by working almost totally within what is essentially a short-story mould. *A Walk in the Night* is, after all, just a long short story, and there are things even a good short story cannot do. In Alex La Guma the limitations of canvas prevent him from exploring in depth the relationship between his characters and developing the many levels of perceptions to which the situations seem to lead.

In *And a Threefold Cord*, which is an examination of events leading to a number of interlinked disasters – the death of a Coloured patriarch, Dad Pauls, the arrest and jailing of his son, Ronnie, the accidental burning of Freda's child by a primus stove – the story begins well and accumulates the kind of details that throw light on the deep sense of entrapment in which all the characters find themselves and which, in a way, makes their final disasters irresistible. They are foredoomed. Again, the canvas which La Guma allows himself is too small for him to explore further and deepen the relationships

between the characters. We know nothing about Susie Meyer's hopes and dreams, for instance, for what we see is only a warped, garishly painted whore who is responsible for some disasters in the Pauls family. And yet the feeling lingers that there is more in the girl than La Guma allows us to see. It is simply not good enough that we know she is the product of the slums and a society as cruel as the South African one. People's failures are, after all, individual and their deaths are individual deaths. Also, the disasters begin to overtake one another toward the end of the book with an overlapping coincidence which may be within the realm of possibility but has to be worked at sufficiently to conceal the air of contrivance. Indeed, except for Charlie Pauls none of the characters in *And a Threefold Cord* are given enough time and space to develop their own individuality. The white garage-owner's engagement with Susie is, to say the very least, quite perfunctory.

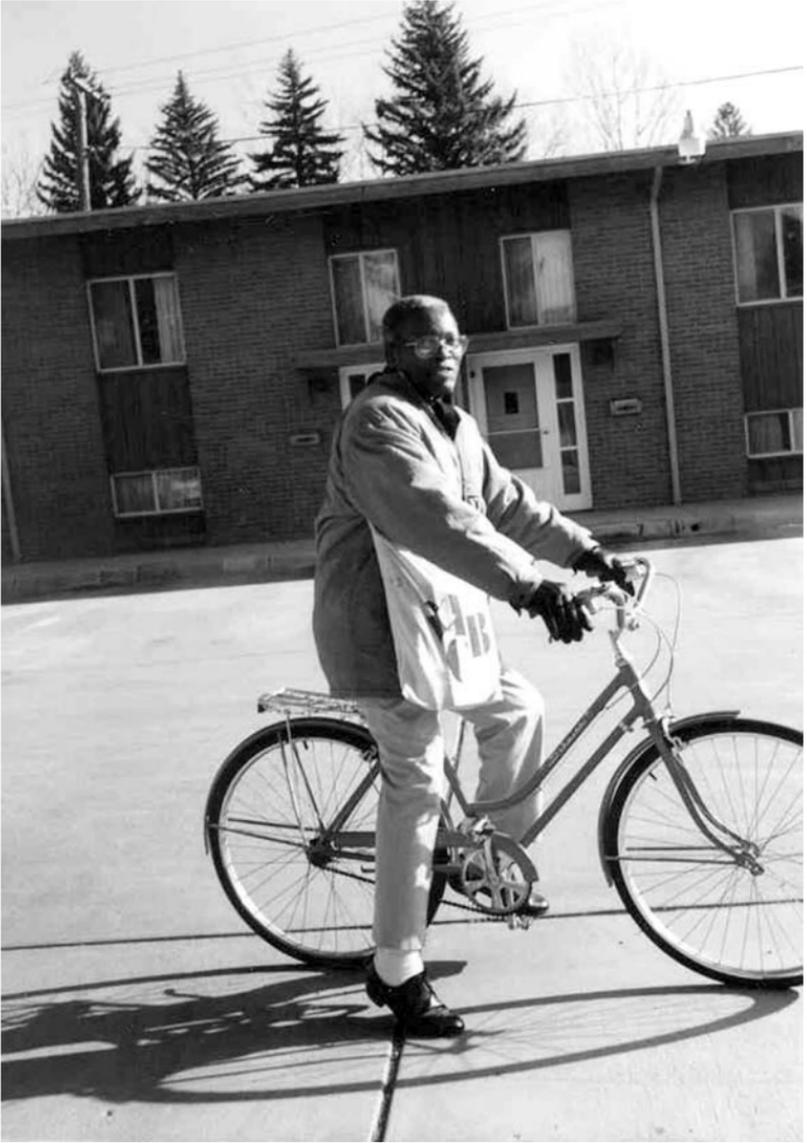
The problem in *The Stone Country* is the same, though it presents itself in a different form. What La Guma has here for a setting is the "stone country" behind the bars of a South African prison. He explores the relationship of his hero, George Adams, a man arrested for his politics, with both the criminal elements and the warders who make up the prison community. There are some wonderful, even humorous sketches of a variety of characters: Butcher-boy, the bully, who terrorizes all the other inmates with the assistance of his sidekicks; Solly, the irresistible ironist who knows the score only too well and survives under all kinds of circumstances; the pathetic figure of Casbah, the Kid, soon to be hanged for murder, a young boy with a personality so blasted that he is capable of pitying neither himself nor anyone else. In a sense, the "stone country" is South African society at large, and La Guma shows the futility of individual escapes from this jail.

Nonetheless, the characters are still 'types'. Prison 'types', to be sure. In themselves, they have very little weight as people. Even George Adams, who provides the moral centre for the novel, is surprisingly flat and faceless. For those who have never been on the non-white side of a South African jail, I suppose the story is instructive in its realistic detail, but for me it is very little else. The trouble there, again, is the narrow confines of La Guma's setting. The bleak routine of a South African jail, or any jail for that matter, repeats itself endlessly; and unless the writer is interested in exploring the interior life of his characters, unless he can perform an extended investigation of their psyches under pressure, or use the flashback method more extensively to relate us to the life outside, he *tells* everything about what happens to them in jail but *illuminates* nothing.

It is as though La Guma's skill with the short story, his economy of language and gesture, has rendered him incapable of attempting a South African *War and Peace* or *The South African Tragedy*. He is in danger of allowing his

very real talent to dwindle into a crotchety old lady knitting a pair of gloves on a Cape Town balcony. What La Guma needs now is to jump bail and range at large in the South African society. He needs to expand. Only a big novel will free him from the exigencies of Cape Malay homecooking!





16 Back from teaching, Wyoming, USA, 1991 (Lewis Nkosi)

15.3 Negritude: New and Old Perspectives¹

LEWIS NKOSI

1

NO WORK purporting to introduce the student to African literature can be said to have accomplished its task without some explanatory remarks on the theory of Negritude. Admittedly, such an undertaking is an onerous one, requiring as it does an amount of patience, fairness and impartiality that is often beyond the capacity of any one critic. Why this should be so can at once be fully grasped by taking into account the mass of confusing, often contradictory statements, the passionate assertions and counter-assertions, that have characterized the Negritude controversy these past ten years. A useful starting-point in any discussion of Negritude is a brief survey of some of the pronouncements that have been made for and against its general philosophy.

In what must surely rank as the understatement of the century, the black American critic and poet Samuel W. Allen once observed of Negritude that it was not “amenable to easy definition.”² The term, said Allen, appeared to “serve in somewhat varying roles” those who employed it. While acknowledging this difficulty, Allen made a brave attempt to provide various definitions of Negritude. “It represents in one sense,” he said, “the Negro African poet’s endeavours to recover for his race a normal self-pride, a lost confidence in himself, a world in which he again has a sense of identity and a

¹ From *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981).

² Samuel W. Allen, “Tendencies in African Poetry,” in *Africa as Seen by American Negroes*, ed. American Society of African Culture (Paris: Présence africaine, 1958): 182.

significant role.”³ According to Allen, “The Negro is denied an acceptable identity in Western culture.”⁴ And:

this preoccupation with the situation of the Negro in a culturally alien world common to the vast majority of Negro African poets has given birth in the French language to the central concept of *négritude*.⁵

It is now common knowledge that the man who invented the term Negritude is the great Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, co-founder with Léopold Senghor of *L'Étudiant noir* in the Paris of the 1930s. In a most illuminating interview describing the precise conditions which gave rise to the Negritude concept, Césaire told the Haitian poet René Depestre, during the Havana Cultural Congress in 1967:

We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are – that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations. At the time we began to write people could write a history of world civilization without devoting a single chapter to Africa, as if Africa had made no contributions to the world. Therefore we affirmed that we were Negroes and that we were proud of it, and that we thought that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity; in sum, we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world.⁶

As a movement of political revolt against the tyranny of Western culture over those who were colonized by Europe; as an attempt to restore pride and dignity to those denuded of either hope or racial identity, Negritude was fairly easy to understand or defend: and if the objection is made, as it is so often made, that the great mass of white people who made up the white West were

³ Allen, “Tendencies in African Poetry,” 183.

⁴ Samuel W. Allen, *The American Negro Writer and His Roots* (New York: American Society of African Culture, 1970): 9.

⁵ Allen, “Tendencies in African Poetry,” 183.

⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, tr. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972): 76.

themselves victims of economic oppression and exploitation, then the blacks, in the words of Césaire, “were doubly proletarianised and alienated: in the first place as workers, but also as blacks.”⁷

It was for this reason that in his monumental poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* Césaire put all his passionate lyricism at the service

of those who never tamed steam or electricity
those who did not explore sea or sky
but who know in their innermost depths
the country of suffering

The poem was a great paean to the humiliated and oppressed blacks; also a noble attempt by a great poet of the French language to reclaim for these ‘down-trodden’ and ‘wretched of the earth’ a certain measure of human dignity. Seen from such a perspective, and apart from its profound historical consequences for the black literature of Africa and the New World, Negritude was primarily a movement of political reaction: indeed, most of the leading theorists of Negritude have at one time or another emphasized the essentially political aspect of the movement’s concerns without denying its cultural dimension or its undoubtedly fructifying results for black literature, especially the poetry of the period between the two world wars. Even those figures in the movement now regarded as fundamentally conservative have been no less emphatic on this point. M. Léopold Senghor, the poet-president of Senegal, and the movement’s most celebrated spokesman and theoretician in Africa, has insisted: “Africa’s misfortune has been that our secret enemies, in defending their values, have made us despise ours.”⁸ This conclusion led Senghor to assert, somewhat controversially, the primacy of African values in everything concerning Africans or people of African ancestry:

The spirit of African civilization animates, consciously or unconsciously, the best Negro artists and writers of today, both in Africa and America. Insofar as they are aware of African culture and draw inspiration from it, they rise to international status. Insofar as they turn their backs on Mother Africa, they degenerate and are without interest.⁹

Senghor’s exposition of Negritude is extremely complex, suggestive, poetic, even subtly conjectural. In contrast to the rest of his pronouncements on Negritude, his most-quoted definition is at once breathtakingly simple and

⁷ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 76.

⁸ Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. John Reed & Clive Wake (London: Oxford UP, 1965): 97.

⁹ Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, 97.

impossibly panoramic: "Negritude," he has told us, "is simply the sum total of civilized values of the black world,"¹⁰ a proposition which explains everything while explaining nothing. Senghor is not content, however, to leave matters at that: his definition soon narrows down sufficiently to give us some clue to his rather detailed ideas about what he means by Negritude. Senghor's Negritude, at any rate, is not simply a matter of political protests; it also involves an African ontology, an essentially African way of perceiving reality and the relations between beings or forces inhabiting the universe.

For instance, at his most controversial, Senghor distinguishes between what he calls "African rationality" and that of the European races. The European, says Senghor, is distinguishable from the African by his worship of the "objective intelligence." To understand the world he must analyse, and to analyse he must kill and dissect. "White men," says Senghor, perhaps enjoying the inversion of a long-standing joke, "are cannibals." The African, on the other hand, is "shut up inside his black skin [...] He does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, the tree or stone." The Negro or the African uses "intuitive reason," he abandons himself to the object: "Classical European reason is analytical and makes use of the object. African reason is intuitive and participates in the object." Furthermore, the African, according to Senghor, "reacts more faithfully to the stimulus of the object. He is wedded to its rhythm. This physical sense of rhythm, rhythm of movements, forms and colours, is one of his specific characteristics, for rhythm is the essence of energy itself."¹¹

These and other similar assertions by Senghor have been the source of a major dispute among African writers and intellectuals. His pronouncements have been variously pronounced "racist," "unscientific" and worse. Nonetheless, Senghor does enjoy formidable support among certain English-speaking African intellectuals who see nothing 'unscientific' in the proposition that Africans possess certain unique characteristics which distinguish them from Europeans or Asians. One of the most articulate of these intellectuals is the Nigerian literary critic Abiola Irele, a product of English schools and the Sorbonne, a fact which probably explains both his skill in handling abstract categories and his sympathy with some of his French-speaking African colleagues who are the main proponents of the Negritude theory. However, Irele's re-interpretation of Senghor's thoughts acquires its peculiar force from

¹⁰ Opening address by President Senghor at Dakar Conference on African Literature and the Universities, April, 1963, published in *African Literature and the Universities: Papers of the Congress for Cultural Freedom Conference, Dakar and Freetown 1963*, ed. Gerald Moore (Ibadan: Ibadan UP/Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1965).

¹¹ Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, 29–34.

a trenchant style, at once aggressively polemical and relying to some extent on what may be termed the 'objective facts' of the situation. His interpretation¹² begins with the hypothesis of a pan-African 'cultural world view' according to which, despite some obvious internal differences, all African cultures can be said to be united into a single pan-Negro whole. "A fundamental basis of negritude," he has asserted, "is the unity of African culture." Irele acknowledges that there are certain objections to this view, but goes on to argue: "Surely there is something in common, in the way of perception that distinguishes the Negro-African from the European and the Asian. The unity of African culture does not exclude internal variations." Irele then develops this argument further at some length:

Apart from empirical considerations such as those dictated by racial affinity, there are objective proofs of a fundamental African world system, which embraces Bantu, Akan, Yoruba, Kikuyu and Zulu together in one cultural family. This fundamental conception of the world is expressed in languages, music and art that are related, and that are surely distinguishable from European and Asian, and more profoundly still in the religions of the African peoples.

The writer insists that these differences are objectively ascertainable, and challengingly asserts: "I find nothing to contradict the thesis of a unified African universe."

Indeed, there is already a considerable body of ethnological data to support the belief held by many contemporary scholars of African societies that there is a certain 'ensemble of African cultural values' which constitutes a so-called 'Pan-Negro cultural universe'. Such a universe is predicated, first of all, upon the essential 'unity of African cultures', until recently a much disputed concept. Not only is the 'unity of African cultures' an often disputed concept but some critics of Negritude have gone further: they have rejected any suggestion that there are unique elements in African cultures which are not discoverable in one form or another in other human cultures. On the face of it, there appears to be a lot in this argument, but I think most commentators would agree with Senghor when he argues that even those features which African cultures share with other cultures "are not found elsewhere united in the same equilibrium and with quite the same illumination."¹³

Even those scholars who for convenience tend to divide sub-Saharan Africa into specific 'culture areas' concede that despite the apparent variety of

¹² Abiola Irele, "A Defence of Negritude," *Transition* 9/50 (March–April 1964): 39ff.

¹³ Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, 76.

African cultures there is a certain underlying unity which collectively distinguishes them from West and Eastern civilizations. In his work *Civilizations of Black Africa*, Professor Jacques Maquet, who, as must be obvious from the title of his book, believes there is not just one but several African civilizations, is equally prepared to concede that “to the degree to which more similarities are found between the various cultures of Africa than between African and non-African cultures, it is justifiable to place the African cultures in a separate category”;¹⁴ and the Ghanaian philosopher Professor W.E. Abraham observes that African cultures belong to a “world view to which can be related all other cultural concepts, including those of religion and theology, morality and social organisation.”¹⁵ It is just upon the validity of this hypothesis of a ‘pan-African world view’ that any basis can be found for supporting any idea of a possible cultural link between New World Negroes and Africans; and it is upon this link, in turn, between New World blacks and their ancestral African cultures, determined on a purely objective basis of ethnological findings, that the theory of Negritude stands to benefit most.

Ironically enough, it was Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and a white man, who wrote what has become a seminal essay¹⁶ for any further explorations of the philosophy of Negritude. When Sam Allen observed in passing that Negritude was “unsettling to many because it puts into the realm of the explicit that which might more comfortably remain in the area of the implicit,” he was merely repeating what Sartre had already stated in more forceful terms in a work to which most commentaries on Negritude have since become unusually indebted. In his famous preface to Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948), Sartre stated categorically that the Negro writer “can scarcely express negritude in prose.”¹⁷ Enlarging on what he described as “the folly of the enterprise of speech,” Sartre saw language essentially as prose, “and prose, in essence, failure,”¹⁸ so that Negritude could only be evoked by words “always allusive, never direct.” For Sartre, the source of all poetic experience, especially a poetry trying to express the essence of Negro being, was this “feeling of failure before the language when considered as a means of direct expression.”¹⁹ Thus Allen, too, contrasting poetry with the demands of realism in

¹⁴ Jacques J. Maquet, *Civilizations of Black Africa*, rev. & tr. Joan Rayfield (*Afrique, les civilisations noires*, 1962; London & New York: Oxford UP, 1972).

¹⁵ W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962): 45.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, tr. S.W. Allen (Paris: Gallimard, 1976): 24.

¹⁷ Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, 24.

¹⁸ *Orphée Noir*, 25.

¹⁹ *Orphée Noir*, 24.

the novel, speculated that it was probably “not by chance that this concept, negritude, originated among the poets rather than among those working in prose.” The poet, according to Allen, “has probably a greater chance to penetrate, at once without apology, and without a setting of the worldly stage, to the deepest levels of his creative concern.”²⁰ Later on, we shall see in fact that it was precisely for this reason that Freudian psychology and the artistic movements such as surrealism held such fascination for the adherents of Negritude. Negritude, after all, was nothing if not an exploration of the collective dreams of black men who had only just awakened from the nightmare of colonialism; and poetry, with its direct visceral routes to the ‘psyche’, or because of its spontaneity, became the essential medium for the expression of the ‘negro-ness’ of Negro people.

