

“Azikwelwa” (We Will Not Ride): Politics and Value in Black South African Poetry

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In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values. In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them and vomit them up.

—FRANTZ FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*

On the winter morning of 16 June 1976, fifteen thousand black children marched on Orlando Stadium in Soweto, carrying slogans dashed on the backs of exercise books. The children were stopped by armed police who opened fire, and thirteen-year-old Hector Peterson became the first of hundreds of schoolchildren to be shot down by police in the months that followed. If, a decade later, the meaning of Soweto's "year of fire" is still contested,¹ it began in this way with a symbolic display of contempt for the unpalatable values of Bantu education, a public rejection of the "culture of malnutrition" with which blacks had been fed.² The local

"Azikwelwa," we will not ride, is a slogan expressing the people's refusal to ride on state transport during the bus and train boycotts.

1. At least three general analyses of the Soweto uprising have emerged: deeper African National Congress involvement in the community; strains on the educational system, unemployment and recession, with greater industrial militancy stemming from the strikes in the early seventies; and the emergence of Black Consciousness ideology. See Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (Johannesburg, 1983), pp. 321–62.

2. See M. K. Malefane, "'The Sun Will Rise': Review of the Allahpoets at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg," *Staffrider* (June/July 1980); reprinted in *Soweto Poetry*, ed. Michael Chapman, South African Literature Series, no. 2 (Johannesburg, 1982), p. 91. *Soweto Poetry* will hereafter be cited as *SP*.

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provocation for the Orlando march was a ruling that black children be taught arithmetic and social studies in Afrikaans—the language of the white cabinet minister, soldier, and pass official, prison guard, and policeman. But the Soweto march sprang from deeper grievances than instruction in Afrikaans, and the calamitous year that passed not only gave rise to a rekindling of black political resistance but visibly illuminated the cultural aspects of coercion and revolt.

The children's defacement of exercise books and the breaking of school ranks presaged a nationwide rebellion of uncommon proportion. The revolt spread across the country from community to community, in strikes, boycotts, and street barricades. It represented in part the climax of a long struggle *between* the British and Afrikaans interlopers for control over an unwilling black populace and was at the same time a flagrant sign of the contestation of culture, an open declaration by blacks that cultural value, far from shimmering out of reach in the transcendent beyond, would now be fought for with barricades of tires, empty classrooms, and precocious organization.

After Soweto, new forms of artistic creation appeared across the country. Poetry groups burgeoned in the black townships, creating poetic forms which by received standards were "unliterary" and incendiary, written in "murdered" English, formally inelegant and politically indiscreet. Yet, as it turned out, the poetry reached a far wider audience in South Africa than ever before, posing an unsettling threat to the legitimacy of white settler aesthetics on South African soil and giving rise to an unusually intense debate on the nature of aesthetic value and its relation to what might broadly be termed politics.

The most visible sign of the new Soweto poetry was the launching of *Staffrider* magazine in 1978 by Ravan Press. A "staffrider" is the township name for one who—in mimicry of railway staff—boards at the last minute the dangerous trains hurtling workers to the white city, snatching free rides by clambering onto the roofs of the overcrowded coaches or by hanging from the sides. A staffrider poet, as the editorial of the first issue explained, is thus a "*skelm* of sorts," a miscreant hanging at an acute angle to official law and convention.³ Tenacious and precarious, at odds with state decree, a black poet becomes a "mobile, disreputable bearer

3. "About Staffrider" (editorial), *Staffrider* 1 (May/June 1978); reprinted in *SP*, p. 125.

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of tidings."⁴ More than anything else, the *Staffrider* poet is figured as part of a group in motion, destined to arrive suddenly in the midst of white urban centers.

From the outset, *Staffrider* flouted almost every decorum of sacerdotal authority. A fierce rebuttal of white poetic standards, the magazine paraded an aesthetics of calculated defiance and collectivity. Not only did its literary contents and format—a generic mosaic of poems, photography, articles, graphics, oral history, and short stories—effectively challenge the prestige of the “literary,” but its methods of creation and distribution revolutionized periodical publishing in South Africa.