If it is true, as one writer has suggested, that Negritude covers “a variety of frequently conflicting tendencies,” it is in Sartre’s great analytical essay that all the various strands, political, cultural and aesthetic, are finally gathered together to illuminate that murky area between theory and experience. Sartre’s analytical tools are a Marxist outlook deepened by his subjective existentialism, one balancing against the other. For Sartre, Negritude is both objective and subjective, an act of ‘becoming’ by black people who, victims of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, have been denied an autonomous existence by an exploitative bourgeois West. Negritude is a ‘myth’, if you will, but a ‘myth’ that becomes reality through a massive effort of political will: the desire of black people to free themselves from white standards of Western culture by a militant assertion of their independent humanity. The African “must compel those who for centuries have vainly attempted, because he was a Negro, to reduce him to the status of the beast, to recognise him as a man.”²¹

Sartre accepts the provisional and temporary aspect of Negritude; after all, as a Marxist he believes in the ultimate unity which will gather into a single combative mail fist all the oppressed of the world, black and white; but, equally, Sartre recognizes that before the blacks can join the white oppressed in a common struggle there must be what he calls a “moment of separation or of negativity.”²² Rhetorically, Sartre asks:

²⁰ Allen, *The American Negro Writer*, 12.

²¹ Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, 15.

²² *Orphée Noir*, 15.

Can black men count on the aid of the white proletariat, distant, distracted by its own struggles, before they have united and organised themselves on their own soil?²³

There must, therefore, be an interim period in which the blacks learn to express their claims “in common,” when “they think of themselves as black men,”²⁴ This Sartre calls “anti-racist racism,” which he hopes finally will lead to the abolition of the differences of race, of all racism. However, a ‘myth’ created for political purposes is only one aspect of Negritude: Sartre also insists that “there exists in effect an objective negritude which expresses itself in the customs, the arts, the songs and the dances of the African population.”²⁵

It is impossible to suggest in the course of one chapter the full range of Sartre’s analysis of Negritude, the startling variety of his poetic insights and the resourcefulness of his mind in the face of the mute and unknowable. His essay deserves the reputation it has acquired over twenty-five years since it was first published. It is not just a skilled enterprise of intellectual analysis; it is also a supreme effort by a Western intellectual to enter imaginatively into the world of black men.

2

The first concerted attack on Negritude began partly as a result of a general disenchantment with the political conservatism of some of the movement’s leading ideologues in the post-independence period of African politics and partly as a result of increased exchanges between French-speaking African intellectuals, with their slightly different experiences of colonialism. For several reasons, some of which will be obvious later, English-speaking African writers have generally been hostile to Negritude, even to some of its literary production.

The debate on the meaning and function of Negritude finally reached its most absurd, sometimes hilarious, but all the same potentially dangerous, climax in March and April of 1963 during the sessions of the Dakar and Freetown conference on “African Literature and the Universities.” I say “potentially dangerous” because the sometimes justified criticisms of Negritude as an ‘aesthetic’ movement were to assume in Dakar and Freetown a groundswell of reaction, at least among English-speaking critics, in which reason-

²³ *Orphée Noir*, 15.

²⁴ *Orphée Noir*, 16.

²⁵ *Orphée Noir*, 31.

able men were compelled to adopt extreme positions, even to confuse ideas with personalities, and there seemed to exist no broader understanding of the tendencies of literature to draw inspiration from ideas or ideologies that are later found to be inadequate, if not questionable. Who, for instance, can deny the validity of a work like *Germinal* merely on the grounds that Zola's pseudo-scientific naturalism has been found wholly inadequate as a theory of literature? The extreme reaction to Negritude, on the other hand, created an atmosphere in which rational men, worrying about the impurity of the water, were inclined to throw the baby out with the bath-water.

At any rate, after the acrimonious proceedings of those two conferences the Negritude movement, if it still had any life in Africa, was generally declared to be 'dead'. As the Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam'si was to put it to fellow delegates: "Let us have done with this question of negritude once and for all!" Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese novelist and film-maker, summed up what has now become a standard response of the Marxist left to Negritude in Africa. "There was a time," said Ousmane, "when negritude meant something positive. It was our breastplate against a culture that wanted at all costs to dominate us. But that is past history." Ousmane went some way to admit that there were values or qualities that "characterized the black races," but maintained that no one had yet worked out exactly what they were: no really thorough study of Negritude had ever been undertaken. The reason, according to Ousmane, is that "negritude neither feeds the hungry nor builds roads."²⁶ Elsewhere,²⁷ Newell Flather, who interviewed the author in Dakar, was to repeat Ousmane's strictures on Negritude in more specific terms. According to Flather, Ousmane is critical of the Negritude movement because "all too often in Africa there is a divorce between words and acts" and "those who preach negritude most ardently are often most closely allied with those who profit from Africa's backwardness."

However, to be truly inclusive, any survey of the critical literature on Negritude must include, at least, the writings and speeches of Ezekiel Mphahlele, the South African writer and critic who, in English-speaking Africa, at any rate, has been the spearhead of a whole attack on Negritude. If nothing else, the value of his contribution to the debate on Negritude has been to open up a dialogue between French- and English-speaking Africans.

²⁶ Sembène Ousmane, talking at a conference on African literature; published in *African Literature and the Universities: Papers of the Congress for Cultural Freedom Conference, Dakar and Freetown 1963*, ed. Gerald Moore (Ibadan: Ibadan UP/Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1965).

²⁷ Newell Flather, interviewing Ousmane at the Dakar Conference, in *Africa Report*.

Mphahlele's difficulties with the more fervent adherents of Negritude, and they with him, are as much the result of emotional entanglements as they are the consequences of genuine intellectual disagreements. For instance, as a black man who has lived and suffered great disabilities under the apartheid regime, Mphahlele tends to see Negritude simply as another version of the racist ideology of the Afrikaners. Reed and Wake, in their preface to the Senghor book, are right to emphasize this aspect of the South African contribution to the debate on Negritude; but they are seriously wrong to underestimate the interaction between white South African perceptions of colour differences and the role they assign to indigenous African cultures as a result of it.²⁸ Mphahlele's objections to Negritude are not simply because this ideology reminds him of the superficial aspects of the race ideology of South Africa; time and again Mphahlele has made it clear that his reservations have something to do with his approach to culture as a human activity: for example, he regards South Africa, despite its apartheid programmes, as having gone some way toward providing a model of 'acculturation' in Africa. Such a process is inevitably not without some conflict, and for black South African intellectuals this conflict is expressed in the following dilemma: "Would it be preferable to call a march back to indigenous culture and thereby help the Government (of South Africa) to reconstruct ethnic groups and help work the repressive machinery, or leave things to drift as they do at the moment, leaving it to individual cultural activity to go the way creative genius guides it?"²⁹

Personally, I think this argument has serious flaws, but the weakness is not the one attributed by Reed and Wake to the South African critics of the theory of Negritude. The weakness in Mphahlele's argument lies in its negative nature, which seems to suggest that no matter how valid the case for Negritude may be, if it can be shown that white racists will benefit from its expression it must therefore be suppressed. Surely, this is conceding too much to white racists: it is virtually to permit them to dictate the shape and the future of the black South Africans, culturally as well as politically; for to be seen as always reacting to what white racists might think of your pronouncements on the black cultural situation scarcely suggests an independence of mind. On the contrary, this reminds one of the time when black Americans used to deny that they could dance better than white people on the grounds that such an admission would reinforce the stereotype of the blacks as being 'more rhythmical'. The arguments for Negritude are either valid or not valid, and their validity does not depend on what white people make of them.

²⁸ Reed & Wake, introduction to Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, xii.

²⁹ Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962): 36.

On the whole, Mphahlele's critique of Negritude has never been an occasion for deep political analysis. In contrast to his thoughtful commentaries on the artistic questions raised by Negritude, Mphahlele's contribution to the debate on the relations between black literature and politics is most perfunctory. Indeed, both Mphahlele and some of the left-wing critics of Negritude have yet to apply themselves seriously to the kind of analysis of race and class that Jean-Paul Sartre so challengingly offered in *Orphée noir* or by Aimé Césaire in the Havana interview³⁰ and elsewhere. It is upon the aesthetic problems raised by ideological affiliations that Mphahlele's criticisms strike their target most consistently. His objections in this area derive from the sensibility of a creative writer, who is, above all, properly suspicious of any ideological prescriptions that would tend to impose certain restrictions on the artist's creative instinct. A clue to the drift of Mphahlele's thinking on the subject can be discerned in even the most casual remarks that he makes on the relationship between Negritude as a principle of black art and the actualities of creative effort as they are experienced by the individual artist. Referring to the Negritude controversy at the Makerere conference of African writers, for example, Mphahlele reported: "We did not dwell on the delegates' defence of *négritude*, because we were not interested in poetry that is written in accordance with a cultural ideology or programme [...] Indeed much of *négritude* poetry has killed itself."³¹ He has warned us further: "We should not allow ourselves to be bullied at gunpoint into producing literature that is supposed to contain a *négritude* theme and style."³² Again, more emphatically, "I say, then, that *négritude* can go on as a socio-political slogan, but that it has no right to set itself up as a standard of literary performance."³³

³⁰ "At that time I criticised the Communists for forgetting our Negro characteristics. They acted like Communists, which was all right, but they acted like abstract Communists. I maintained that the political question could not do away with our condition as Negroes. We are Negroes with a great number of historical peculiarities.

There are people, even today, who still think that it is all simply a matter of the left taking power in France, that with a change in the economic conditions the black question will disappear. I have never agreed with that at all. I think that the economic question is important, but it is not the only thing" (interview by René Depestre in *Casa de las Américas* 49, July–August 1968; tr. in *Savacou* 5, June 1971, and in *Discourse on Colonialism*).

³¹ Mphahlele, remarks on the Makerere Conference.

³² Mphahlele, "A Reply ... Paper in Response to W. Jeanpierre, 'Negritude and its Enemies'," in *African Literature and the Universities: Papers of the Congress for Cultural Freedom Conference, Dakar and Freetown 1963*, ed. Gerald Moore (Ibadan: Ibadan UP/Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1965): 25.

³³ Mphahlele, "A Reply," 25.

At times Mphahlele seems to be merely raising objections no doubt rooted in a certain empiricist Anglo-Saxon tradition, against the need to theorize about the obvious or, if not the obvious, the intangible. What most writers have failed to notice, however, is the distinctly anti-intellectual strain running through most of the Anglo-African criticism of Negritude – as indeed there is in English culture generally, an inherent suspicion of metaphysics which can be seen clearly in the tendency to treat with disdain what is obviously a deeply felt need amongst French intellectuals to construct theoretical models about even the most nebulous phenomena. After Dakar, Mphahlele wrote with bitter irony – mingled, one suspects, with a genuine puzzled curiosity – about French-speaking critics of African literature:

As one listens to the vocabulary of this criticism one experiences various emotional responses: irritation, admiration, humility, because one suspects there is a profound philosophy beneath it all that escapes one, and irritation in turn because of this failure to grasp it.³⁴

Mphahlele's own presentation of the issues is beguilingly simple and unpretentious:

If there is any *négritude* in the black man's art in South Africa, it is because we *are* African. If a writer's tone is healthy, he is bound to express the African in him. Stripped of Senghor's philosophic musings, the African traits he speaks of can be taken for granted.³⁵

A sometimes exasperatingly superficial thinker, Mphahlele nowhere examines the implications, among others, of using a foreign language; nor does he pay any attention to a phenomenon common to the colonized: the adoption of models, whether linguistic or narrative structures, which have been bequeathed to them by the colonizing masters. The point is hardly original, several writers having already commented upon it, from Sartre to Frantz Fanon:

Every colonised people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the

³⁴ Mphahlele, "Postscript on Dakar," in *African Literature and the Universities: Papers of the Congress for Cultural Freedom Conference, Dakar and Freetown 1963*, ed. Gerald Moore (Ibadan: Ibadan UP/Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1965).

³⁵ Mphahlele, *The African Image*, 53.

civilizing nation [...] The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.³⁶

And Sartre puts it even more provocatively when he observes:

it is this language (French), for them half dead, that Damas, Diop, Laleau, Rabéarivelo pour the fire of their skies and of their hearts. Only through it can they communicate; like the scholars of the sixteenth century, who understood each other only in Latin, the blacks rediscover themselves only on the terrain full of the traps which white men have set for them.³⁷

Mphahlele has a simplistic view of literary production: to hear him tell it, a handful of literary primitives, unaware of antecedent literary examples, cheerfully sit down to write and, while doing so automatically, exhibit their African qualities. But of course it is not as simple as that: the literature of black people, in Africa as well as the New World, affords numerous examples of writers who, in attempting to express the soul of black people, were not only betrayed by the language of their colonial masters but sometimes deliberately chose to suppress those spontaneous qualities which make up the emotional content of their lives, in order to gain acceptance into the metropolitan cultures.³⁸

In Mphahlele, above all, we discern, as I have already suggested, a hostility common among Anglo-African critics of Negritude to the type of ratiocination which is characteristically French; if there is any quality to be thought of as Negritude, it is said, it must be grasped as part of an artistic feeling within the work itself and not as an object of intellectual inquiry.

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; New York: Grove, 1967): 18.

³⁷ Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, 22.

³⁸ In his autobiography *A Long Way From Home*, Claude McKay provides an excellent example of the black writer's effort to stifle his own originality: "In Mr. Braithwaite's writings there was not the slightest indication of what sort of American he might be. And I was surprised one day to read in the Negro magazine, *The Crisis*, that he was a colored man. Mr. Braithwaite [William Stanley Braithwaite, critic on the Boston *Evening Transcript*] was kind enough to write me, a very interesting letter. He said that my poems were good, but that, barring two, any reader could tell that the author was a Negro. And because of the almost insurmountable prejudice against all things Negro, he said, he would advise me to write and send to the magazines only such poems as did not betray my racial identity"; *A Long Way From Home: An Autobiography*, intro. St. Clair Drake (1937; New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1970): 27.

Hence Wole Soyinka's now famous maxim: "A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude."

3

What I now propose as a new perspective in the discussion of Negritude is to regard it not as some aberration by a group of racially inspired black men but as part of an old, legitimate, even respectable intellectual tradition which goes back to Kant and the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Anyone who is conversant with the history of the Negritude movement and its origins; anyone, that is, who is even vaguely aware of the acute dissatisfaction felt by the founding members of Negritude with the serene classical detachment of formal French culture, with its cool stately control and rigorous suppression of boisterous emotion – or what one black writer characterized as "the abominable system of constraints and restrictions [...] generally known by the name of Western civilization"; indeed, anyone who can at all understand the restless quest for the wells of authentic Negro expression which these writers felt were being dried up in the fruitless attempt by the colonized blacks to adhere to the bourgeois norms of a discredited system; such an individual will surely read with a surprised recognition Henry D. Aiken's exposition of a similar, though not identical, sense of frustration among certain nineteenth-century philosophers, with the rationalistic norms of Western culture, chiefly those concerned with the modes of intellectual inquiry. In his introduction to *The Age of Ideology*, Aiken writes:

In fact, when one looks beneath the forms of words, one finds that what they were attempting, in effect, was a basic critique not only of reason, but of the entire system of norms and principles of Western culture. This task did not and could not be accomplished simply by using the 'rational' methods which had been traditionally employed in philosophical speculation, for those methods themselves formed a principal part of the culture whose norms were being called in question.³⁹

This dissatisfaction with the rationalistic boundaries of philosophic inquiry and the equally tranquilizing effects of neoclassicism in literature, led to a general rebellion, of which Romanticism was merely a part, that culminated in the extreme forms of twentieth-century 'irrationalism' as exemplified in art by the worship of the 'super-reality' of the surrealist writers and painters and the playful, nihilistic gestures of the Dadaists, In philosophy as well as in art,

³⁹ Henry D. Aiken, *The Age of Ideology* (New York: New American Library, 1956): 21.

with varying degrees of intensity, these movements were to provide a continuous challenge to the long reign of Reason as the sole arbiter of what constituted ‘reality’; sometimes, as with the surrealists, an effort was made to dethrone Reason altogether in favour of other ‘non-rational’ means of gaining access to ‘reality’. Consequently, it should surprise no one that jazz, traditional African art, the pre-logical or non-logical structures of verbal communication, became so much the vogue; traditional African art primarily because of its anti-naturalistic bias: and it is in this respect, of course, that the psycho-analytical ideas of Freud and Jung became so crucial; their elevation of the ‘unconscious’ to an important place as an alternative route to the sources of Being was to furnish the modern artist with the means for uncovering the authentic personality behind the careful surfaces of civilized life. We are not, I think, called upon to minimize certain grave dangers inherent in these ‘irrationalist’ tendencies in order to appreciate their importance in the development of twentieth-century art and philosophy.

At any rate, it ought not to be too difficult to see a connection between the riotous excesses of these movements at the beginning of the century and the equally turbulent birth of Negritude as a gesture of rebellion against the stranglehold of Western culture. After a period of apprenticeship in which they had tried to imitate literary forms that had more to do with European preoccupations than with those of the people among whom they lived, black writers, too, were in a rebellious mood. Perhaps ‘imitate’ is too strong a word, since some of these writers, through education and outlook, genuinely thought of themselves as ‘French’ and did produce some works of exceptional quality; all the same, as the great Haitian scholar Dr Jean Price-Mars so felicitously put it in his essay on Haitian culture, art and literature, “Haitian literature was like a distant echo of a great organ whose sonorous waves spread out in splendid harmonies over the lands of France.”⁴⁰

In the French Antilles, at any rate, after a century or more of flirtation; with neoclassicism or the so-called Parnassianism, these writers discovered they had only succeeded in submerging their individuality beneath metrical verse forms that had nothing essentially to do with the noisy, crowded chaos of black life or its fierce, orgiastic rhythms. To write this type of perennially polished verse, the black poet had, metaphorically, to still the memory of the tom-tom in his blood: for Parnassian serenity and its formal objectivity could only pacify the abrasive anger and diminish the affective power of black verse in the interest of calculation and restraint. It was to this dilemma that Léon Laleau, the Haitian poet, referred in “Trahison,” when he wrote:

⁴⁰ Jean Price-Mars, *De Saint-Domingue à Haïti: Essai sur la culture, les arts et la littérature* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1959): 17.

This haunted heart which does not fit
 The language I speak and the clothes I wear
 This heart upon which squeeze like a cramp-iron
 Sentiments and costumes borrowed
 From Europe: can you sense the suffering
 And that despair to which there is no equal –
 To tame with words from France
 A heart that came to me from Senegal?

Exile and alienation: they were the starting-point in the poetry of Negritude from which spun out the themes of self-recovery, self-vindication and a return to Africa, to the source of all Negro inspiration. The Haitian poet Jacques Roumain expresses this feeling of exile and return in his poem “Guinée”:

It’s the long road to Guinea
 No bright welcome will be made for you
 In the dark land of dark men:
 Under a smoky sky pierced by the cry of birds
 Around the eye of the river
 the eyelashes of the trees open on decaying light
 There, there awaits you beside the water a quiet village,
 And the hut of your fathers, and the hard ancestral stone
 where your head will rest at last.

If we move to North America we find there, too, in the work of a poet of the Negro Renaissance such as Countee Cullen, that the theme of exile was sufficiently strong to require a similar poetic enactment of a symbolical return to a mythical Africa, a sort of “literary Garveyism more romantic than convincing,” as the editors of the *Negro Caravan*⁴¹ once defined this poetry. However, the sense of loss was very real. As Cullen explained his predicament in “Heritage”:

My conversion came high-priced;
 I belong to Jesus Christ,
 Preacher of humility;
 Heathen gods are naught to me.

⁴¹ “Introduction” to the “Poetry” section of *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*, ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis & Ulysses Lee, new introduction by Julius Lester (1941; New York: Arno Press/New York Times, 1969): 281.

However, beneath this apparent Christian decorum lay the authentic feelings, the poet's actual Negritude, if you wish, which were so volatile that you can palpably feel the poet drawing back from their expression:

*All day long and all night through,
 One thing only must I do:
 Quench my pride and cool my blood,
 Lest I perish in the flood.
 Lest a hidden ember set
 Timber that I thought was wet
 Burning like the driest flax,
 Melting like the merest wax,
 Lest the grave restore its dead.
 Not yet has my heart or head
 In the least way realized
 They and I are civilized.*

Yet if we examine the poem closely we begin to see a conundrum at its centre. If you compare the poem with lines from Césaire, for example, "Heritage" suffers from a certain stiffness of metre and regularity of movement which are clearly in conflict with the turmoil that the poem is constantly hinting at. Even the rhyme draws our attention away from the turbulence of emotion that lies just beneath the surface of the verse. It was this dichotomy between form and content that, among other things, began to attract the attention of Negritude poets of the French language.

The immediate problem, then, for the black poet was how to recover his authenticity, how to express that 'beleaguered heart' which came to him from Senegal, in an alien language that was for his purposes frustratingly cold, objective and analytical: or, to put it in another way, the question for the black poet, especially the kind of poet who considered himself the victim of the French language, was how to shatter the carefully polished Apollonian surface of French verse in order to descend once more fully into his unconscious past, a Black Orpheus in search of his Eurydice:

Do you know my other name, that comes to me
 from that vast continent, the name
 that bleeding and imprisoned, crossed the ocean
 in chains [...]?

Ah, you cannot remember it!
 You have dissolved it with immemorial ink.⁴²

⁴² Nicolás Guillén, "The Name," *Black Orpheus* 7 (June 1960).

The instruments that lay close at hand were no different for the black writer than those which the Western artist, in his accumulating frustrations with the proprieties of Western bourgeois society, had already fashioned out of a conglomeration of ideas and techniques, from Marxist economic theories to Freudian interpretation of dreams, from ‘free association’ to verbal *non-sequiturs* or surrealist techniques. I am indebted to Frederick J. Hoffman, the literary historian, for a vivid picture he gives of the spread of Freudian ideas in the 1920s and the 1930s, to which we must link such artistic movements as surrealism, Futurism, and Negritude itself, and the consequences these ideas had for the literary mind. The works of Freud, Hoffman reminds us,

called the attention of writers to the need for a new language – a language based upon the devices of condensation, displacement, multiple determination, and secondary elaboration. In so doing, it suggested to experimentalists the idea of employing ‘absurdities’ in their writing – that is, a repudiation of what is logical and syntactic, for what is illogical and ungrammatical.⁴³

Such a programme suited the militant black writers in the 1930s and 1940s even better. After all, their search for ‘a new language’ to express the nightmare of Negro life had more desperate roots; equally, the search for new forms had a more revolutionary purpose. That in their efforts to liberate themselves from the ‘civilized decorum’ of Western culture these black writers were obliged to make use of the weapons which that culture had itself furnished points, of course, to the irony which we are at liberty to enjoy while appreciating the always underlying drama in the dialectic between colonizer and the colonized.

4

In June 1932 there appeared in Paris a ‘thin brochure’ produced by a group of young West Indian students from the French island of Martinique: the journal, which was called *Légitime défense*, intemperate in language and radical in tone, delivered a broadside against the “suffocating” institutions of the “Christian, bourgeois, capitalist world,” and the young contributors decided they would no longer “make peace with this surrounding ignominy.”⁴⁴ Taking

⁴³ Frederick J. Hoffman, *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1945): 114.

⁴⁴ As quoted in Lilyan Kesteloot’s definitive study *Les écrivains noirs de langue française: Naissance d’une littérature* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1963): 25.

as their masters Marx, Freud, Rimbaud and Breton, they attacked European rationalism, the foul bourgeois conventions and hypocrisy of the capitalist world; instead, they wished to recover for the black man his original personality, and their programme would include the deliberate rejection of existing European models in art and a revolt against the colonial capitalism in politics. But their most violent attack was reserved for the black middle class they had left behind at home, whose principal crime, apparently, was slavishly to imitate everything French, in social manners as well as in art. The literature written by and for this class was “an indigestion of French spirit and the French classics,” and they mocked cruelly “these chatterboxes and the sedative water of their poetry.” The manifesto was signed by Étienne and Thelus Léro, Jules Monnerot, René Menil, Maurice–Sabat Quitman, Michel Pilotin, Simone Yoyotte, all Martiniquais and aged between twenty and twenty-three. Étienne Lero wrote of his elders’ outpouring in literature:

The outsider would look in vain in that literature for a profound or original accent, for the sensual imagination darkened by Negro life, for the echo of the hates or the aspirations of an oppressed people.⁴⁵

This literature, said Menil, would please neither the whites nor the blacks, the whites because it is a pale imitation of French literature, and the blacks for the same reason.⁴⁶ And if there is any doubt as to the impact of the new revolutionary techniques, very much the rage in France, upon these young blacks, one can only draw the reader’s attention to sections of the manifesto:

We accept without reserve the surrealism to which – in 1932 – we tie our future. And we would refer our readers to the manifestoes of André Breton, to the whole work of Aragon, of Breton, of René Crevel, Salvador Dalí, of Paul Éluard, of Benjamin Peret, of Tristan Tzara, of which we must say it is not the least shame of this time that they are not known wherever French is read.⁴⁷

Three of the principal founders of Negritude, Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Léon Damas from French Guyana and Léopold Senghor from Senegal, were all directly influenced by the ideas of the new review. Surrealism was to become, technically, the principal weapon of self-discovery because of its tendency to go directly to the unconscious in order to tap the authentic reservoir of Negro feeling long buried beneath the tamed classicism of French verse and its tired metaphors: in the words of Breton, “the clear-cut intention

⁴⁵ Léro, as quoted by Kesteloot, *Les écrivains noirs de langue française*, 30.

⁴⁶ Menil, as quoted by Kesteloot, *Les écrivains noirs de langue française*, 30.

⁴⁷ Kesteloot, *Les écrivains noirs de langue française*, 44.

[was] to deal the fatal blow to the so-called 'common sense' that has impudently usurped the title of 'reason'."⁴⁸ Césaire, who was to write the first serious poem to embody the Negritude theme and the French surrealist manner, has explained, in the already mentioned Havana interview:

My thinking followed these lines: Well, then, if I apply the surrealist approach to my particular situation, I can summon up these unconscious forces. This, for me, was a call to Africa. I said to myself: it's true that superficially we are French, we bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we plumb the depths, then what we will find is fundamentally black.⁴⁹

Cahier d'un retour au pays natal, Césaire's long poem, which was first published in Paris in 1939, not only affirmed the racial identity of its author, at that time considered a sufficient indiscretion to require a rebuke, but the poem was a clear celebration of all those qualities which Negritude poetry was to enthrone as the most important in the hierarchy of human values: an organic connection between the Negro and the world of nature; unashamed, even aggressive, eroticism; a concern with virility and fertility; the community of all living beings and a recognition of the stultifying effects of the mechanistic, technological civilization of the Western world.

Négritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral
 it thrusts into the red flesh of the soil
 it thrusts into the warm flesh of the sky
 it digs under the opaque dejection of its rightful patience
 Eia for the royal Kailcedrat!
 Eia for those who invented nothing
 for those who have never discovered
 for those who have never conquered!

Not surprisingly, most Negritude verse shares certain striking affinities with a strain in English verse which runs from Blake to D.H. Lawrence. The aggressive sexual imagery or the 'emotional surge of the rhythms' in D.H. Lawrence or the hot passionate intensity in Blake, with its mystical undertones, find their echoes in much of the poetry which is characterized as belonging to the Negritude mode! The distinction, if there is any distinction to be made, between Negritude poetry on the one hand, and romantic – or

⁴⁸ André Breton, preface to Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1956): 24.

⁴⁹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 68.

Lawrence's "organic" – poetry on the other, subsists almost entirely in the curiously violent but understandable reversal of colour values to which Negritude poets felt themselves committed by virtue of their racial identity. For the first time we find the colour of blackness elevated to a principle not only of immense vitality and fecundity but also of great beauty and majesty; and in the exuberant emotion of self-discovery even the God of the white Christians is somehow transformed into a black God:

Black of eternal blackness
 With large voluptuous lips
 Matted hair and brown liquid eyes...⁵⁰

The blackness becomes, finally, a colour of absorbing sensual richness and aggressive virility, often contrasted favourably with the pallid weakness of the devitalized white hue. This glorification of blackness as the colour in which 'life' inheres led Jacques Roumain, a mulatto poet, to cry out in bitter anguish:

Listen to those voices singing the sadness of love
 And in the mountains: hear that tom-tom
 panting like the breast of a young black girl

 Your soul is this image in the whispering water where
 your fathers bent their dark faces
 Its hidden movements blend you with the waves
 And the white that made you a mulatto is this bit
 of foam cast up, like spit, upon the shore.⁵¹

The contrast is further insisted upon in Léon Damas' poem "Limbe":

Give me back my black dolls
 To disperse
 The image of pallid wenches, vendors of love
 going and coming
 on the boulevard of my boredom.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Ras Khan, "The Poetry of Dr. R.E.G. Armattoo," *Présence africaine* (February–March 1957).

⁵¹ Jacques Roumain, "Quand bat le tam-tam," in *Panorama de la poésie haïtienne*, ed. Carlos Saint-Louis & Maurice A. Lubin (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1950).

⁵² Léon–Gontran Damas, "Limbe," in Damas, *Pigments* (Paris: Guy Lévy Mano, 1937), and in Senghor, ed. *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, 8.

Or in Senghor's famous poem "Manhattan," in which the city is divided into Black and White, into Night and Day, White Manhattan staring at herself in the mirror of a Black Harlem, and the poet sums up the white city:

All the birds of the air
 Fall suddenly dead below the high ashes of the terraces
 No child's laughter blossoms, his hand in my fresh hand
 No mother's breast. Legs in nylon. Legs and breasts with no
 sweat and no smell.

But Harlem, ah, Harlem hums "with sounds and solemn colour and flamboyant smells" and the pavements are "ploughed by the bare feet of dancers." Harlem belongs to Night rather than Day – belongs, that is, to the "Festival of Darkness."

I proclaim there is more truth in the Night than in the Day.

In Brazil, curiously enough, Negritude was linked not only to the modernist movement, with its sudden lurch into neorealism after the suffocating influence of European (Iberian) classical and romantic forms, but also to the country's strenuous attempts to free herself from European tutelage, which drove writers like Mário de Andrade and Jorge de Luna to emphasize non-European elements in the formation of the Brazilian character.⁵³ Necessarily, this struggle for cultural autonomy had the further significance of releasing Afro-Brazilian writers from their colonial dependence and was to propel them toward investigating in their prose and poetry the lives of black Brazilians who had hitherto appeared only as exotic 'relief' in Brazilian literature. It also explains why this literature embraces themes of anticolonial protest in which the expulsion or suppression of African traits in the national literature is seen as reaction to a "supine, colonial mentality, for they passively allow a European model to serve as a national image."⁵⁴ There is an easy transition from the odes of José Craveirinha, an African from Mozambique, protesting against the colonial mentality of his people, against the

intolerant love of their Gospels,
 the mystique of glass beads and gunpowders,
 the logic of machine gun chatter,
 and songs from lands we do not know.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Richard A. Preto-Rodas's essay "The Development of Negritude in the Poetry of the Portuguese" in *Artists and Writers in the Evolution of Latin America*, ed. Edward D. Terry (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1969): 55–69.

⁵⁴ "The Development of Negritude in the Poetry of the Portuguese," 58.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Preto-Rodas, "The Development of Negritude," 62.

to the angry cry of an Afro-Brazilian exhorting his black brothers:

cast aside your tame glances, your timidity, and your
 eternally happy smile...
 be hard, black man
 hard
 like the post on which they lashed you a thousand times
 Be black, black, black
 marvellously black.⁵⁶

And, quite evidently, we have come full circle to the great anticolonial poetry of Césaire himself. Not only did Césaire introduce a new word to the French language, but his poem had immense influence on other young poets, in the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America. Its rhythms, the explosion of imagery and the frank avowal of racial pride and identity, was to set an example that other poets felt obliged to follow.

In the triumvirate that included Césaire and Damas, Léopold Senghor had the distinction of actually having lived the life that Western blacks could only re-create from books. Again it is Césaire who acknowledges the debt:

At the time I knew absolutely nothing about Africa. Soon afterwards I met Senghor, and he told me a great deal about Africa. He made an enormous impression on me: I am indebted to him for the revelation of Africa and African singularity.⁵⁷

There is some dispute among critics as to how successful Césaire and others were in employing the surrealist techniques of free-association and semi-automatic writing as a means of mining the Negro psyche for racial memories of the African past. Roger Bastide has argued convincingly, it seems to me, that even if there was such a thing as a ‘collective memory’, the sense in which Jung employed the term implied memories of the ‘human’ rather than a particular race. According to Bastide, ‘Africa’ in Césaire’s poetry is a “willed construction of his creative imagination, by way of reading’ and ‘not a dictate of his subconscious.’”⁵⁸ Césaire, says Bastide, is a “White poet,” albeit a very great one.⁵⁹ It is also said, I think rather questionably, that there

⁵⁶ Quoted in Preto–Rodas, “The Development of Negritude,” 62.

⁵⁷ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 69.

⁵⁸ Roger Bastide, “Variations on Negritude,” in *Negritude: Essays and Studies; A Centennial Publication*, ed. Albert H. Berrian & Richard A. Long (Hampton VA: Hampton Institute Press, 1967): 76–77. Originally published in *Présence africaine* 8.36 (1961): 83–92.

⁵⁹ Bastide, “Variations on Negritude,” 79.

is something too deliberate about Césaire's technique for it to be an unconscious rendering of Negritude: but, surely, surrealism, except among the madmen and poseurs, was never intended to imply a complete abandonment of technical control. What Césaire and other poets of the Negritude school achieved was to restore vitality to the French language: they did so by infusing French with the robust rhythms of the West Indies, by exploiting imagery and metaphors whose nightmarish quality had justification in the actual objective conditions of Negro life. If one sometimes found echoes of 'Africa' in their works it was because some of these writers had made the conscious effort to saturate themselves in the living folklore of West Indian peasants, the descendants of former African slaves who are by all accounts the single most important source of African inspiration in the New World.

5

What I have been at pains to show here is that both the philosophical assumptions underlying Negritude and the strategies which Negritude writers were compelled to adopt in the actual production of their work came out of a specific intellectual tradition; they were part of a particular climate and a particular mood. It may be embarrassing to those worshippers at the shrine of Negritude, who see it as the embodiment of a racial distinctness, to be reminded that Negritude is really a bastard child whose family tree includes, apart from the living African heritage, Freudianism, Marxism, surrealism and Romanticism.

Has Negritude, as has sometimes been argued by its critics, outlived its role? Frankly, I think not. Whatever intellectual problems are raised by Negritude, its importance for black literature in places as different as Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean has been enormous; with the present growth of the 'black consciousness' movement in South Africa, a wholly new political and cultural phenomenon, a reassessment of the Negritude movement and its origins may once again be in order. In the United States, a resurgence of a black cultural nationalism, with its insistence on a re-evaluation of the role of the African heritage in the experience of black Americans, has resulted in radical changes in the structuring of academic courses and the selection of their content that is bound to influence new scholarship as well as stimulate fresh creativity on the part of the young blacks.