Staffrider was literature in a hurry. Partly because of the nervous post-Soweto climate of surveillance and bannings, it named no editors and placed responsibility for speedy distribution in the hands of township groups and small shops. *Staffrider* had to be a magazine “that would move very quickly without drawing too much attention to itself . . . a contradiction in normal publishing terms.”⁵ Carefully egalitarian from the outset, the magazine was intended to air the growing number of poets around the country who were writing collectively, and to do so in a way that allowed the art groups themselves to choose the poems to be published. In other words, editorial policy and content lay very much in the hands of readers and writers beyond the publishing house. As Mike Kirkwood, director of Ravan Press, explained, “Nobody wanted the kind of editorial policy that comes from the top: ‘We’ve got a policy. We’ve got standards. If you fit in with this policy, come up to these standards, we’ll publish you.’”⁶

Not surprisingly, the state took immediate umbrage, and the first issue was banned—the Publications Directorate justifying its actions on the grounds that some of the poems undermined “the authority and image of the police.”⁷ Nor was the state alone in its displeasure. Members of the white literary establishment were piqued by the appearance of a magazine which could brazenly announce: “Standards are not golden or quintessential: they are made according to the demands different societies make on writers, and according to the responses writers make to those demands.”⁸ Soweto poetry became as a result the locus of a fierce debate

4. Michael Kirkwood, quoted in Ursula A. Barnett, *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English, 1914–1980* (Amherst, Mass., 1983), p. 37.

5. Nick Visser, “*Staffrider*: An Informal Discussion”: Interview with Michael Kirkwood,” *English in Africa* 7 (Sept. 1980); reprinted in *SP*, p. 129. *Staffrider* was conceived in 1977 during discussions with groups such as the Mpumalanga Arts Group. One of the best known of these groups, the Medupe Writers, with a membership of over two hundred, had taken poetry readings to the schools and communities, and was promptly banned in October 1977, along with the South African Students’ Organization, the Black People’s Convention, and other Black Consciousness organizations.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Staffrider* (May/June 1978); quoted in Barnett, *A Vision of Order*, p. 38.

8. *Staffrider* (July/Aug. 1978); quoted *ibid.*

over the value of black culture and the politics of black aesthetics, not only in the white academy and white publishing houses but also in black classrooms and universities, community halls, poetry groups, and private homes. At stake was whether aesthetic value could any longer credibly be seen to emanate from the text itself, a transcendental immanence somehow detached from the squalor of politics and “the shame of the ideological.” In South Africa, as elsewhere, though perhaps more flagrantly, the question of value became entangled with the history of state and institutional power; the history of publishing houses and journals; the private and public histories of the black and white intellectuals, teachers, writers, and evangelists; and the changing relation between this black intermediate class and the worker and oral poets—the Xhosa *iimbongi*, or the migrant Sotho *likheleke*, “the people of eloquence.”⁹ Questions of education, constituency, and audience were evoked and therewith the possibility that value is not an essential property of a text but a social relation between a work and its audience, constituted rather than revealed, and endorsed or outstripped by successive orders of power.

It was a joy to recite and listen to the grandeur of Shakespeare on campus. . . . The spoken word or phrase or line was the thing, damn the dialectic.

—ES’KIA MPHAHLELE

The first full generation of black writers in English were the Sophiatown writers of the fifties, years Lewis Nkosi dubbed the “fabulous decade.”¹⁰ Sophiatown was a freehold suburb close to the heartland of white Johannesburg where blacks could still own land. Poor and very violent, a jumble of potholed streets and shacks, Sophiatown was at the same time a genuine community where the loyal neighborliness of social life and the huge street armies allowed the police only a precarious foothold. Crowded with varied social groupings, it was hospitable both to militant defiance and middle-class dreams, attracting the elite of the black entertainment and political underworld to its *shebeens* and jazz clubs,¹¹ and becoming, as the poet Nat Nakasa put it, “the only place where African writers and aspirant writers ever lived in close proximity, almost as a community.”¹² From exile Miriam Tlali would voice a common

9. See David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London, 1985), and “Interpretive Consciousness: The Reintegration of Self and Society in Sotho Oral Poetry,” *American Ethnologist*, forthcoming.

10. Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London, 1983), p. 3; all further references to this work, abbreviated *HE*, will be included in the text.

11. A *shebeen* is an illegal house of entertainment usually run by a woman, selling beer and liquor to black people.

12. Nat Nakasa, *The World of Nat Nakasa: Selected Writings of the Late Nat Nakasa*, ed. Essop Patel (Johannesburg, 1975), p. 80; all further references to this work, abbreviated *NN*, will be included in the text.

nostalgia for the lost Sophiatown that would survive only a few more years before the Nationalists moved in to destroy it: "Sophiatown. That beloved Sophiatown. As students we used to refer to it proudly as 'the center of the metropolis' . . . The best musicians, scholars, educationists, singers, artists, doctors, lawyers, clergymen" came from there.¹³