Whatever the case may be, Negritude, as part of a history of ideas as much as for its past and present influence on black writing, must continue to provide an area of legitimate interest for any student of African literature.

15.4 White Writing*

LEWIS NKOSI

Nadine Gordimer (1988) *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. London: Jonathan Cape.

J.M. Coetzee (1988) *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven, Connecticut & London: Yale University Press.

IT IS A REMARKABLE FACT, when you think about it, that South African literature has developed almost entirely without the existence of any strong local criticism. The review essay in the academic and the literary journals, sometimes written with verve and even extreme elegance, the kind of which the novelist Dan Jacobson has been the undisputed master, has represented almost the sole intervention of a critical consciousness in our literary activities.

For white writers with their easy access to university education, to well-stocked public libraries and an easily definable literary culture, this has not mattered much. For black writers, often poor and cut off from many of these supportive cultural institutions, the absence of any informed local criticism has been wholly disastrous. As Nadine Gordimer notes in one of the essays in *The Essential Gesture*, back in the early 1960s Ezekiel Mphahlele and I made an attempt to inaugurate such a criticism from the distance of European exile, but the books were quickly banned from the country. Thereafter the black cultural debate was confined, in the words of Nadine Gordimer, “to conferences of exiles and exiles’ publications and at home to a clandestine affair

* *Third World Quarterly* 11.1 (1989): 157–60.

showing itself here and there in white and/or literary journals.”¹ Although this is no longer strictly true, as the critical interventions of Njabulo Ndebele will tend to show, for a long time the absence of a strong critical tradition in the black community meant that writers who might have benefited from a vigorous critical debate were compelled to create their works in a kind of aesthetic void, subject to the pressures of mindless political fiat, always a prey to the critical vandalism of white do-gooders.

The Essential Gesture is a labour of love during which Stephen Clingman (who published a full-length study of Nadine Gordimer in 1986), in collaboration with his author, has compiled a catalogue of some 160 titles out of which they made this selection. In some respects it can be said that the pieces brought together here belong exactly to the kind of casual commentaries on art and letters which I described as characterizing the only mode of cultural criticism to which the South African public has been accustomed. The dominant interest they provide is merely to confirm what we only know of Gordimer’s private and public preoccupations from reading her novels. Of more than casual interest is the title essay, “The Essential Gesture,” and “Living in the Interregnum,” in which the novelist, with a rare passion, stakes a claim to the life of the imagination without yielding ground on her claims to an ethical life.²

The kinds of novels which J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer write are as different in style and form as are the approaches which the two writers adopt in their considerations of cultural issues. Not only is one type of discourse quite different from the other but the levels at which the two writers engage with South African culture or its absence are also different. I speak of its “absence” because it is arguable whether in a country in which the races remain so deeply divided by force of statute, by force of habit and habitation, we are at all entitled to speak of a single South African culture rather than of a number of ethnic or national cultures. In fact, it is precisely to that question that both these books address themselves: how a single national consciousness is to be attained and a South African identity achieved. Both books reflect the frustrations experienced by whites in trying to forge an identity separate from that of the black majority. Coetzee is very clear on this:

In this way, we see better why the lone poet in empty space is by no means a peripheral figure in South African writing. In the words he

¹ Nadine Gordimer, “Relevance and Commitment” (1979), in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. & intro. Stephen Clingman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988): 141.

² Gordimer, “The Essential Gesture” (1984) and “Living in the Interregnum” (1982), in *The Essential Gesture*, 285–300 and 261–84 respectively.

throws out to the landscape, in the echoes he listens for, he is seeking a dialogue with Africa, a reciprocity with Africa, that will allow him an identity better than that of a visitor, stranger, transient. (8)

Then Coetzee fingers the dilemma of the South African poet of landscape:

It began to be apparent that the ultimate fate of whites was going to depend a great deal more urgently on an accommodation with black South Africans than on an accommodation with the South African landscape. (8)

What constitutes the difference, therefore, between the two books is hardly that most fundamental question which agitates white South Africa; more than anything else it is a question of style. Gordimer is personal: "I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen from the interregnum," she told her New York audience in the 1982 lecture included in this book.³ She also sounds more politically involved – one might even say more politically anguished – by the spectacle of her country's drift toward revolutionary violence and race war. Over the years her fiction has been nothing if not a careful annotation of that anguish.

To my knowledge, Coetzee has never participated in or lent his very considerable prestige to the anti-apartheid struggle. Although this might have been just a pose, at times he has even expressed doubt as to the propriety of describing him as "a South African novelist." In a 1983 interview with Tony Morphet, he was asked whether he considered the task of writing *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) to have been presented to him by "the history of South Africa specifically," and Coetzee's answer was astonishingly non-committal: "I sometimes wonder whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a 'South African novelist'."⁴

Not surprisingly, Coetzee's tone in *White Writing* is more detached and the mode of analysis more academic than Gordimer's passionate, self-lacerating engagement with her subject-matter, which is by no means the same thing as saying Coetzee's cultural analyses are therefore less politically useful. What Coetzee has set out to do and sometimes succeeds magnificently in doing is to analyze the ways in which white observers, visitors and settlers alike, from the days of the first settlement of the Cape by the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century to modern literary interpreters, have attempted to read the

³ Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum," 264.

⁴ Tony Morphet, "Two Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987," *TriQuarterly* 69 (Spring–Summer 1987): 454–64.

South African landscape. They have failed, in Coetzee's opinion, because they tried to impose on an alien African landscape a European framework and conventions of reading landscape, deriving from the interpretive code built up from the genre of the pastoral and the picturesque. In Coetzee's words: "This landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it." For if the real Africa "will always slip through the net woven by European categories," the question arises "whether native African languages may not be in harmony with the landscape as European languages are not." Somewhere Coetzee poses the question, but hardly gives us a satisfactory answer, as to how it was that white settlers in America were able to naturalize their language to the new landscape. He writes:

It is no oversimplification to say that landscape art and landscape writing in South Africa from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth revolve around the question of finding a language to fit Africa, a language that will be authentically African.

However, this could never be achieved simply by asking the European to learn an African language "from outside"; he would have to know the language "'like a native', sharing the mode of consciousness of the people born to it, and *to that extent giving up his European identity*" (italics mine).

In Coetzee's view, the problems of representation "raised by the interior plateau, and particularly by the flat, arid Karoo," were more daunting, more intractable to first attempts by poets of European background: "the problems, to put it in its crudest form, of finding enough in the landscape to fill the painting or poem; or, to put it in a different way, of finding an art form responsive to 'empty' country" (49). Coetzee has enough fun showing that once the poet's attempts at a dialogue with the African landscape are disappointed the confrontation "becomes more and more antagonistic"; tracking down a poem in which A.S. Cripps attempts to bring the veld to life by resort to what Coetzee calls "metaphoric excesses," he wryly observes that "because they [such metaphorical excesses] fail to compel the veld to yield up its essence they are predictably followed by a reaction in which the veld is condemned as unresponsive to language":

What can you yield of delight to those who [...]
Seek for elusive Beauty, crave for the spell of her voice?
(Lines from Cripps's poem).

At the end of the most provocative reading of the early attempts by white South African settlers to domesticate an alien landscape, Coetzee sums up:

The dominating questions, particularly in poetry, become: How are we to read the African landscape? Is it readable at all? Is it readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language? Is the very enterprise of reading the African landscape doomed, in that it prescribes the quintessentially European posture of reader vis-à-vis environment? Behind these questions, in turn, lies a historical insecurity regarding the place of European heritage in the African landscape such as we do not encounter in America – an insecurity not without cause.

I have given disproportionate space to Coetzee's chapters on the ways in which white settlers in South Africa tried to represent landscape in their writing and painting because, unexpectedly, they are by far the richest and most suggestive in the book; by comparison, though long, the chapters on the Farm Novel and the novels of "blood and the taint of miscegenation," besides raising serious issues of interpretation which I have not the space to consider here, are laboured and constitute the dreariest parts of the book. Similarly, distorted visitor accounts of "Hottentot idleness" are the commonplace of colonial literature. Our only surprise is Coetzee's own surprise at such distorted views.

The only major weakness in Coetzee's hermeneutic project is to have left out of account altogether black writing, even if such an exclusion is to be justified by a certain economy of reading. This exclusion, which has only negligible results elsewhere, is severely distortive in parts of Coetzee's analyses. There is no way, for example, in which Coetzee can find answers to some of the questions he has been asking except by drawing upon the evidence of traditional oral literatures and contemporary writing of the indigenous populations – questions such as: is the African landscape readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language? It is not true, as Coetzee tries to argue, that "among black writers, even those of dual African-English linguistic culture, the mode (landscape poetry), without precedent in the vernaculars, has barely been practised" (174). True, in traditional African poetry poetic celebration of nature is integrated with other concerns, and in that sense does not constitute a separate genre of poetry, and as far as contemporary writing is concerned we have to know just how much weight we are to place on Coetzee's use of the modifier in "barely practised." In any case, is it only in the art of verse as understood in Europe that nature is to be 'read' in the works of black writers? Might not their prose works, assuming we know how to distinguish poetry from prose here, give us just as valid a description of African landscape as filtered through an African consciousness? To enter these caveats is hardly to minimize the value of Coetzee's interpretive enterprise, and few will wish to quarrel with the final paragraph in *White Writing*:

From William Burchell to Laurens van der Post, imperial writing has seen as the truest native of South Africa the Bushman, whose romance has lain precisely in his belonging to a vanishing race. Official historiography long told a tale of how until the nineteenth century of the Christian era the interior of what we now call South Africa was un-peopled. The poetry of empty space may one day be accused of furthering the same fiction.



15.5 Bloke Modisane: *Blame Me On History**

LEWIS NKOSI

1

TO WRITE AN INTRODUCTION to this book is an act not only of homage but also of conversion. When I first read Bloke Modisane's memoir of his life in South Africa some twenty-seven years ago I was frankly appalled, not so much by what at times seemed to be the author's incessant compulsive need to confess on every other page to some act of indiscretion, moral baseness or deceit – after all, among its many other pleasures, one of the most dependable lures to the reader of modern autobiography is the promise of disclosure of human vice and folly – but what in my young age astonished me about Modisane's book was the author's apparent lack of self-consciousness, his unbelievable insouciance, which permitted him not only to tell all but to presume on the sympathy and understanding of the reader concerning his own failures and shortcomings. I must hasten to add that though it can be read as a straightforward attempt by the author to blame every personal inadequacy on the circumstances of his birth and upbringing in racist South Africa, the title of this book alludes to a passage of elaborate irony in which Modisane not only mocks at such 'rationalizations' but is also celebrating his inability to fill the stereotyped role required of him by racist white South Africa. As he explained it, "If I am a freak, it should not be interpreted as a failure of their education for a Caliban, but a miscalculation of history."

However, to go back to that first reading of *Blame Me On History* some twenty-seven years ago: as I recall, it was occasioned by a review which I had been asked to write for one of the British newspapers; and though I do not

* *Southern African Review of Books* 13–14 (1990): 11–13.

have that review in front of me now, if my clouded memory serves me well, parts of it were mildly disapproving. Something about the tone of the book, at any rate, an odd commingling of an effusive self-blame on the one hand and a plaintive self-pity on the other, but always at the service of a relentless moralizing about South African racism, I had found quite off-putting. It may seem strange that another victim of apartheid should have reacted this way to the book. To understand why requires at least some knowledge of the journalistic background, with its cranky code of conduct and a set of shared assumptions which shaped the intellectual and moral style of a whole group of writers now often characterized as belonging to the so-called “*Drum*” school. Bloke Modisane and I were members of that group. In my book *Home and Exile*, I tried to explain the professional milieu as well as the specific qualities which characterized the *Drum* writers.

In those days when I went to join the paper, *Drum* was a curious institution. It wasn't so much a magazine as it was a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanized, eager, fast-talking and brash. Anthony Sampson, a young Englishman who had come out to edit *Drum* at the beginning of the 1950s, had gathered around him an exciting bunch of young writers who considered it a mark of great honour to get into trouble with the authorities as often as possible while in pursuit of fact and photograph. In their work they were alive, go-getting, full of nervous energy, very wry, ironic, and they brought to South African journalism a new vitality which none of the white writers had seemed capable of achieving. Naturally, in their eagerness to record the event, *Drum* writers were frequently in trouble with the police; their heads were clubbed more often than any group of people I know. Back in the office they wrote up these grim stories of farm-labour brutalities, police torture and township riots in a cool sober prose in which they permitted themselves the luxury of a laugh.

Above all, what this collective *Drum* style seemed to have made obligatory, even without the formal declaration of a manifesto, was a writing scrupulous in the observation and description of the ugly facts of life in racist South Africa, a writing equally rigorous in the exclusion of self-pity, the crudely sentimental or maudlin in the presentation of the Self. On the grounds that the situation was already sufficiently gruesome or grotesque without any recourse to tear-jerking melodrama, a stagy presentation of one's personal situation would have struck a *Drum* writer as being as shocking as a gratuitous display of bad manners might do a carefully brought-up person. Detachment, impersonality, a ruthless accumulation of detail rather than a loud proclamation of injustice were all that was required, it was thought, to make the point.

Against these tenets, almost central to the *Drum* doctrine, when I first read it *Blame on History* seemed too loud in the denunciation of nearly everyone, from South African cabinet ministers to the leaders of the African National Congress, from personal friends to wife and mistresses; the latter's very devotion seemed to stir up in the author a violent reaction of ill-temper and animosity; his own shortcomings did not fail to provoke his fiercest ire and frenzied self-repression; in short, the book was unashamedly and noisily declaratory of the author's anger, his grief and remorse, and, surprisingly, he was sometimes moved to exaltation, or what sounded very much like exaltation, when recounting his moral, if not his mental, breakdown. "My stomach has become larger than my eyes," he wrote in one unexpectedly surreal turn of phrase. During his seasons of anomie: "Sex and vice became the pursuits of my life." And in the same place he insisted: "I searched for new vices, did research into little-explored experiences; sought out and devoured anything vaguely pornographic, and then turned round looking for rationalization, a philosophy to justify the depravity of my life."

Clearly, behind such sensational confessions lies a good deal that is purely theatrical; no one who knew him, least of all myself, who is described by the author as "the boy I had privately and unofficially adopted as a brother," can remember Modisane as ever having been quite so dreadful. True, somewhere he writes of himself: "I have reserved for myself a freedom from morality, surrendered myself to the lower freedoms: the freedom of all vices"; but then, life in a black South African township was never quite a Sunday-school picnic.

Nevertheless, it is still true that in and outside *Drum* circles one can think of many contemporaries of Bloke Modisane who seemed more amoral, more promiscuous, who drank more and were chronically unfaithful to their wives. In at least one recent autobiography described by Nadine Gordimer as "exhilarating," a black South African poet admits to having been the leader of one of the most notorious of the many homicidal gangs that terrorized Sophiatown and to having served time in prison for at least one of the murders. By comparison, though yearning and bruised in spirit, and though racked by so many appetites social and carnal, Modisane seems to have been a model citizen. He abhorred violence: he was devoted to his family, especially his mother, though he regrets not having loved his wife better. He did not rob or kill or cruise the midnight streets for drugs. It is therefore difficult to suppress the suspicion that by portraying himself as irredeemably depraved, and by supplying information that suggests a haggard, tormented consumer of pornographic images, forever in search of the *recherché* with which to palliate an inflamed nervous system, Modisane must have hoped to shock

the complacent reader into heightened awareness of the corrupting nature of the apartheid system.

This is not, however, how the book was read by many South Africans with whom I discussed it in London when it first came out some twenty-seven years ago. Those who were politically sensitive tended to take umbrage at the attacks on individuals and organizations; those who worried about public relations resented the 'image' which, by example, it presented to the world of an alienated black intelligentsia, emotionally crippled and perhaps too mentally enfeebled by excessive repression. The book offered no example of heroism and redemption that would have explained the emergence of a Mandela or Sisulu save escape by means of bizarre sexual experience and day-dream, and, finally, when that failed, actual physical escape by fleeing the country.

As can be imagined, these were not the reasons which were likely to influence my own responses to the book, but what I felt most strongly at the time, having known Modisane intimately in Johannesburg, was that without quite inventing a fictitious life, he had so darkened the picture, so caricatured himself that it sometimes took real effort to recognize the figure within the shifting penumbra of light and darkness which coloured his memories of himself. The Modisane with whom I had spent many hours in his small room in Sophiatown, holding intense discussions, listening to his formidable collection of jazz and classical records of Mozart, Beethoven, Bartók and Stravinsky, and listening spellbound to the recorded monologues of Olivier's Richard III and Brando's Mark Anthony, a Modisane querulous but full of savage humour and whimsical relish for the absurd, had seemed to me much more than victim and puppet; and later, when he sat at his desk in the newspaper office, carefully shaping his entertainment column line by line on his writing-board like a diamond-cutter, occasionally reading aloud some caustic comment that he knew was bound to provoke a howl of pain from the entertainment industry, when the Sunday paper hit the streets, Bloke had seemed to me then much more than just a bundle of social and sexual appetites, blindly reacting to intolerable historical pressures.

Of course, it may very well be that Modisane succeeded better than most in concealing his pain. In fact, occasionally he hints at just such a concealment and disguise. "In the presence of South African friends I could wear a mask, be the eternal actor in a make-believe world of tinsel reality," and then he concludes: "but I have no face, I have no name, my whole existence slithers behind a mask called Bloke." In any case, when I first read all this, my reaction was that Bloke had laid it on a bit too thick, that he had diminished his personality and the incredible gaiety of which it was capable for the sake of castigating a repressive system. It has taken this reissue of the book

after nearly three decades and a rereading now happily relieved of any need for solidarity with the text except perhaps curiosity, to convince me of the book's lasting importance as a social document, and to persuade me of its many virtues without in any way minimizing its shortcomings.

2

I first met William "Bloke" Modisane when I went up to join *Drum* from Durban, then a sleepy provincial town in which I had been born and brought up. Johannesburg was then the Mecca of African journalism, and among the reputations already being made was that of William Bloke Modisane as social reporter. Some of the articles he had written had appeared enigmatically under the byline "By Bloke 'Debonair' Modisane." Was this a joke? I had no idea until I laid eyes on the man. In his splendidly cut suits, mostly dark or charcoal grey, his snazzy grey hat, his spotless shirts and gorgeous ties, he was the best dressed man on *Drum*. He was also charming in a sly, calculating sort of way which always made you feel you were being taken advantage of. Once I listened to Bloke trying to soothe the ruffled feelings of an office worker, not a very bright man but an accomplished amateur boxer whom Bloke had publicly called a "fat head." Bloke was patiently trying to convince this man that he had not been insulting but, on the contrary, that he had been paying him a compliment similar to calling someone an 'egghead'. The man was finally mollified.

In the newspaper office Modisane's witticisms were only less celebrated than those of Casey Motsisi, another *Drum* writer who specialized in writing satires for the paper. I remember that when the pages of the paper were being made up Modisane's social and entertainment column always caused some frisson in the office; at least, a nervous shudder would transfix the white editor, who seemed to live in mortal fear of libel laws. Sometimes the victim of potential libel seemed so remote from our small journalistic world, like the notoriously promiscuous actress whom Bloke described as "a centrally heated tart," that there was little probability of our being sued, but this did not prevent the editor, as Bloke later complained, from hovering over the rest of his copy with a blue pencil. Sometimes we had visits to the office from local show promoters who came to complain of maltreatment in Modisane's column.

During the first two years of my joining *Drum* I lived with the Motsisi family in Western Native Township, just across the tram tracks from Sophiatown. Some mornings I would walk across to catch a bus to town or to share a taxi to the newspaper office with Bloke. Even at that early hour of the morning we would have enough time to listen to some excellent new jazz record while Bloke put some finishing touches to his attire. When I moved to

Sophiatown to share with several other people Can Themba's large barrack-like room, the most notorious menagerie among the Johannesburg literati, I spent even more time with Bloke, and his wife Fikile and baby when he got married and started a family. Themba's so-called "House of Truth" was always overrun by ribald, noisy strangers, and given the appalling lack of privacy, if girls were brought round for the night one was always obliged to listen to the most intimate details of these sexual transactions. Inordinately ambitious, I was spending most of my spare time reading and dreaming of being a successful author. Whenever the turmoil became intolerable I would sometimes walk round the corner to Modisane's "Shangri-la," as we then sometimes playfully called his little shack, to talk or listen to records.

Few people had telephones in Sophiatown; as a result, friends frequently dropped by without any warning and sometimes, walking into Bloke's little room, I would find a group of white friends squeezed tightly into every available space, a most sumptuous dinner in progress, complete with aperitifs, wines, and cognac to go with coffee and dessert. Modisane always presided over these occasions with characteristic aplomb and wordly geniality, but in the meantime out there in the streets murders and fights were taking place. I was always surprised at the amount of ingenuity that enabled Bloke to stage such unheard-of, elaborate dinner parties in Sophiatown, within the confines of such limited space; that he tried so hard was equally puzzling, until I read a passage in this book where the author recalls how as a boy he had admired and hoped to emulate Dr Xuma, the most famous African doctor "educated in America, Glasgow and London," who lived just up the road in Sophiatown when young Bloke was growing up. Privately, like everyone else, Bloke complained about poor wages, but when he read pious criticism in the white newspapers about blacks who accumulated debts because they lived above their means, he joked that, on the contrary, his means were below his standard of living. Modisane's ambitions were perhaps not as extravagant as wishing to be trained in Glasgow and London, but he did aspire to a "social position" which, as he said, would have "eased the handicap of being black in South Africa." And while hating the black middle-class for their class snobbery, he is candid enough to confess: "I became attracted to this class, embracing all its bourgeois values":

To be a doctor like Dr. Xuma would be to be respected, to live in a big house with separate bedrooms, a room for sitting, another for eating, and a room to be alone, for reading or thinking, to shut out South Africa and not be black.

This, of course, was not to be: even this parodic reproduction of the mannered prose of *Cry, The Beloved Country* seems to be self-consciously under-

scoring the gap between ambition and fulfilment. Even had his father lived, but especially after his father had died, to train as a doctor would have placed an impossible burden on his mother, who was now forced to run a speakeasy to keep the family going. Modisane wrote with some bitterness about the financial straits to which the family was reduced, the sacrifices his mother was forced to make to keep the family going: “She turned our home into a shebeen, worked fourteen hours a day brewing and pressing home brews called skokiaan and barberton, and from the proceeds she educated me to high school level and the two girls to primary school level.”

And yet, sitting in that room, listening to Beethoven or Stravinsky, especially in the company of visiting Londoners or New Yorkers, one could be forgiven for forgetting that one was in a black township in South Africa. Perhaps the dinner parties were an attempt to ‘shut out South Africa’ but on the evidence of this book they offered little real consolation. “Nothing in my life seemed to have any meaning,” he writes, “all around me there was the futility and apathy, the dying of the children, the empty gestures of the life reflected in the seemingly meaningless destruction of that life.” Just as important, his marriage was by then also in difficulties. So when a visiting American editor suggested as a way out a move to the United States and the offer of financial assistance came unexpectedly from a philanthropic American family, Modisane was ready to pack his bags and go.

Modisane was not a saint, as makes all too clear, an autobiography whose candour is actually one of its cardinal virtues; but one wonders at the lack of virtue which would compel a regime, after oppressing someone for no reason than his colour, would also deny him a passport to leave the country. In the end Modisane was forced to leave the country secretly and illegally by secret back routes, through Bechuanaland and the Rhodesias. The clandestine departure followed weeks of a cat-and-mouse game played between the author and the Special Branch, who tried to induce him to inform against *Drum* colleagues in order to secure a ‘good conduct’ report which would have enabled him to obtain a passport.

3

To assign to Modisane’s autobiography its proper place and value in South African literature, it is necessary first to say a few words about the structure of cultural domination in our racist society, and the restricted space accorded to the voice of the black majority in the records of the official culture. It is also important to stress here that to describe this culture as “official” is in no way to ignore the participation in it of dissident white progressives and liberals, regardless of their often stated embarrassment and discomfort in having

to collaborate with the structures of white domination. In any case, a serious examination of South African culture must at some time come to terms with a fact which may be uncongenial to both black and white progressives, given our prior commitment to a non-racial democratic future; and that fact is the near-total hegemony within the various cultural practices of South African society of an unrepresentative white minority, consisting not only of diehard upholders of the apartheid system but also of white liberals and progressives as academics, as critics, as anthologists, as impresarios, as gallery owners and publishers, as well as in their role of consultants to those who own virtually all the means of cultural production.

What all this means, of course, given the divided nature of our society, is that at the most intimate levels the interpretations of our social structures must rely on a view which is at best partial, at worst disabled or impoverished in some way. To take one example: I know of no major historians of South African society who are black; in recent years literary and cultural criticism has begun to surrender some ground, not so that anyone would notice who was not already so disposed, to a few black practitioners; but on the whole the picture is a depressing one which shows a whole culture dominated at all levels by the discourse of a white minority while the voice of the majority remains essentially marginalized. That the black South Africans may have good thoughts but cannot be expected to speak them until some white spokespersons have been found who can speak those thoughts for them, is so much a part of an unstated assumption of cultural domination, the effects of exclusive privilege, better education and training for a minority, that by now it almost seems a natural state of affairs. How much more 'natural', therefore, in this situation that the progressive liberal white intelligentsia should speak for those who, through no fault of their own, lacking proper training and the requisite skills, are reduced to silence, unable to speak for themselves!

It is only in the single area of 'lived' experience, the area in which autobiography offers its consolation prizes, that the true voice of the black majority remains paramount, for the simple reason that in the area of 'lived' experience there is no conceivable substitute for the original voice. Modisane writes angrily somewhere in this book: "There are very few things which can be as irritating as the smug understanding of those jokers who profess to know what it would be like to be black in South Africa." This may or may not be strictly true; after all, black South Africans did not invent suffering and have no monopoly over that regrettably recurring condition in the history of humanity; but the mere conviction that black people themselves know better than anyone else what "it is like to be black in South Africa" is what has given to the memoir and the autobiography their urgent status and has made them seem more central than even the novel to our literary culture. Nothing

that Peter Abrahams came to write was to equal the power and felicity of *Tell Freedom*, nor was Zeke Mphahlele able to match in his fiction the convincing breadth of *Down Second Avenue*.

The range of autobiographical writing, from the diaries of Sol T. Plaatje to the memoirs of Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele and the chronicles of the generation of Mark Mathabane, Molefe Pheto and Don Mattera, has been immense. However stylistically flawed they may sometimes seem, collectively these narratives, so incurably inflected with the voice of actual 'lived' experience, constitute the most significant source of what knowledge we have regarding the feel and texture of black life in South Africa. Even in the form of the fragment, occasionally abandoned to the pathos of ephemeral journalism as in the writings of Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Richard Rive, something of the irreducible experience of the black community is rescued and finally preserved. For this reason, if for no others, the reissue of *Blame Me On History* at this time has to be welcomed.

That said, it remains for us to identify those crucial areas in which Modisane's autobiography makes a special contribution to the social history of black South Africans. In my opinion, there are two such areas. First, there is the unforgettable requiem for the death of Sophiatown which frames the composition and seems naturally to close an era in Modisane's own life as a citizen of the South African state. Few whites got to know Sophiatown as well as Bishop Trevor Huddleston, whose own life, until he returned to England in the middle of the 1950s, became entangled with the fate of Sophiatown. As head of the Anglican Mission of Christ the King, Bishop Huddleston had not only observed but had participated in the daily life of the community. "Sophiatown!" he wrote in his valedictory testament, "How difficult it is to analyse and make comprehensible the magic of that name. As soon as it is written down in black and white, all the life and the colour runs out!"

Even the fortuitous manner in which Sophiatown came into existence has helped to create and enhance a legend. At the turn of the century, when Johannesburg was little more than a mining centre, a certain Mr Tobiansky had purchased some land on the rocky promontory in the western outskirts of the young but growing town which he named after his wife Sophia, hoping to sell lots to white Johannesburgers; in this dream he was thwarted by the city council, which decided to provide such social amenities as the sewerage system in the east of the young town, making Sophiatown less attractive to white buyers. Tobiansky was then obliged to sell to black buyers, making Sophiatown one of the few areas in South Africa where blacks owned their property. The inhabitants were wonderfully mixed, comprising Indians, Chinese, 'Coloured' and black South Africans.

This gave Sophiatown its unique character and its most fiercely guarded identity; the township soon became a living symbol of defiance, whose art of survival was endlessly celebrated in the theatre, music and literature of the community. “Sophiatown,” Huddleston wrote in his book, “is above all a lively place. It is more than that. It has a vitality and exuberance which belongs to no other suburb of South Africa, surely to no white suburb.” But, alas for its own fate, Sophiatown was to become too obvious a symbol of defiance; it became the imperilled nerve of a community that was soon threatened with expropriation. When the National Party took office in 1948 the township became for the regime an irritant, a frustrating negation of government philosophy of racial zoning and residential separation of races; along with other places described in the official literature without a trace of humour as “black spots,” Sophiatown was finally earmarked for demolition. “In spite of all the violence and revolt it has known occasionally,” wrote Bishop Huddleston, “Sophiatown is above all a cheerful place. But it is necessary to live there, as it is necessary to live in any city with character to also capture its soul, in order to know it.”

To put it this way is in fact to confer great value on Modisane’s project, which is to provide us with a detailed description of a life lived in the township. Not only did Modisane live there, he was one of the few born in the place, so that the mere description of his own life becomes inevitably a description of the life of the township. Never is this existential link better illuminated than during that moment when, after his father’s death, the author is impelled to recall another death – that of his sister Nancy, “who died of starvation, delicately referred to as malnutrition.” This reflection on the premature death of his sister leads inexorably back to the demolition whose work is everywhere evident around him. “There was another death gaping at me: I turned away from the ruins of the house where I was born in a determination not to look upon this death of Sophiatown.” This demolition, the death agony of Sophiatown, is also memorialized in the images of Lionel Rogosin’s film *Come Back Africa*, which Bloke Modisane and I co-scripted with Rogosin.

Throughout the book, Modisane’s gaze is constantly shifting from the contemplation of his own life to that of the threatened township. The book opens with an impression of the township under sentence to the government bulldozer: “Walking down Good Street and up Gerty Street was like walking through a ghost town of deserted houses and demolished homes,” Modisane recalls. His moment of departure from South Africa, even the manner of that severance accomplished by means of secret flight across the border, is thus also the moment of rupture between the internal and what was to grow into an exile wing of our literary intelligentsia, and the effects of his severance on our literary culture was made even more severe by the wholesale bannings of the

works of writers who had been forced into exile; which meant that, at a stroke, the younger writers who emerged in the late 1960s were left bereft of an entire literary inheritance that rightly should have been theirs. That exodus of writers and intellectuals began with the departure of figures like Es'kia Mphahlele, Alfred "Tough" Hutchinson, Arthur Maimane and Bloke Modisane himself; others were to follow: Nat Nakasa, who died in New York; Can Themba, who died in Swaziland; Arthur Nortje, who died at Oxford; Alex La Guma, who died in Havana; Dennis Brutus, who survives in the USA; and many others. Writing in the aftermath of that period, a black poet has observed: "For literature as an art form, the tragic exodus created a vacuum in South African writing which could not be filled," and another wrote: "Bannings, exile and death had robbed the literary scene of many writers."

In terms of the internal development of black writing, what is offered in *Blame Me On History*, then, is the fleeting glimpse of a milieu and a scene of writing in which a whole generation lived out its last days before an important rupture occurred which was to decisively cut off the 1950s generation from those writers who came after them. The Sharpeville massacre which occurred in March 1960, less than a year after Modisane's departure, was followed by the declaration of the first national state of emergency the country had ever known and by the subsequent banning of the ANC and the PAC, the two main liberation organizations, obliging them to go underground. Collectively, these events represent a decisive moment in our political history and in our culture, and *Blame Me On History* is vertiginously poised at the tip-end of that political precipice. "Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown," is how Modisane opens his narrative, and he brings it to an end as the train crosses the border into Bechuanaland (now Botswana). "Then the train entered and puffed its way out of Mafeking, and South Africa and everything I had known, loved and hated remained behind me. I was out of South Africa."

The second area, less well-managed but nonetheless important for what it tells us of the secret and the not-so-secret dreams of the black intelligentsia during the naughty 1950s, is clearly mapped out in Modisane's prolonged meditation, cowed, disheartened and unnerved, on the direction his life was taking. This part of the book, prolix, desperate and suffocatingly claustrophobic, was always excruciatingly difficult to read because of its dishevelled, anguished logic, especially in those baffling passages where the author makes the customary gesture towards serious political analysis. Whatever else *Drum* writers were successful at, deep political analysis was not one of them, for the simple reason that very few *Drum* writers at the time had any clearly worked-out social theory, and I naturally include myself among them; and the lack of one makes their writings on politics seem wildly improvised and dangerously

spontaneous. But in-between, Modisane's book is interspersed, unexpectedly like raisins in a cake, with the kind of small vignette which has the power to illuminate many things about black life in South Africa; the instability of family life, the random violence, the unusual amities and courtesies of the oppressed among themselves.

Sociologists have spent many hours of labour to explain the corrosive effects of racist oppression on black family life in the south of the United States and in South Africa; the mental disorientation among young children and the confused hatred, which ironically enough is usually directed at their own parents, when they observe them grovelling in front of white authority. In Modisane's book, the collapse of parental authority is recorded with great precision on the day the young Modisane, until then an awed admirer, watches his father bullied and humiliated by a young police constable during a raid for passes (or identity documents). Noticing the rude manner in which the police constable had accosted his Uncle George, he had expected his own father to defend his dignity against insult when the young policeman bawled at his father: "And you, why you sitting on your black arse?" Instead of asserting himself, his father remained "calm" and "unruffled" and pulled out his wallet and showed his documents: "The walls of my world came tumbling down, everything collapsed around me, wrecking the relationship." With the devastating simplicity and implacability of a disappointed child, young William could not forgive his father for that failure to measure up to the ideal of his hero-worship. "My hero image disintegrated," he recalls. "We lost each other from that moment, and in his own way he tried to recover his son, but I was hard and monstrously unjust." Thus are sons fathered and lost in the bewildering wilderness that is life in racist South African society.

There are other examples in which the concrete in Modisane's book overrules the temperament for theorizing abstraction. Such a poignant moment, almost surrealistic in its poetic injustice, occurs during the funeral of the author's father, killed in a violent fight with a stranger. This is yet another glimpse of the uglier face of Sophiatown, less romantic than the other which we would like to recall, and once more Modisane stands in the middle of an experience, firmly fixed by the aura of the event. "The bearers carried the coffin out of the house, the yard, and into the hearse, and as they passed by me I noticed that 'William Modisane' had been inscribed on it in error. The shock of seeing my name and not my father's on the coffin confused and frightened me." In fact, the most powerful scenes in Modisane's book occur during those carefully established protocols of direct observation and reportage, calmly mimicking the casual suavities of the *Drum* house-style. The description of Modisane's wedding-party, during which a police sergeant is coaxed into participating in the house celebrations, thus diverting attention

from the fact that European alcohol, then prohibited to ‘natives’, was being consumed by Africans as well as the white guests, is one in a series of awkward, anomalous epiphanies in the daily management of the apartheid state which we encounter in the book.