In the fifties Sophiatown became the center for a vital and jazzy generation of black writers. In 1951, a few years after the Nationalists rose to power, *Drum*, the first journal for black writing in English, was launched with funds from Jim Bailey, son of Sir Abe Bailey, the Rand gold and racehorse millionaire. Alongside the mimeographed broadsheet, the Orlando *Voice*, *Drum* became the mouthpiece of writers such as Nkosi, Nakasa, Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Es'kia Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi, Henry Nxumalo, and Bloke Modisane, who produced a spate of fiction, autobiography, poetry, and journalism. With this came a new aesthetic and a new politics of value. *Drum* "was coming into a real literary renaissance. . . . People were really writing furiously . . . There was . . . a new kind of English being written. Significantly, it was the black man writing for the black man. Not addressing himself to the whites. Talking a language that would be understood by his own people."¹⁴ Nonetheless, if the Sophiatown writing paraded a "new kind of English," it was one riven with ambivalence toward the august relics of a white European tradition still lingering in the schools. Educated for the most part in the English-run church schools and uneasily straddling the worlds of black and white culture, the black writer and intellectual at this time could still rub shoulders, despite official opprobrium, with some mostly liberal and mostly English whites. This ambiguous situation, which sets these writers entirely apart from the later Soweto generation, left a mark on their writing and on their notions of aesthetic value. The governing paradox of their situation was that the aesthetic which they fashioned with passion and difficulty was shaped not only by their own desires but also by the fact that the Sophiatown intelligentsia became at that time the last real battlefield on which the English and the Afrikaners fought for sway over the cultural values of the black intermediate class.

Violence in colonized cultures is not always unlettered. If, in the colonies, as Frantz Fanon knew, the policeman and soldier by their immediate presence "maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts and napalm not to budge,"¹⁵ these same colonies also need the tactful squadrons of moral teachers, advisors, and bewilders to coax those who are ruled into admitting the legitimacy and "universality" of the ruler's values. Rule by gunpowder and whip is blended with forms

13. Miriam Tlali, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (Johannesburg, 1975), p. 70.

14. N. Chabani Manganyi, "'The Early Years': Interview with Es'kia Mphahlele," *Staffrider* (Sept./Oct. 1980); reprinted in *SP*, p. 42.

15. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York, 1968), p. 38.

of cultural cajolement which create an atmosphere of deference and complicity immeasurably easing the burden of policing. As a result a divided complicity springs up between the lords of humankind and the colonized "elite." The colonized intellectual, "dusted over by colonial culture,"¹⁶ therefore comes to play a checkered role in the life of the people.

In South Africa the persuasive culture during the colonial period was that of the British settlers, who, after the freeing of the slaves in 1834, began in the new mission schools and churches to groom a tiny black elite to walk abroad as the evangelists, catechists, and peddlers of European ways of life.¹⁷ The Afrikaners were forced by their rout during the Boer War to genuflect to this same British culture, but they soon began their long refusal in a nationalist crusade which they won politically in 1948 and continued to wrestle for culturally throughout the fifties. The situation of the black intellectual and artist became as a result unusually pinched, as the British and the Afrikaners, in their long slow tussle over land and labor, also vied jealously with each other for different methods of control over black culture.

Over the years the British and Afrikaans struggle for sway over black lives and values would take different but related shapes, in a tango of mutual embrace and recoil. As a result the situation of the black intellectual was anomalous. Unclassed by whites, born of black parents but schooled and salaried by the English, steeped in white culture but barred at the door, contemptuous of Afrikaners, respectful of white English capital, often knowing Shakespeare but not the languages of the people, in love with the township but identifying with the world of the mind, the Western-educated black writer learned to live at more than one social level at a time, and, standing in perpetual imbalance, created a form of writing that was divided against itself.

The politics of value that emerged was torn and contradictory. Nakasa, journalist for *Drum* and *Golden City Post*, the first black journalist on the *Rand Daily Mail*, and one of the first of the "wasted people" to leave the country into exile, called himself ironically "a native from nowhere" and asked, "Who am I? Where do I belong in the South African scheme of things? Who are my people?" (*NN*, p. 77). Son of a Pondo, he did not know the tongue of his father's people. Brought up speaking Zulu, he cast off his mother's language as unfit for the times. Mphahlele, educated before the Bantu Education Act of 1953 depredated an already ravaged black schooling, bears similar witness to the paradox of that generation's position. The library of the Johannesburg boarding school he attended in 1935 offered him the shimmering promise of a world of white culture

16. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

17. See Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt, Roots of a Revolution?* (London, 1979), chap. 1.

magically protected from “the vulgarity, the squalor, the muck and smell of slum life” of Marabastad, his black Pretoria location.¹⁸ Poetry, which his English teachers had taught him “must be about trees, birds, the elements,” offered him a “refuge in the workshop of mind” from the rusted tin shacks and streets filthy with children’s stools, and, since there was no one a fledgling black writer could go to for advice, he learnt to “[write] verse out of a book as it were,” a white book (“E,” p. 76).

Writing in the heady atmosphere of postwar liberal humanism, before Sharpeville made such values untenable, the Sophiatown writers attempted to wed the aesthetic values of these two incongruent worlds: the vitality of township life and the glamorous, if niggardly, allure of a white culture they could glimpse but not grasp: “the location shebeen and the Houghton soiree.”¹⁹ For Nakasa the cult of the illegal black *shebeen* gave writing its dash and substance, but he longed for the “techniques of Houghton” to grace black writing with the formal “discipline” it lacked (*NN*, p. 37). Yet this distinction between the Dionysian pulse of black life and the Apollonian discipline of white form was a familiar one, imbibed from a ready European tradition. Probably more than any other black writer of that time, Nkosi’s taste for black writing was soured by his fidelity to European literary standards; measured by these, the black scene, as he saw it, quite desperately lacked “any significant and complex talent” (*HE*, p. 131). He scoffed at the “bottomless confusion” of attempts by African intellectuals to refashion an image of themselves from their ravaged cultures.²⁰ Most lamentable, as far as he was concerned, was the unnatural African proclivity for breeding art with politics, which produced sorry generic hybrids: “the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature.”²¹

18. Mphahlele, “My Experience as a Writer,” in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, ed. M. J. Daymond, J. U. Jacobs, and Margaret Lenta (Pietermaritzburg, 1984), p. 75; all further references to this article, abbreviated “E,” will be included in the text.

19. Chapman, introduction, *SP*, p. 16. Houghton is one of Johannesburg’s lavish white suburbs. In *Blame Me on History* (London, 1963), Bloke Modisane admitted that he had wanted acceptance “in the country of my birth; and in some corner of the darkened room I whisper the real desire: I want to be accepted into white society. I want to listen to Rachmaninov, to Beethoven, Bartok and Stravinsky” (p. 35).

20. Nkosi, “White on Black,” *Observer*, 1 April 1962, p. 46.

21. See Mbulelo Mzamane in *Momentum*, p. 302. The silky taboo of white Johannesburg women became, for Nkosi at least, the promised loot of collaboration with white liberals in league against the Nationalist state, and when he at last came “subtly to despise white South Africans” (*HE*, p. 23), it was the renunciation of white women that smarted most: “The image of the white female beauty is one that rings most frequently the cash register of the Negro psyche. In any case, we all know how notoriously alluring women of the ruling class have always proved to be for aspiring revolutionaries, black or white” (*HE*, p. 150). In the cash nexus of Nkosi’s psyche, aspiring revolutionaries were apparently strictly male, and revolution a manichean struggle between male races over the spoils of white female beauty—the untiring and magnificent role of black women in resistance found no place.

Plagued in these ways by conflicts of allegiance and aesthetic value, theoretically obedient to the cleavage of art and politics yet hopeful that the multiracial courtship of white and black liberal artists “might yet crack the wall of apartheid,”²² disparaging traditional culture yet equivocally fascinated by township life, the early *Drum* writers couched their exposures of farm atrocities, township dissent, and prison life in a style that was often flamboyant with “the grand Shakespearean image” (“E,” p. 79). Sporting a studied sardonic detachment, these writers for the most part regarded the African nationalist movements with a certain amusement and were regarded in turn with misgivings. Intimate with English mining capital and courted by English liberals, lacing their politics with “cheese-cake, crime, animals, babies,”²³ at no time, as David Rabkin points out, did the *Drum* writers bring their scrutiny to bear on the migrant labor system or the conditions of the African mine workers.²⁴

If Mphahlele could call *Drum* “a real proletarian paper,” this was only in part true, for the aesthetic of the Sophiatown writers was by all appearances the style of individual heroics.²⁵ In *Home and Exile* Nkosi recalls with nostalgia that in both one’s personal and aesthetic life “one was supposed to exhibit a unique intellectual style” (*HE*, p. 9). For Nkosi, as for Nakasa, it was the liberal promise of gradual admission into the “new and exciting Bohemia” of the multiracial suburban parties of Johannesburg that gave life and writing much of its savor (*HE*, p. 17). Nakasa hankered for a “common” or universal rather than black experience, for an uncolored aesthetic unity of vision and for a culture that emanated “from a central point in the social structure.”²⁶ But the alluring Bohemia of Houghton as the radiating point of a central and “universal” artistic vision was a dream of cultural glamour which the state began to legislate further and further out of reach.

At about this time the Nationalists began to prize open the handclasp of the black and white liberals, wagging “a finger of cold war at white patrons”²⁷ of multiracial poetry readings, music, and theater and barring writers such as Nkosi, Nakasa, and Modisane from the palaces of white

22. See Robert Kavanagh, *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa* (London, 1985), p. 62.

23. See *ibid.*, p. 60.

24. See David Rabkin, “*Drum Magazine* (1951–1961) and the Works of Black South African Writers Associated with It” (diss., University of Leeds, 1975), p. 57.