One day in March 1959 I saw William “Bloke” Modisane off at Johannesburg’s Park Station. In order to keep his departure as secret as possible, it had been arranged that I was to be the only friend allowed to see him off at the station. From his family there was his younger sister Suzan, his wife Fiki and baby daughter, and a young woman who accompanied them. Bloke was to travel through Botswana, then to what was then Rhodesia, and from there catch a plane to London. How to avoid detection as a runaway was going to be his main problem. In his wry, deadpan style, reminiscent of more cheerful days on *Drum* and the *Golden City Post*, Modisane wrote: “I made the decision to travel in March over the Easter holidays, relying on the Christian nature of the white Rhodesians who should be celebrating in church.”

But even this last morning in his home city, before facing the hazards of a grey endless exile, was not to pass without an incident. When Bloke attempted to buy a pack of cigarettes from a white woman at the tobacco kiosk we waited for what seemed to be an eternity to be served, while the woman went on gossiping with a friend as if we were not there. In desperation, Bloke enquired if she would mind very much giving us some service. “Can’t you bloody wait!” she screamed. “Can’t you see I am busy?” We decided to leave without the cigarettes.





17 “My first South African passport”, 2003 (Lewis Nkosi)

15.6 The Republic of Letters After the Mandela Republic*

LEWIS NKOSI

ON 19 APRIL 2001, NJABULO NDEBELE, the new Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, and a writer himself (noted especially for his short-story collection *Fools and Other Stories*), invited over fifteen writers and critics to consider the state of letters in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. To commence: three writers, the Nigerian-born Kole Omotoso, Brenda Cooper and myself, were to make a brief presentation, each lasting fifteen minutes; two discussants, the poet and teacher Jeremy Cronin and Ian Glenn, critic and professor at the University of Cape Town, were to respond. An undercurrent running through the discussions that evening was, broadly speaking, the relation of the present to the past, both in the politically constituted republic which came into being with the inauguration of Mandela as the first president of a freely elected democratic government on the one side and the republic of letters on the other, which exists, presumably, parallel to the political republic, one interacting with the other.

Inevitably, much discussion in South Africa at the moment centres on notions of nation-building. Two novels to which I shall refer on occasion, Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, both published in 2000, are much preoccupied with the projects of nation-building and the relation of the past to the present; both take up the question of how to make the transition from the past to the present; both reflect on what is continuous and what is discontinuous between the past and the present. Before I comment on these texts, I wish to dwell at some length on the theme of national identity in order to indicate why the idea of the 'nation' and nation-

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building weighs so heavily on the minds of black and white South Africans, and why the lack of what Pericles Lewis calls “the shared assumptions of national culture” has been responsible not, as some like to think, for a richly heterogeneous but a monotonously rent and schizoid literature.¹ In *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin introduce the essays on nationalism by stating that

one of the strongest foci for resistance to imperial control in colonial societies has been the idea of “nation” [...] which has enabled postcolonial societies to invent a self-image through which they could act to liberate themselves from imperialist oppression.²

The three editors also warn against the “pitfalls of nationalism,” how it “frequently takes over the hegemonic control of the imperial power replicating the conditions it rises to combat,” but also they point out that “settler colony cultures have never been able to construct simple concepts of the nation, such as those based on linguistic communality or racial or religious homogeneity.”³ This is particularly true of South Africa.

It is a peculiar feeling to have lived for more than half a century without living, properly speaking, within the bounds of a cultural space which may be described as a ‘nation’. If, as so many cultural theorists have insisted in recent years, the nation or its emergence is the condition for the coming into being of certain narratives; if it is true, as one critic has ascribed to it, that the nation is “a gestative political structure which the Third-World artist is very often building or suffering the lack of”;⁴ and if it is true for yet another critic that “the national spirit, nation or nationhood, has been the bedrock for the emergence and shaping of the national literatures and cultural traditions as we

¹ In his book on the nation and the novel, Pericles Lewis refers to what he describes as “the crisis of nationalism” in the European states: “the idea of the sovereign nation, whose individual members all shared common interests and cultural assumptions, underlay much of the actual working of liberal political systems. To the extent that some inhabitants of a given territory did not share, or were not seen to share, these common national interests and assumptions, liberalism increasingly came to seem incapable of reconciling their needs and interests with those of the national majority”; Lewis, *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 9.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995): 151.

³ Ashcroft et al., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 151.

⁴ Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989): 4.

know them today”:⁵ if all this is held to be true, then the South African writer has these long years been operating in a man-made cultural desert which often blights all imaginative efforts by the errant anchorless subject.

Much has been written about the conceptual and aesthetic problems relating to how we think the ‘nation’: the nation as virtual space, as a discursive formation, as a mental structure which can organize and give shape to individual histories; the nation as the very reservoir of native traits, customs and social practices that make up national traditions, which finally provides writers with the natural resources from which to fashion stories of the nation. Among some of the most recent and timely publications are the papers presented at the 1993 Triennial Conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in Graz, Austria, which, though not exactly revelatory, have much to say by recapitulation what is provocative and relevant concerning the intertwined problems of the national: versus international perspectives in postcolonial representations. Most of the essays analyze the ways we *imaginatively* construct the nation through literary creation, especially through the novel. A useful supplement to these careful anatomies of narrative fiction, and how it comes to constitute the nation, is Doris Sommer’s investigations of foundation narratives of South America in the book of the same title, in which she traces the connection between “ethical politics and erotic passion, the connection between Eros and Polis, between epic nationalism and intimate sensibility.” In her deftly argued thesis, Sommer concludes that “readers of Latin America’s canon of national novels have in fact been assuming what amounts to an allegorical relationship between personal and political narratives.” While European models existed in the form of heroic or individual romances of Scott, Chateaubriand, Rousseau or Stendhal, it was only when they were rewritten in such a way as to serve as allegories for the founding of the new nations of the Americas that they achieved their pre-eminent distinction: “To marry national destiny to personal passion was precisely what made their books peculiarly American.”⁶

The thesis is, of course, not new. As Kwame Appiah observes,

it is a familiar idea that modernity makes national identity central to an individual identity. It is a slightly less familiar thought, that the identity of this nation [USA] is tied up with the stories of individuals – Represen-

⁵ Elmar Lehmann, “Early South African Novels: National Beginnings, International Contexts,” in *Nationalism vs Internationalism: The (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*, ed. Wolfgang Zach & Ken Goodwin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1996): xiii.

⁶ Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991): 24.

tative Men and Women, in Emerson's formula – whose stories, in helping to fashion a national narrative, serve also, indirectly, to shape the individual narratives of other patriotic – nationally identified – citizens.⁷

But even more pertinent to our immediate task in South Africa are the analyses of David Lloyd and Seamus Deane, two of the most trenchant cultural critics writing on the discourses of nationalism, literature and the postcolonial state. Especially compelling for the South African critic are the parallels their work suggests between the Irish and the South African national projects of decolonization and recuperation as well as the itinerary that they map out of that complicated transition from nationalism to the modern bourgeois state, which now seeks to “educe a moment of identity out of the disparate populations and individuals that constitute the people.”⁸

South Africa is, of course, the best illustration of the principle that the state is not commensurate with the ‘nation’. Max Weber made the point that a collection of individual subjects does not constitute a nation simply by belonging to a given polity.⁹ E.J. Hobsbawm's argument that “nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around”¹⁰ is, to say the least, problematic; as he himself declares in the very next paragraph, one of the ways in which “nations” manifest their existence is in the very aspiration to establish the “territorial state.” How, then, can the “nation” be the expression of that which it seeks to establish? The argument becomes even more untenable when applied to South Africa, which has been a modern state since 1910, with clearly defined legal borders enclosing its various communities, without ever developing a national identity or national character. Indeed, under the last regime, white South Africa seemed to have been always ready to back away from the idea of a single nation, with shared symbols of nationhood and cultural identity; away from anything resembling the project of Irish nationalism, which, as David Lloyd has described it, was “the integration of a highly differentiated population into the modern nation state, a project which has al-

⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Part 1, Mass Media, Biography and Cultural Memory: Introduction,” in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel & David Suchoff (New York & London: Routledge, 1996): 10.

⁸ David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-colonial Moment*. Durham NC: Duke UP, 1993): 147.

⁹ Max Weber, “The Nation,” in *Nationalism*, ed. John Hutchinson & Anthony Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994): 22.

¹⁰ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990): 10.

ways sought to transcend antagonisms, contradictions and social differences for the sake of a unified conception of political subjectivity.”¹¹

In terms of a personal history, it was always possible, of course, in the South African *Bildungsroman* for a young Zulu, growing up within a web of interacting indigenous cultures, to live happily and without purpose up to a certain age, purpose being a state which is marked by awareness of the future; possible, then, up to a point, to live in a sort of “tribal imaginary” before being inserted willy-nilly into a ghoulish symbolic order where true horror tales are told, where myths are encoded into legal systems, and racial fictions are fashioned out to calm or exacerbate a nervous condition; but in any case a system which could finally offer no support for the errant anchorless subject. At the level of the symbolic order, the nation was only a rumour, requiring an extraordinary effort of the imagination to conjure it textually; but far from providing a place of sublimation and transcendence, the symbolic order in our literature was a secret place where curses were uttered with great ferocity against foreign invaders, where maledictory themes were plentifully there for the asking, and creative life was haunted by fear and loathing.

In the absence of a single national identity, South Africa’s “house of fiction” has so far served merely as a “War Room” in which stories that are told within offer, as someone has put it, “a vision of nations thriving on conflict and an antagonistic conception of inter-ethnic relationships.” The very anxieties of the liberal humanist novel are already a reflection of our general malaise, for, inscribed in this novel, whether written by whites (Schreiner, Brink, Gordimer) or by blacks (Plaatje, Abrahams), is an ideology which, with very good intentions but very little support, attempts to will into existence the ‘nation’ – an attempt, therefore, to fill the empty category of the ‘nation’ with subjectivities which have yet to come into being. Similarly, in their embarrassment at the lack of a shared sense of nationhood, critics of liberal persuasion work hard to discover one. In discussing three early novels, Olive Schreiner’s *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, Douglas Blackburn’s *Richard Hartley, Prospector*, and Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi*, Elmar Lehmann begins by asserting that his discussion

will revolve, directly and obliquely, around the idea of a South African literature or, at least, around the idea of a history of the South African novel. Although I am fully aware of the problematical nature of the idea I do side with Ampie Coetzee and will look for traces of a distinct South African voice in the novels under discussion.¹²

¹¹ Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, 5.

¹² Lehmann, “Early South African Novels: National Beginnings, International Contexts,” 239.

Later, he admits that Schreiner's novel does not even accommodate an African voice in its narrative: "Despite all the indignation at the treatment of the blacks, however, the South African voice in Schreiner's novel is exclusively white."¹³

As everyone liked to prognosticate after the collapse of the apartheid regime, the election of the Mandela Republic was likely to create entirely new conditions for literary production in South Africa. In the collection of essays edited by Homi Bhabha, the coupling of the two terms 'nation' and 'narration' has, importantly, continued to frame discussions of postcolonial literature, especially the novel, which seems to occupy pride of place in discourses of nationality and nationalism. Because of its unique powers of representation, acknowledged by nearly all theorists of narrative, my remarks below have centred on the novel. If, as so many theorists have insisted, the 'nation' is the ground on which certain aesthetic forms of expression are enabled, the incubator of totemic narratives bearing the signature of a national consciousness; if in a kind of dialectical process national consciousness is in turn the soil in which such narratives find their true existence and justification, then, though not exactly parentless, the South African novel has always been homeless, depending for its conception, shape, and readerly sustenance on foreign powers. It has been said that dynasties and monarchies have their epics, traditional communities have their legends and myths of origin, and new colonial societies have their romantic allegories of conquests and domestication of the wilderness, which is but another name for the exercise of colonial authority over colonized people; but until now, the principal expression of our South African literary culture has been a novel of refusal and resistance, apartheid its particular cross and its affliction. In the introduction to a collection of essays, *Black/White Writing*, Pauline Fletcher writes:

South African literature has been held hostage by apartheid. That noxious system has given writers a subject of great power and moral urgency, while at the same time denying them the luxury of certain choices if they want to be taken seriously.¹⁴

The new South African polity represents, literally, "an unexamined life," but after it has been exhaustively analyzed and narrated, will that life be worth living? Following Fanon's account of how artists engaged in an anticolonial struggle will create relevant structures of literary representation to suit the

¹³ Lehmann, "Early South African Novels: National Beginnings, International Contexts," 241.

¹⁴ Pauline Fletcher, *Black/White Writing: Essays on South African Literature* (London & Toronto: Bucknell UP, 1993): 12.

various stages of political development, we may conclude that what will now be superseded in South Africa is the era of the so-called “literature of combat”;¹⁵ but, after the “literature of combat,” can ‘better’ narratives of the national Self emerge from the degraded past in order to inhabit this new republic which came into being so unexpectedly; and can a “new longing for nationhood” generate not only new narratives but also create a new public for storytellers, the kind whom Fanon described as “formerly scattered” but who have now become “compact”? Do we even want our reading public to be “compact”? Or at least, to be *that* compact?

In Beckett’s *Unnamable*, a text which provides us with some key metaphors regarding the process of narration, his extremely loquacious narrator speaks irritably of “ever murmuring my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time.” The *Unnamable* then asks rhetorically: “is there really nothing new to try?”¹⁶ His project is not only the discovery of new epistemologies, but a new ontological self which can shelter the speaking voice, for narratives can only issue from real historical subjects with real physical bodies, an assertion that may strike us as comic, if not paradoxical, coming from a fictional narrator who simultaneously labours to find for his voice some physical embodiment which always seems to be beyond his access. “It is as well to establish the position of the body from the outset, before passing on to more important matters,”¹⁷ he tells us as he settles down into a more comfortable position which will enable him to speak. This disembodied voice belongs to a nameless speaker adrift in a sea of modernist anonymity beyond the call of national duty, but the novel as nationalist discourse belongs to a collective that is the ‘nation’ or Benedict Anderson’s famously named ‘imagined communities’, and, despite its pretensions to the contrary, such a novel has other priorities than the eternal quest for individual originality. Even a superficial reading of ‘Third-World’ texts soon reveals one incontestable fact: the thematics of the master-narratives of colonial displacement and uprootedness rarely change over time, only the mode of the telling does. Indeed, the story seems

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington, intro. Jean-Paul Sartre (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961; tr. 1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990): 193.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959): 305. Hugh Kenner made the same point when he wrote “whoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live in is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul, and he may think of forging in some invisible smithy the uncreated conscience of his race”; Kenner, *The Pound Era: The Age of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972): 39.

¹⁷ Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable*, 306.

to repeat itself endlessly in different places of the colonized world and at each location the story reads to local inhabitants as if it were being told for the very 'first time'. Moreover, despite the variegated nature of the world's cultures, what such reading soon discloses is the fact that the founding mothers and fathers of all colonized nations seem to bear an uncanny resemblance to one another. They "murmur" the same stories of national misfortune, they idealize the past, and they recite for their offspring stories of past heroic deeds never to be forgotten, as if they were being told for the very 'first time'.

The 'first time' of South African literature is, unfortunately, so problematical that when, during a brief address to the 1990 Oxford Conference on South African literature, I dared to question the very existence of the object we were discussing, when I wondered whether in our political circumstance it was legitimate to refer to a South African national literature, my remarks provoked an outraged reaction from delegates determined to defend at all costs the existence of at least *something*. For the sake of convenience, then, since texts written by South Africans have also to be classified and located somewhere in the Library of the World, we may refer to something called South African literature, which sometimes resembles a national literature but surely is nothing of the kind, so long as we can hold on to the proposition that in order to qualify as such, this literature must – to borrow Simon During's formulation – "function as signifier for a national identity or heritage." Whether or not it is desirable for literary texts to be asked to fulfil such a programme, our literature has never performed this function. On the contrary, thus far South African literature has operated under the sign of a division so profound that only a complete overhaul of the social infrastructure could clear the ground for the emergence of a truly national literature. This may soon change, of course. We can already see this beginning to happen in the sphere of sporting activities, perhaps because as an instrument of cultural expression the body seems capable of instantaneous adaptation to new conditions; but in the domain of thought and creative imagination, new discursive regimes must come into being in order to cause to emerge anything like a national literature.

Typically, that which passes for founding historical narrative in the literature of South Africa is always accompanied by its oppositional shadow, its double; white settler narratives are shadowed by native counter-narratives; characteristically, the wound inflicted at Blood River becomes a double trauma: in a kind of ineluctable chain, the massacre of Piet Retief's men at Mgungundlovu only prepares the ground for a Boer victory which will turn the Boer massacre into a Zulu trauma when inevitable defeat follows. And just as liberal politics was an attempt to effect a compromise between the conqueror and the conquered, the major struggles of the liberal South African

novel have always centred on the task of closing the ever-opening gap between two narratives. It has engaged in a tireless effort to bring together two radically opposed strands into a single yarn of resistance in which the descendants of white settlers unite with the descendants of the dispossessed in a common struggle against apartheid, and resistance to apartheid is then transformed into resistance against all discourses of the imperial centre. Victory over apartheid, it was hoped, would create conditions for new narratives to emerge in which a unified subject of South African history will come into being bearing a new national identity. Which is why the South African liberal novel has always set such great store by the final outcome of the struggle against apartheid, even though it was always assumed that the outcome would be appallingly bloody and chaotic, as the late Arthur Nortje, one of our best black poets, once imagined it in his poem “Questions and Answers”:

I am no guerrilla
 I will fall from the sky as the Ministers gape from their front porches
 and in broad daylight perpetrate atrocities
 on the daughters of the boss:
 ravish like Attila
 and so acquire more scars myself
 laughing as I infest the vulnerable liberals
 with the lice inherited from their gold-mine fathers....¹⁸

As we now know, the outcome was nothing like as Nortje’s poem had tried to prefigure it or as the South African novel had imagined it in texts like *Time of the Butcherbird*, *July’s People* and *A Sport of Nature*. The guerrilla “dropping from the sky” did not perpetrate any atrocities on the boss’s daughter, and though it is now acknowledged that there was a ‘hidden hand’ in the violence which broke out just before the election of the first democratic republic, it is still a fact that this was a ‘black-on-black’ violence which, ironically, left the white population untouched and immune. Nor did Nadine Gordimer’s heroine, the Hillela of *A Sport of Nature*, manage to entrap Mandela into marriage, who instead married the widow of an ex-guerrilla and late president of a neighbouring state, thus defying the novel’s expectations; surely a minor detail in a fictionalized history. All in all, the final outcome of this history of resistance has defied what has long been the teleology of South African fiction. I had once suggested, in a review of Gordimer’s *July’s People*, that the climax to this Herculean struggle, lasting more than three centuries, might not in fact turn out to be a general outbreak of horrendous revolutionary violence

¹⁸ Arthur Nortje, *Anatomy of Dark: Collected Poems of Arthur Nortje*, ed. Dirk Klopfer (Pretoria: U of South Africa P, 2000): 374.

but instead could conclude with a rather banal muted whimper, a finale in which the fundamental economic structures of society would remain largely uncontested. Ambushed by history, deprived of the moral and material support of the socialist camp by the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, a negotiated peace between a lame government and weary liberation movements was probably the next best thing, but the South African novel of unbridled apocalyptic desire was equally thwarted in its secret longing for a cataclysmic, cathartic climax. The negotiated peace enacted what Doris Sommer, writing about South America, described as “a premature end of history.”

Jonathan Steinwand writes that nations “make use of nostalgia in the construction of national identity.”¹⁹ “The nation, like the individual,” says Renan, “is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion.”²⁰ These statements underline by implication the importance of *nostalgia* for nationalist discourse. Writing of the attempts to reclaim or renovate Irish tradition, Seamus Deane states: “Nostalgia was the dynamic that impelled the search for the future,”²¹ confirming, in a sense, Hobsbawm’s argument that the ‘nation’, as conceived by nationalism, can only be recognized prospectively. What is so striking, then, about modern writing in South Africa is the relative, at times astonishing, absence of *nostalgia*. The nearest we get to expressions of nostalgia in black South African fiction is to be found in the novels written in the indigenous languages, which attempt to reconstruct a past that is then experienced as irrecoverable loss.

In Mda’s novel there are moments of *nostalgia*, certainly, but here even the nostalgia is experienced only as a borrowed emotion. There is an amusing passage in the novel in which the elders living in a post-apartheid Xhosa community attempt to re-create the past as a moment of intense suffering under colonial occupation; as the narrator puts it, they wish to “linger in the years when their forebears were hungry.”²² However, in order to do so they have to stage some kind of psychodrama of a dance ritual borrowed from the traditions of the abaThwa (the San) of the interior. To re-enter the world of the ancestors, they therefore organize a performance during which they go into a trance and “induce death through their dance,” a manipulation of faked

¹⁹ Jonathan Steinwand, “The Future of Nostalgia in Friedrich Schlegel’s Gender Theory,” in *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender and Nationalism*, ed. Jean Pickering & Suzanne Kehde (London: Macmillan, 1997): 10.

²⁰ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley & Ronald Grigor Suny (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996): 44.

²¹ Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999): 146.

²² Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (Cape Town: Oxford UP, 2000): 83.

emotion which is then portrayed by the author as both decadent and inauthentic.

The elders seem to induce death through their dance. When they are dead they visit the world of the ancestors. When the trance is over they rejoin the world of the living. Only the elders do not die to the Otherworld but to the world of the past. Xholiswa's father was one of those who were sent to the hinterland to borrow the dances and trances of the *abaThwa* that take one to the world of the ancestors. (82)

As one irate traditionalist later taunts his enemies: "Your rituals are not even your own. You stole them from *abaThwa*." Nostalgia is perhaps always inauthentic, an onanistic daydream.

As I have been at pains to show, that nostalgia in South Africa, or attempts at what would pass off as nostalgia, is usually linked to the memory of pain. What is unusual about Mda's elders – except, of course, from a psychoanalytical standpoint – is that they should consciously seek to mobilize all their psychic resources in order to revisit the scene of the trauma. Though the past is usually the launching-pad of "nationalist discourse," so far as I remember, no one has ever wished to re-live it. One is tempted to assert, perhaps too hastily, that pain can never be used as a source of nostalgia until one remembers the pleasure that generations of American slaves and their descendants have derived from blues music, which is fashioned out of the memory of suffering. Surely, this is the moment, as Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde argue below, when "unpresentable loss is transformed by nostalgic recollection into a beautiful form."

With regard to the theme of nostalgia as a special ingredient in the creation of nationalist subjectivities, I found the essays edited by Pickering and Kehde to contain many valuable insights of special relevance, if only by contrast, to the South African situation, for the feelings of nostalgia they seek to divulge in the discourses of nationalism are notable largely for their absence from our literature. To generalize even further, I would say South African literature shows a certain incapacity for generating nostalgia for the past, a *pastness* which can be re-created, regrettably, as the moment of loss or state of vanished happiness:

The unpresentable loss, painful as it may be, is thus transformed by nostalgic recollection into a beautiful form. The fiction so loosened from the historical constraints of its original space and time offers a consolation allowing the master-project of modernity to stay its progressive course by orienting itself in relation to the nostalgic image it offers as the com-

pensation for the forgetfulness and alienation of its guilt-ridden conscience.²³

Pertinent, too, is the observation by Elizabeth Taylor that

liberal whites, such as the poet Guy Butler and the novelist Alan Paton, could celebrate the pastoral, but Can Themba and his black journalist friends were working out of their experience of police brutality, crime and tsotsi gangs on the streets, discrimination, drunkenness, and despair at home.²⁴

These writers, she says, found little time “in their conversations [...] for recalling a romantic past” (101). Since I am one of these writers, I can only confirm the truth of her observation. For very obvious reasons, from the artesianium of black writers it is a rare production that comes to us not already scarred by the memory of tragic waste, cruelty and injustice. But for white writers, too, nostalgia is a nearly empty category, without much content, even if one takes into account the idyllic constructs of the *plaasroman* (pastoral novel) which is now reworked, mocked or parodied by younger writers as a form of decadent pretence. One ought to point out that this absence of nostalgia for what elsewhere passes for an inconsolable sorrow at the loss of paradise has special implications for our literature. Instead of being eternally bathed in a pleasant glow of nostalgia, the past in South Africa is remembered mainly as a bad nightmare fomented by wars of conquests and resistance. Even for Afrikaner nationalism, which will later seek to dominate all other emergent nationalisms, the past leads not to some edenic idyll of boundless bliss and well-being but to great enmity and misery, to continual attempts to elude Compagnie (Dutch East India Company) rule at the Cape and evade later British administrations in the Colony, only to re-encounter them in a particularly brutal form in the Boer Wars. In South Africa, it was not the past but the future which was said to hold promises of happiness, just as soon as all scores were settled and the debts properly paid; but the promise of such a future, always haunted by the spectre of revolutionary wars, widespread violence and mayhem, did not hold much appeal either.

“Is there really nothing new to try?” Beckett’s chatty narrator rhetorically asks himself. For South African writers this is all too pertinent a question,

²³ Jean Pickering & Suzanne Kehde, *Narratives of Nostalgia, Gender and Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1997): 10.

²⁴ Elizabeth Taylor, “Tradition and the Woman Writer in Southern Africa, or How to Enjoy the River Without Carrying the Water Drums,” in *Black/White Writing: Essays on South African Literature*, ed. Pauline Fletcher (London & Toronto: Bucknell UP, 1993): 101.

now that we are “free at last.” Pauline Fletcher’s answer is that “it is too soon for post-apartheid literature to have emerged. Indeed, it is premature to talk about the death of apartheid, even though the laws that enforced racial segregation have been repealed.”²⁵ That having been acknowledged as a general truth, there are some indications of a fresh beginning, often merely in the themes chosen but sometimes also in the forms of representations. Regarding the thematics that emerge from the sudden collapse of apartheid, one which hardly merits much consideration, since it was already so predictable that some writers were producing novels in anticipation of such a move, is of course the shift of emphasis from *race* to *class* and the predictable emergence of a voracious black bourgeoisie hastily attempting to accumulate as much wealth as quickly as their white counterparts had done, a process inevitably accompanied by much corruption. Simultaneously, for the less well-off among the white citizens, the removal of the safety-net of white privilege (such as job-reservation laws) and its replacement by open competition for jobs, goods and services in the marketplace, means that many will sink below their customary standard of living into the common pool of the unemployed, pauperized underclass. For the first time in living memory, I saw in Durban a white woman sitting on the pavement, begging for alms.

Jean Franco says that in South America “the link between national formation and the novel was not fortuitous.”²⁶ Through the novel, the intelligentsia would “work out imaginary solutions to the intractable problems of racial heterogeneity, social inequality, urban versus rural society” (205). Not surprisingly, after the defeat of apartheid the “intractable problems” mentioned by Franco now constitute the emergent themes of the new South African novel, of which John Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* are notable examples. Franco also points out that “the novel made visible that absence of any signified that could correspond to the nation” (205). As I have already indicated, in South Africa the absence of any signified that could correspond to the idea of the nation is our almost generic condition, our particular affliction, bequeathed to us by an *insolite* history of racial division and racial oppression. Making a virtue of necessity, some left intellectuals have taken to celebrating this very lack as positive, the High Noon of a South African postmodernism, primly and piously resolved against all manifestations of nationalism as corrupting, totalizing, when not tantalizing us. Wicomb is especially adept at diagnosing and then demonstrating the hollowness at the heart of the nation-building pro-

²⁵ Fletcher, *Black/White Writing*, 13.

²⁶ Jean Franco, “The Nation as Imagined Community,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. Aram H. Veesser (London & New York: Routledge, 1989): 204.

jects exemplified in her novel by Adam Kok and his descendants: insular, parochial, xenophobic. But as Régis Debray once put it, nations have a “zero point,” the point of their origin. “This zero point or starting point is what allows ritual repetition, the ritualization of memory, celebration, commemoration – in short, all those forms of magical behaviour signifying defeat of the irreversibility of time.”²⁷ The narrator of *David’s Story* explains:

Oom Pause was in a fighting mood. He started, as usual, at the beginning, where any Griqua would start. There was no other place from which to speak, he said, than from the beginning, when God spoke to His servant, Chief Fleur, and showed him the lost mules so that the people could be led out of the wilderness and turned into the proud Griquas they were today. Not a cobbled together, rattle-taggle group of coloureds who do not know where they belong, but real folk, a nation who had no need to claim kin with either whites or blacks.²⁸

This narrow conception of the ‘nation’, a display of an exclusive nationalism that is alternately cosy and corseted, at once sullen and reclusive, the manifestation of a supreme paradox of a *mestizo* people advocating a policy based on “blood purity,” is of course exquisitely vulnerable to Wicomb’s wakeful deconstructive wit. When David, a former guerrilla, fondly remembers the taste of *pokkenko* (his father called it Hotnos food) that he ate as a child in Namaqualand, his wife Sally is disgusted by the nostalgia in his voice (26). “Do you remember how it’s made?” she asks. Herself an ex-cadre of the liberation movement, she will have nothing to do with all that nonsense about roots and ancestors, “dressing up in leopard skin and feathers and baring your tits for the nation’.” She screams at him:

“Rubbish, it’s all rubbish. Next thing you’ll be off overseas to check out your roots in the rubbish dumps of Europe, but no, I forget, it’s the African roots that count. What do you expect to find? Ours are all mixed up and tangled; no chance of us being uprooted, because they’re all in a neglected knot, stuck. And that I’d have thought is the beauty of being coloured, that we need not worry about roots at all, that it’s altogether a good thing to start afresh.” (27–28)

²⁷ Régis Debray, “Marxism and the National Question,” *New Left Review* 105 (September–October 1977): 27, quoted in Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, 51.

²⁸ Zoë Wicomb, *David’s Story* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2000): 130. Further page references are in the main text.

But like all attempts at deconstructing national myths, *David's Story* is haunted by the words of the putative Huguenot–Griqua ancestor, Madame la Fleur, who in an earlier century had posed herself the question: “who was she to set herself against the making of history and tradition?” All efforts to shake up the ethnic ingredients that would constitute a South African nation are held up to severe scrutiny in *David's Story* and then smartly deconstructed in true postmodernist fashion. However, the problem will not go away. In the discourses of national formation the problems of national identity are also tied up with questions of the self. As David says: “‘We don’t know what we are; the point is that in a place where everything gets distorted, no one knows who he is’” (29).

After years of writing fiction that was firmly rooted in the present, responding to the daily offences of government policy under apartheid, black writers seem suddenly fascinated by something more distant: the history of colonialism, attempting to discover for each ethnic group the moment of its deepest trauma and the modes of its transformation into present relations. By comparison, we may refer to a review of John McGahern’s novel *By the Lake* by Hilary Mantel; she describes the relation of the novel to the country of Ireland and concludes: “The dead are under the feet of the living, and it is their presence – the repressed, repressing generations – that makes people whisper. [...] Yet the tenor of the book is profoundly anti-nostalgic”²⁹ More than any others that I can think of, Mantel’s words describe exactly the feeling generated by two South African novels I have mentioned in the course of this essay: in Zoë Wicomb’s novel, the sense of something “repressed,” of something left out of the account in our wounded attempts at self-creation, impels David to undertake an inquiry into the meaning of those “whispered words of the dying [that] lie in scattered syllables on the surface” of the battleground of recent conflicts; and in Mda’s novel the sense, the weight, of all those “repressing generations” whose tortured history presses so heavily upon the minds of the living; and, of course, both novels are “profoundly anti-nostalgic.” This applies to Wicomb more than Mda, whose alter ego Camagu is careful to reject nothing from the past that can sustain his people in their struggle to live in the present. Rewriting Conrad’s story of Marlow’s journey to the “heart of darkness,” the overeducated Camagu voyages to the “heart of redness” in Xhosaland; and if, in Conrad’s novel, Marlow’s journey reaches its destination under the horrific shadow of Kurtz, Mda’s Camagu discovers at the end of all his travelling that the little girl-prophet Nongqawuse is the concealed wound in the history of Xhosa resistance to settler rule.

²⁹ Hilary Mantel, “Getting Through,” *New York Review of Books* 49.9 (23 May 2002): 10.

Finally, it is important to note that because of our racial inheritance, even in this new era of a post-apartheid society, black and white writers reflect different preoccupations in their choice of theme. While black writers remain somewhat stunned by this sudden change, seeming for the most part without a subject, a few like Mda and Wicomb have begun the necessary process of examining the ways in which our recent and distant past have shaped, and continue to exert their pressure on, the present. On their side, white writers seem divided between those who wish to explore their own sense of guilt about the years of racial oppression carried out in their name (a writer like Anjtie Krog is quite explicit about this) and those others, suddenly quite numerous, who see the end of apartheid as the occasion for inventing black villains whose function is to serve as pawns in a game in which roles are suddenly, conveniently, reversed. Former white exploiters are transformed suddenly, and for the occasion, into “victims,” and former black victims become, again conveniently, one suspects, the new “exploiters,” never mind the fact that, as Pauline Fletcher tried to argue, many social and economic structures remain much the same even after the repeal of apartheid laws. Perhaps Susan Ritchie should be given the last word on this:

Apartheid may be legally dismantled, but its form lives on. For the post-modern impulse to simultaneously deny subjectivity and yet freely articulate a position of power has done a great deal to keep power in familiar places within the postcolonial world.³⁰

If it is too soon to speak of a post-apartheid literature, I hope it is not too soon to begin to organize the ‘discursive space’ in which narrating the new nation will be made possible. South Africa has achieved its liberation at a critical moment in world history when globalization of economic institutions effectively means the taking-away of some initiatives from national governments and local communities. Already South Africa seems to be serving as the dumping-ground of cheap (or expensive) pharmaceutical products from the so-called ‘First World’, while providing an easy market for junk art and other forms of popular entertainment. With regard to cultural institutions, art schools, museums, galleries, publication and distribution of artworks, there is very little likelihood that funding these can be met out of government pocket. In the face of these challenges, both internal and external, the prospect of maintaining an aesthetic independence for artists seems at times severely and

³⁰ Susan Ritchie, “Dismantling Privilege, Inventing Self: Postmodern Feminism and Postcolonial Subjectivity,” in *Writing the Nation: Self and Country in Postcolonial Imagination*, ed. John C. Hawley (Critical Studies 7; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1996): 151–52.

dauntingly limited. As for literature, we know what challenges it has had to meet during the long march to 1994, and with what meagre resources. We know its achievements against great odds, as well as its lapses, its theoretical failures and its near-misses. Tony Bennett, the British critic, probably had in mind cultural institutions closer to home when he called for a fresh examination of the whole “existing field of literary practices, institutions and discourses,” but his analyses offer some useful hints for South Africans on how to think a future connection between literature and politics. According to Bennett,

there is no ready-made theoretical position outside aesthetic discourse which can simply be taken up and occupied. Such a space requires a degree of fashioning; it must be organized and, above all, won – won from the preponderant cultural weight of aesthetic conceptions of the literary. And won not just for its own sake. The prospect must also be entertained that such a position, when properly fashioned, would significantly modify our understanding as to precisely how literary discourses and practices function as instruments for the formation of subjectivities.³¹

In view of the turbulent history of race politics in South Africa, both the nation and its artists must have a legitimate interest in such an inquiry: how literary discourses come to function as one of the tools in the fashioning of subjectivities and the shaping of identities. The fact that, to be truly effective, the operations of such discourses are never mechanical but must always remain concealed from the subject, which invests them with strange hypnotic force and power and lends cogency to the literary activity and its critical practice in the process of shaping a new nation. What is all too clear in any reading of the discourses of nationalism is the continual disalignment between the nation and the state. About Ireland both Deane and Lloyd remark – not surprisingly, given the nature of its function – on the homogenizing impulses of the nation-state, which Seamus Deane characterizes as a totalizing ambition that was “quite simply to provide a narrative predicated on the notion of recovery and redemption from ruin and oppression.”³² While nationalism finds fulfilment in the state, later, they claim, there will be rupture between the state and nationalism, when “the state rejects nationalism as an ideology that constrains it within provincialism and that also – importantly – refuses to concede to it the monopoly of violence.”³³ Lloyd refers to the same tendency

³¹ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990): 6.