25. Manganyi, “Interview with Es’kia Mphahlele,” p. 42.

26. Nakasa, “Writing in South Africa,” *The Classic* 1, no. 1 (1963); reprinted in *SP*, p. 37.

27. Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (London, 1959), p. 182; quoted in Kavanagh, *Theatre and Cultural Struggle*, p. 51.

entertainment. In *Blame Me on History* Modisane voiced his despair that as his white friends gradually stopped inviting him to their homes or visiting him in Sophiatown, South Africa “began to die” for him.²⁸ The state increasingly made the *fata morgana* of a “universal” artistic vision a mockery, but Nakasa, for one, could not throw off the inherited cultural cringe that “virtually everything South African was always synonymous with mediocrity” (*NN*, p. 36). In 1964 he joined a steady trickle of writers into exile, where he later surrendered to the unlivable contradictions of his position and threw himself from a skyscraper window in New York.

Beyond the reach of the mission schools and the English-owned newspapers and journals, however, a rich and polyphonic black culture—of oral art, township musicals and theater, South African jazz and jive, *marabi*, *kwela*, and *mbaqanga*—was sustaining and renewing itself under conditions of considerable difficulty. David Coplan’s pathbreaking *In Township Tonight* pays brilliant tribute to the musicians, poets, dancers, actors, and comedians who, in the churches, *shebeens*, dance halls, and mine compounds of urban South Africa, fashioned the nascent shape of a national culture. Drawing on performance traditions from all over the subcontinent, Africans had carried with them to the cities of diamonds and gold—*eDiamini*, Kimberley, and *eGoli*, Johannesburg—a heritage of intricate rural cultures from which a proletarian populace, living “by their wits in the shadows and shanties of the mushrooming locations,” created as time passed “hybrid styles of cultural survival.”²⁹

Sotho migrant workers, for example, walking or riding in buses hundreds of miles to the cities and mines, drew on traditional forms of Sotho praise poetry (*lithoko*) to fashion a modern genre of oral performance *sefela* (pl. *lifela*) which could somehow negotiate the intractable contradictions between home and mine.³⁰ An anomalous, threshold oral poetry, one foot in the *shebeens* of the city and one in the villages, *sefela* gives rise, perhaps unavoidably, to the governing narrative theme of travel and to such elaborate liminal images as the train:

Hlanya le mabanta a litsepe,
Hanong ho eona ho le ho fubelu,
Ihloana la tollo ha le bonoe

28. Modisane, *Blame Me on History*; quoted *ibid.*, p. 60.

29. See Coplan, *In Township Tonight*.

30. The *lifela* performance is a public competition during which two or more poets (*likheleke*, “eloquent persons” [Coplan, *In Township Tonight*, p. 17]) display the desired criteria of their craft: sustained extemporaneous eloquence, originality of figure and metaphor, musical patterning, the aptness of donated or borrowed formulaic elements, and the re-fashioning of shared experience into aesthetic form.

Liporo li ota maloanloahla
 Mahlephisi a lla likoto-koto
 Poncho tsa bina,
 "Ielele-ielele!"
 Ea phulesa eaka e ea re lahla
 Terene ea chesetsa maqaqa naha,
 Ha 'metlenyana ha chela lilaong . . .

Madman with iron belts,
 Inside its mouth [furnace], such fiery redness,
 Its eye [lamp] is blinding,
 Trainrails beat rattling, [cars] coupled together,
 The rattling railjoints sang,
 "Ielele-ielele!"
 It pulled out as if it would throw us off-board
 The train set aflame the humble country Boers' fields,
 Rabbits roasted alive in their holes . . . ³¹

The exclusion and denigration of these forms of emergent urban culture within both black and white communities is itself an act of political exclusion and a crucial part of the politics of evaluation. It fosters a misleading sense of the representativeness of the Sophiatown writing in its most self-consciously "literary" manifestations as well as critical indifference to the scantily understood traffic of influence not only between traditional and contemporary oral poetry but also between these forms and poems composed for print. One might usefully compare, for example, two poems published by Sol Plaatje in 1920 which indicate the tugging of two incommensurate traditions that would gradually infuse and influence each other over the years:

Speak not to me of the comforts of home,
 Tell me of the Valleys where the antelopes roam;
 Give me my hunting sticks and snares
 In the gloaming of the wilderness;
 Give back the palmy days of our early felicity
 Away from the hurly-burly of your city,
 And we'll be young again—aye:
 Sweet Mhudi and I.³²

31. Molefi Motsoahae ("Madman with iron belts"). I am very much indebted here to Coplan's "Interpretive Consciousness." The quotation is from his translation.

32. Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, "Sweet Mhudi and I," *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (Lovedale, 1933); reprinted in *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry, 1891–1981*, ed. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel (Johannesburg, 1982), pp. 49–50.

The poem's self-consciously literary eloquence, uneasy submission to imported metrical and rhyming patterns, and implausible literary cliché offer a curious contrast with the following invocation to an alternative oral lyric source, which draws, if incompletely, on oral patterns of repetition and parallelism, incantation and interjection:

Yes, keep and feed the sprite,
Especially the hairy sprite;
Yebo! yebo!
He'll show us how to crack magic out of poles
So that we'll scatter and slay our enemies,
Then nobody will do us harm
While we use this wonderful charm;
Yebo! yebo!
Let the hairy spirit live
Let him live, let him live.
Yebo! yebo!
Yebo! yebo!³³

Nevertheless, if the glamour of Sophiatown as “the place of ‘sophisticated gangsters, brave politicians and intellectuals’” chiefly satisfied a small and relatively privileged coterie of intellectuals and writers (*NN*, p. 5), this glamour cast its radiance and influence over an entire generation, and it was this group of writers which the state would soon turn to destroy.³⁴

The political climate of the fifties was unruly. The National party had triumphed in 1948 and now set about the dogged implementation of modern apartheid. Black resistance to the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, to racial classification under the Population Registration Act, to petty apartheid on trains, to the passes, to the manifold indignities and scourges, flared in the Defiance Campaign in 1952, the most successful organized resistance the African National Congress (ANC) was ever to stage, and this resistance met in turn the unswerving brunt of Nationalist wrath.

The Nationalist policy of “tribal” segregation in the “bantustans” was by now under way, and, partly to prevent urban blacks from identifying too intimately with the urban environment and its values, partly to uproot what they not inaccurately felt were the seedbeds of resistance in the freehold suburbs, and partly to place the heel of state control more firmly on migrant labor, the Nationalists began the razing of the black freehold townships. The first and most famous of those to be destroyed was Sophiatown.

33. Plaatje, “Song”; reprinted *ibid.*, p. 45.

34. See Lodge, *Black Politics*, p. 95.

At night you see another dream
 White and monstrous;
 Dropping from earth's heaven,
 Whitewashing your own black dream.

—MAFIKA GWALA

On 9 February 1955 eight trucks and two thousand armed police rolled into Sophiatown to begin the forced evictions to Soweto which would, despite fragile and futile resistance, last six years.³⁵ Over the next decade the demolition across the country of “black spots” and the removal of the people to dreary, gridded townships would satisfy the state’s cold dream of utterly rational control. White architects were notified that the layout of black townships should obey principles ensuring the utmost surveillance and control: roads had to be wide enough to allow a Saracen tank to turn; houses had to be lined up so that firing between them would not be impeded.³⁶ At the same time the houses and highways of black art began to be policed as vigilantly and the situation of the black artist began subtly to change.

In 1953 black education was taken from provincial and largely English control and placed in the hands of the national Department of Native Affairs. In a speech before the senate in June 1954, H. F. Verwoerd, architect of these cultural removals and graphic designer of the new layout of the artistic life of black South Africa, was quite frank about the aims of the Bantu Education Act: “The Natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans is not for them. . . . There is no place for him [the Bantu] above the level of certain forms of labour.”³⁷ Henceforth blacks would have “ethnically” separate schools, syllabi, teachers, languages, and values. In 1959 the Extension of University Education Act parceled out the “different” ethnic groups to different universities. The Bantu Education Act, like the destruction of Sophiatown, was a crucial event in the history of black culture not simply because it began the transfer of black education from hegemonic English control to more flagrantly coercive Afrikaner Nationalist hands but also because it threatened the alliance between the black and white liberals and drove the white-educated black artists back into their communities. More blacks would now receive a deliberately impoverished schooling, with the effect of leveling out some of the differences between the tiny educated elite and the vast illiterate populace that had existed before. From then onward, blacks would be subjected more efficiently than ever to what Malefane

35. See *ibid.*, chap. 4.

36. See Hirson, *Year of Fire*, p. 184.

37. Hendrik F. Verwoerd, Policy of the Minister of Native Affairs, 7 June 1954, *Verwoerd Speaks: Speeches 1948–1966*, ed. A. N. Pelzer (Johannesburg, 1966); quoted in Hirson, *Year of Fire*, p. 45.

calls a calculated policy of “cultural malnutrition.” This would have a marked effect on black literature and would bring about significant changes in notions of aesthetic value.