³² Deane, *Strange Country*, 146.

³³ *Strange Country*, 192–93.

of the nationalist state in the wish to produce modern subjects who will participate in a linear narrative of progress

where the individual subject, within the narrative which to function must be universally the same, is to be integrated first within the nation and then with “humanity” (the family of nations), so each individual nation state must be developed into increasing integration in the global capitalist market.³⁴

In the postcolonial state of South Africa, two elements demand our attention: the politics of instant, enforced reconciliation, of which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a notable example, and the continuing and vexed land question which seems unresolvable through the ministrations of the bourgeois nationalist state. Land reform and reconciliation politics seem for once in direct conflict, as I predicted at the Nation Writers’ Conference in Johannesburg in 1991. Both the TRC and President Mandela’s attempt to knock together the heads of the white farmers and the land-hungry peasants is an attempt to reconstruct the country in accordance with a new narrative of national transcendence in which “nationalism, the idea of the nation, finds itself rebuked by the state which was its goal.”³⁵ As we have seen, after much testimony, after the denials, the falsehoods, and the simple refusal to even testify by a former head of state, the TRC has come up with some bizarre “facts,” but hardly anything we did not already know or suspect. At the end of the day, there was a “crime” but no “punishment.” The truth of recent South African history can only be told in novels of the abyss worthy of the name of Kafka, Dostoevsky or Primo Levi.

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PART THREE:
SOURCES FOR LEWIS NKOSI



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16 Bibliography for Lewis Nkosi¹

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17 Timeline for Lewis Nkosi

- 1936 Born 5 December in Durban South Africa, the only child of Samson and Christine Margaret (Makhathini) Nkosi.
- 1944 Orphaned before age of 8; goes to live with his grandmother Esther Makhathini in Hillcrest, then Hammarsdale, then Chesterville, then Cato Manor.
- 1945 Attends primary school in Durban.
- 1952–54 Attends the Zulu Lutheran High School, a boarding school run by missionaries in Eshowe, Natal.
- 1954–55 Works for a construction company in Durban, a fertilizer company, and a paint factory.
- 1955 Joins *Ilanga lase Natal* on a part-time basis.
- 1955 Writes poem “To Herbert Dhlomo.”
- 1955 Studies at M.L. Sultan Technical College in Durban for the Matric certificate.
- 1956 Joins as full-time member of staff at *Ilanga lase Natal*.
- 1956 Resigns from *Ilanga lase Natal* and leaves for Johannesburg.
- 1957 Joins *Drum* magazine and the *Golden City Post*.
- 1956–58 Resident of Sophiatown.
- 1958 Assists in the production of Athol Fugard’s *No-Good Friday* at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre Johannesburg.
- 1959 Co-writes screenplay for *Come Back Africa* with Bloke Modisane and Lionel Rogosin.
- 1960 Reports on the Sharpeville massacre for the *Golden City Post*.
- 1960 Awarded a Nieman Fellowship; banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, and granted an exit permit from South Africa.
- 1961 Arrives January 1961 in New York.
- 1961–62 Writes play *The Rhythm of Violence* while studying at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1961 *The Rhythm of Violence* is staged in competition at the Brattle Theatre, Harvard University.

- 1962 Writes the short story "The Alien Corn."
- 1962 Settles in London.
- 1962 Attends the seminal "African Writers of English-speaking Africa" conference at Makerere University, Uganda.
- 1962–65 Producer of the BBC radio series "Africa Abroad," Transcription Centre.
- 1962–68 Staff member of the South African Information Bulletin.
- 1962–65 Moderator and interviewer for the NET radio series "African Writers Today USA."
- 1965 Marries Bronwyn Ollernshaw in England.
- 1963 Visits Paris with Breyten Breytenbach.
- 1963 "The Promise" (short story).
- 1963 "The Hotel Room" (short story).
- 1963 Returns to Africa to interview several African writers.
- 1964 Publishes play *The Rhythm of Violence* (Oxford University Press).
- 1964 "Potgieter's Castle" (short story).
- 1962–68 Literary editor of the *New African* in London.
- 1965 Publishes *Home and Exile: Critical Essays* (London: Longman).
- 1965 Writes two poems, "Jealousy" and "Spanish Roses (for Teresa)."
- 1965 "Come Back Alicia" (short story).
- 1965 In September, attends the Conference on Race and Colour at Copenhagen.
- 1965 In September, visits Paris accompanied by his wife, Bronwyn.
- 1965–68 Literary editor of *The New African* in London.
- 1966 Receives the Dakar World Festival of Negro Arts Prize.
- 1966 "As For Living" (short story).
- 1966 "The Prisoner" (short story).
- 1967 Granted British citizenship.
- 1967 His play "Malcolm" produced on TV.
- 1967 Arrested for not having a passport in Cameroon and jailed for a day before being permitted to continue on to Nigeria.
- 1968 "Holiday Song" (short story).
- 1968 "Muzi" (short story).
- 1969 His short story "The Trial" broadcast on BBC Radio.
- 1969 Dramatic sketch "The Minister of Heart Transplants" presented as part of the Sharpeville Memorial Concert at the Lyceum, London, March 22.
- 1970 Embarks on a four-year diploma in English Literature at the University of London.

- 1970 “Malcolm” (1967) revised as “Virgin Malcolm Look Not So Pale: A Play” (unpublished; first produced under the auspices of the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London, in September under the direction of Lionel Ngakane.
- 1971 Twin daughters, Joy and Louise, born.
- 1971 Appointed Visiting Regents Professor for African Literature at the University of California (Irvine). In April, stops over in New York.
- 1971 “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King” broadcast on BBC Radio.
- 1971 *The Chameleon and the Lizard* (libretto in Zulu) performed by the London Bach Society, Goldsmith College.
- 1972 “Virgin Malcolm Look Not So Pale: A Play” performed at the ICA Theatre and Bush Theatre, London.
- 1972 Translation of “We Can’t All Be Martin Luther King” broadcast on Norwegian National Radio, 12 April.
- 1975 Obtained a Diploma in English Literature from the University of London.
- 1975 Publishes *The Transplanted Heart: Essays on South Africa* (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation).
- 1976 “The Red Rooster” (unfinished play) broadcast on NOS Holland radio. *The Chameleon and the Lizard* performed at Queen Elizabeth Hall, London.
- 1977 Awarded MA Degree from the University of Sussex with a thesis on “Daniel Defoe and the Rise of the Middle Class.” Begins writing *Underground People*.
- 1979 Returns to Africa as senior lecturer at the University of Zambia; resides in Lusaka.
- [1979–80] Short stories *The Hold-Up* published (Lusaka: Wordsmith).
- 1981 *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman) published.
- 1982 “Images of a Nation Yet to Be” (poem).
- 1983 “Refugee Woman” (poem).
- 1983 Publishes *Mating Birds* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House).
- 1983 “The Black Psychiatrist” premieres at the Theatre Playhouse, Lusaka.
- 1983 Enlarged collection of critical essays published as *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London & New York: Longman).
- 1984 Appointed Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Zambia.

- 1985–86 Professor of Literature, University of Zambia.
- 1986 *Mating Birds* published outside Africa (London: Constable and New York: St Martin's Press).
- 1987 Moves to Warsaw.
- 1987 Receives the Macmillan Silver PEN Award for *Mating Birds*.
- 1987 Attends Third Conference on "South African Literature and Resistance," Bad Boll, Germany.
- 1987–91 Lectures on African Literature at the University of Warsaw, Poland and works on his D.Litt on Joseph Conrad (registered at the University of Sussex).
- 1987 Appointed to the UNICEF Dakar Planning Committee.
- 1988 Honoured in Montpellier, France, for his contribution to the criticism of African literature.
- 1988 Marries Jadwiga Lukanty and resides in the Targowek District, Warsaw.
- 1988 Writes short story "Under the Shadow of the Guns"; proceeds go to the ANC.
- 1991–99 Tenured professor in the English Department, University of Wyoming, Rocky Mountains, Laramie, USA.
- 1991 Returns to South Africa in December for the first time since his exile to attend the *New Nation* Writers' Conference held in Johannesburg.
- 1993 *Der Vermissing* (Ambo) published, the Dutch translation of *Underground People*.
- 1994 "The Black Psychiatrist" (play) published in *Weber Studies* 11.2.
- 1994 "Flying Home" (play, sequel to *The Black Psychiatrist*; unpublished).
- 1994 Visiting Professor of English Literature at the University of Cape Town.
- 1995 Teaches a semester at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.
- 1996 Visiting Professor, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia.
- 1996 Leverhulme Visiting Professor at Queen Mary College, University of London.
- 1996 Professor at Westfield College, London.
- 1997 *Lalela Zulu* (*The Street Songs*), a cycle of Zulu songs composed for the King's Singers, is performed at the Royal Festival Hall, London, and recorded by EMI for the BBC at Whitfield Street Studios, London.
- 1999 Resigns from his post at the University of Wyoming.

- 2000 Moves to Basel, Switzerland, where he continues to write.
- 2000 Invited speaker at the University of Frankfurt.
- 2000 Invited speaker at Humboldt University, Berlin.
- 2001 Visits South Africa as Visiting Professor, where he teaches a course in African Modernism at the University of Cape Town, and attends conference at the University of Durban–Westville.
- 2002 Publication of *Underground People* (Cape Town: Kwela).
- 2002 Visits South Africa; Visiting Professor at the University of Durban–Westville.
- 2002 Granted first South African passport.
- 2002 Panelist at Basel Festival of Literature.
- 2003 Visits South Africa; speaker at the “Time of the Writer Festival” in Durban, University of Natal.
- 2003 Writes poem “What Makes Poetry Not Prose” for the Berlin International Literature Festival, 16–17 September.
- 2003 Writes poem “To Astrid for her 59th Birthday: In imitation of an image in Chagall’s painting ‘Lilies of the Valley 1916’.”
- 2003 Panelist at Berlin International Literature Festival.
- 2003 Invited to read at Berlin’s Gosenbohm Literary Salon.
- 2004 Reissue of *Mating Birds* (Cape Town: Kwela).
- 2004 Discussant at Festival of South African Arts, Bern, Switzerland.
- 2004 Signs contract with Rafford Films Company for the filming of *Mating Birds*.
- 2004 Visits South Africa; speaks at Rand Afrikaans University and is interviewed on South African television.
- 2005 Invited speaker at literature festival in Helsinki, Finland.
- 2005 Novel *Mandela’s Ego* due for release; published by Kwela Books, Cape Town.



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Notes on Contributors

DAVID BASCKIN lives in Durban with his wife and three children. A former copywriter in Durban and London, he then lectured in research psychology at the University of Natal for twenty-three years. He now writes three weekly columns for the South African press and with Zoë Molver co-produces film documentaries for clients in the university and non-governmental organization sectors.

ANNIE GAGIANO is Professor of English Studies at the University of Stellenbosch. She is the author of *Achebe, Head, Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa* (Lynne Rienner, 2000) and of numerous articles on African writers. Her research interests range from postcolonial studies to twentieth-century poetry; feminist issues and folklore.

LUCY GRAHAM is currently finishing a D.Phil. on South African literature at the University of Oxford, and has recently taken up a lectureship at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. She is interested in gender studies and South African literature, as well as postcolonial studies. Her publication record includes articles on gender violence in South African literature, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and a book chapter on Coetzee's use of women's voices (in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Intellectual Practice*, ed. Jane Poyner – forthcoming). In the future she will be working on a book entitled "Writing Towards Freedom," which aims to present new approaches to contextualising anti-apartheid literature.

LIZ GUNNER has written widely on South African performance culture and on popular culture and South African literature. She is the editor and translator of *The Man of Heaven and the Beautiful Ones of God: Isaiah Shembe and the Nazareth Church* (University of KwaZulu–Natal Press, 2004). She has also published short fiction in national anthologies and journals. She is Acting Director of the Centre for African Literary Studies, University of KwaZulu–Natal.

LITZI LOMBARDOZZI completed her Masters degree in English Studies at the University of Durban–Westville in 2002. She is currently working on a doctoral dissertation on Lewis Nkosi at the University of KwaZulu–Natal. Her recent publications include an interview with Lewis Nkosi published in *Alternation* (2004) and an article on Zakes Mda accepted for publication in *English in Africa* in 2005.

SIKHUMBUZO MNGADI teaches in the Department of English at the University of Johannesburg. His research is in the areas of South African drama and cinema.

ZOË MOLVER lectures in the Department of Culture, Communication and Media Studies at the University of KwaZulu–Natal, having lectured previously in the English department of the University of Durban–Westville. She is currently completing a doctorate on the work of the artist, writer and political activist Harold Strachan.

ANDRIES WALTER OLIPHANT is Associate Professor in Afrikaans and Theory of Literature at the University of South Africa. He specializes in comparative literature, postcolonial theory and cultural studies. He has published widely on South African literature, culture and the visual arts. His most recent publications include *A Writing Life: Celebrating Nadine Gordimer* (1998) and *At the Rendezvous of Victory and Other Stories* (1999). He is a recipient of, among others, the 1991 Thomas Pringle Award and the 1998 Book Journalist of the Year.

OYEKAN OWOMOYELA is Ryan Professor of African Literature at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. He received his undergraduate education at the University of Ibadan and did his graduate work at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he took degrees in film and television and in theatre. He taught at the University of Ibadan before moving to Nebraska, and has also taught briefly at the University of Ghana in Legon. His publications include *African Literatures: An Introduction, A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures; The African Difference: Discourses on Africanity and the Relativity of Cultures; and Amos Tutuola Revisited*.

ASTRID STARK–ADLER is Professor of German and Yiddish at the Université de Haute Alsace Mulhouse (France) and in Yiddish at the Universität Basel. Her doctorate in German was on Ingeborg Bachmann. Her publications on Yiddish literature include *Un beau livre d'histoires / Eyn shon mayse bukh: Facsimile de l'édition princeps de Bâle* (1602; Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek, ed. Ueli Dill & Martin Steinmann, Schwabe, 2004). Her interest in South Africa is connected with literature concerned with the problem of apartheid. Her publications in this field include: "South African

Yiddish Literature and Apartheid,” in *Jewish Affairs* (1995) and “Old Home vs Land of Opportunity: Interrogating ‘Home and Exile’ in Rakhmiel Feldman’s *Trayers*,” in *Jewish Affairs* (1997). Professor Starck–Adler translated “The Black Psychiatrist” into French, and had it staged by the theatre “L’Autre Souffle,” Paris. The play was first performed in Guadeloupe, then in West and East Africa, and finally at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, in 2002.

THERESE FREY STEFFEN, Professor of English and American Literature and Culture, and Gender Studies, at the University of Basel, Switzerland, studied English, art history and literary criticism at the universities of Zürich, San Francisco, and Berkeley. In her current position in Basel, she is also the recipient of a Schlettwein Foundation Lectureship, which has enabled her, since 2001, to teach literature in English from Southern Africa. Steffen was a Fellow (1995–96) of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and American Research at Harvard University, and is now a Permanent Associate of that institution. Aside from publications on Shakespeare, Eudora Welty and Rita Dove (*Crossing Colour, Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove’s Poetry, Drama and Fiction*, Oxford University Press, 2001), she has co-edited *Hybride Kulturen: Beiträge zur anglo-amerikanischen Multikulturalismus-Debatte* (1997), *The Civil Rights Movement Revisited: Critical Perspectives on the Struggle for Racial Equality in the United States* (2001), and *Gender Studies, Wissenschaftstheorien und Gesellschaftskritik* (2004). Steffen is also the editor of *Crossover, Cultural Hybridity in Gender, Ethnicity, Ethics* (2000), as well as of *Masculinities–Maskulinitäten: Mythos–Realität–Repräsentation–Rollendruck* (2002). Her research interests straddle the literary and cultural production of (Afro)-America, Southern Africa, and South Asia.

LINDY STIEBEL is Professor in English Studies at the University of KwaZulu–Natal. She teaches in South African and African literature, particularly the novel. Her research interests are late-nineteenth-century British novels about Africa (Rider Haggard), the explorer/painter/diarist Thomas Baines, and contemporary South African literature, especially the work of Lewis Nkosi. She has published widely on Haggard and Baines, understanding both in terms of postcolonial theories of space and place. Among her publications are *Imagining Africa* (Greenwood, 2001) and *Thomas Baines and the ‘Great Map’* (Campbell Collections, Durban 2001, published in CD ROM format).

RAFAELLA VANCINI attended the University of Bologna, where she obtained her degree from the department of Lingue e Letterature Straniere (Foreign Languages and Literature) in 2003. Her dissertation was on Lewis Nkosi, under the supervision of Professor Maria Pia de Angelis.

CHRIS L WANJALA is a professor of literature at the University of Nairobi. He was born in 1944, and received his education in Kenya. He has taught literature at the Universities of Nairobi and Egerton. He is known in East Africa and elsewhere as a critic and creative writer. Some of his books are: *Standpoints on African Literature*; *Faces at Crossroads*; *The Season of Harvest*; and *For Home and Freedom*. As well as contributing literary articles to journals and magazines, he has, for more than three decades, moderated TV and radio talks on literature for the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. He has also written a column for *The Sunday Nation* and other weeklies in Kenya.



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