In 1960 the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) anti-pass-law campaign ended calamitously at Sharpeville. The ANC and PAC were banned, and both resistance movements went underground and into exile. The destruction of Sophiatown foretold the almost total erasure of *public* black writing in the sixties as the state flexed the full measure of its muscle in a decade of bannings, detentions, and torture, crushing the last illusions of liberal reform. Bannings, exile, and death throttled an entire generation of writers, and the “long silence” of the sixties began. This silence was in some ways more apparent than real, for it has been pointed out that in terms of sheer volume more poetry was written during the sixties than the fifties, though it was published later.³⁸ The Publications and Entertainment Act (1963) extended legal state censorship to cultural affairs within the country, and in 1966 most of the black writers who had already gone into exile were listed under the Suppression of Communism Act, even though most of them were liberals of one cast or another: Matshikiza, Themba, Modisane, Mphahlele, Nkosi, Cosmo Pieterse, and Mazisi Kunene. Forty-six authors were gagged by the Government Gazette Extraordinary of 1 April 1966 which forbade the reading, reproduction, printing, publication, or dissemination of any speech, utterance, writing, or statement of the banned. In exile both Themba and Arthur Nortje followed Nakasa in suicide.

Nevertheless, the effect on black writing was not solely deleterious. In 1963, the same year that Nelson Mandela was banished to Robben Island, a black literary journal called *The Classic* opened in Johannesburg. It was named not in honor of a patrimony of excellence enshrined in the white canonical classic but ironically and anticanonically, after *The Classic* laundromat behind which the journal began in an illegal *shebeen*. *The Classic*, edited by Nakasa before he went into voluntary exile, began to publish the first of the Soweto poets.

Sharpeville and its aftermath ushered in a period of calculated refusal of canonized white norms and standards. The South African liberal aesthetic, itself never whole or complete and already strained by its distance from the European tradition, began to fray and unravel. Most white English poets, increasingly edged from cultural power, comforted themselves in their unclassed solitude with the contradictory faith that the lonely poetic voice was also the eloquent mouthpiece of universal truth—a faith that became increasingly untenable for educated black writers not only barred from the white “universal” but also standing, at this point, somewhat uneasily within their own communities. During this

38. See Couzens and Patel, eds., *The Return of the Amasi Bird*, p. 10.

period a marked change in aesthetic values took place as black literature became steadily more radical and polarized.

The poets of the generation after the Bantu Education Act had to begin from scratch. Their predecessors were in exile and their work silenced. As Tlali wrote in "In Search of Books," "They say writers learn from their predecessors. When I searched frantically for mine there was nothing but a void. What had happened to all the writings my mother had talked about?"³⁹ Nevertheless, the Bantu Education Act, zealously shielding blacks from the blandishments of European culture, had done black writing an unwitting service, for the Soweto writers of the seventies sidestepped many of the conflicts of cultural fealty that had plagued the Sophiatown generation. Carlos Fuentes has spoken of the problem for the North American writer of warding off the ghosts of the European tradition, "hanging from the chandeliers and rattling the dishes."⁴⁰ Similarly, white South African poets, unhoused by history, spent decades knitting their brows over their vexed relation to a European tradition that both was and was not theirs. The Soweto poets, bereft of Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, Eliot, had no such ghosts to lay to rest.

The pre-Soweto generation, nurtured on what now seemed an artificially "literary" eloquence, had suffered a different form of cultural malnutrition. Siphso Sepamla, for one, "brought up on Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence, Keats and other English greats," envies the Soweto poets' ignorance of Western tradition: "I would have liked to have been fed on Mphahlele, La Guma, Themba, Nkosi. I would have liked to have laid my hands on the 'unrewarding rage' of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, LeRoi Jones. . . . It would seem my emptiness, my rootlessness, my blindness is all that is supposed to keep me in my place."⁴¹ At the same time, within the country, the Black Consciousness movement had begun to shatter the long quiescence of the sixties.

Soweto poetry was born in the cradle of Black Consciousness and has to be seen within this milieu. Black Consciousness began largely as a black campus movement in 1968 and spanned almost a decade until the banning, after Soweto, of all Black Consciousness organizations in October 1977. Mobilizing black students around the rallying cry of color and the slogan, "Blackman, you are on your own," Black Consciousness was at this stage, however, the dream of the elite black urban petite bourgeoisie, a movement of students, professionals, intellectuals, artists, and a few clergy.⁴² In 1972 the South African Student Organization (SASO) tried to breach the gulf between the intellectual elite and the people of the ordinary black community and in 1972 formed the Black

39. Tlali, "In Search of Books," *Star*, 30 July 1980; reprinted in *SP*, p. 45.

40. Carlos Fuentes, "The Art of Fiction LXVIII," *Paris Review* 23 (Winter 1981): 149.

41. Siphso Sepamla, "The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas," *New Classic* 3 (1976); reprinted in *SP*, p. 116.

42. See Hirson, *Year of Fire*, pp. 60–114; Lodge, *Black Politics*, pp. 321–62.

People's Convention in an effort to give Black Consciousness nationwide clout. But the appeal to the community was uncertain and contradictory, and, partly because the tendrils it extended to organized workers were always slender, it never grew into a mass organization.

The question of cultural values took center stage as literacy campaigns, black theater, and poetry readings were fostered in the belief that cultural nationalism was the road to political nationalism. Since shedding canonized white norms and values was imperative, whites had to be barred and all white values challenged and replaced. As Steve Biko put it, "Black culture . . . implies freedom on our part to innovate without recourse to white values."⁴³ Politically, early Black Consciousness was reformist rather than radical, a blend of moderates, Christian anticommunists, liberals, and black entrepreneurs. It was chronically masculine in orientation (calling for "the restoration of black manhood"), without an analysis of class or gender, and strongly anti-Marxist: "We are not a movement of confrontation but a movement of introspection."⁴⁴

The Black Consciousness movement has as a result been rebuked for being politically naive and theoretically inconsistent, for placing its faith in a timeless black soul and the personal growth of the individual. But at the same time, as the poet Mafika Gwala put it: "Everywhere it was surveillance. It seemed that reading and cultural topics were the only things to sustain one."⁴⁵ At a time when so many political organizations and people were being scotched, black poetry helped revive and sustain resistance to white culture. "The brooding was replaced by an understanding of hope" ("CW," p. 40). Moreover, as the Nationalists drove wedge after wedge between the so-called different ethnic groups, Black Consciousness and the resurgence of black cultural values embraced all embattled groups, Coloreds, Indians, and Asians, within the term "black." For all its undoubted political shortcomings, which became most telling and costly during the Soweto revolt, Black Consciousness provided a rallying cry, a powerful and necessary incitement. As the writer Essop Patel put it, "Black Consciousness provided the initial impetus in the rejection of art as an aesthetic indulgence. Once the black poet freed himself from Eurocentric literary conventions, then he was *free* to create within the context of a national consciousness. The black poet's starting point was the articulation of the black experience."⁴⁶

43. Steve Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity," in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London, 1973), p. 45. See also his *I Write What I Like*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (New York, 1978), and "White Racism and Black Consciousness," in *Student Perspectives on South Africa*, ed. Hendrik W. van der Merwe and David Welsh (Cape Town, 1972), pp. 190–202.

44. Drake Koka, quoted in "Inside South Africa: A New Black Movement Is Formed," *Sechaba* 7 (March 1973): 5.

45. Mafika Gwala, "Writing as a Cultural Weapon," in *Momentum*, p. 37; all further references to this article, abbreviated "CW," will be included in the text.

46. Patel, "Towards Revolutionary Poetry," in *Momentum*, p. 85.

and when I'm supposed to sing
I croak curses.

—ZINJIVA WINSTON NKONDO

Black poetry flourished at this time, becoming what Gwala called a “jaunt in search of identity” (“CW,” p. 38). Not surprisingly, the first Soweto poetry shared many of the dilemmas of the Black Consciousness movement. Not the least of its problems was that it was written, even though in protest, in English, with a privileged white audience in mind, and thus bore the subtle onus of having to curtail itself for the liberal press.

The English literary establishment was beginning to listen to black poets with half an ear. White poets had trickled back from their lonely jaunts into the veld looking for roots and were now writing a little uneasily about black men honing their pangas in the woodshed. In 1971 Lionel Abrahams took a publishing gamble and printed Oswald Mtshali's phenomenally successful *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, sparking at the same time an agitated debate on the value of black poetry and provoking a number of white critics to fits of discriminating judgment bordering on incivility.⁴⁷

Until the seventies, the white and almost exclusively male British canon was troubled only by mild internal differences over value in the English-speaking universities, remaining squarely within an imported Leavisite tradition. In 1959 the Oxford University Press could publish *A Book of South African Verse* that featured thirty-two white male and four white female poets, yet not one black writer of either sex. Until the seventies, the presiding liberal aesthetic faith—in individual creativity, imminent and “universal” literary values, unity of vision, wholeness of experience, complexity of form, refined moral discrimination untainted by political platitude, irony, taste, cultivated sensibility, and the formal completion of the work of art—had for the most part been artificially cordoned off from black experience by segregated education, severe censorship of texts, bannings of writers, and blocking of distribution.

From the seventies onward, however, white liberals began to court black poets while simultaneously having for the first time to defend the presiding liberal tenets within the English-speaking universities at the level of ideology, in an unprecedented flurry of reviews, debates, articles, conferences, and so on. In other words, if some black poetry was to be

47. Some of the reasons for the cultural shift and for the success of Mtshali's book—the first book of poems by anyone, black or white, ever to make a commercial profit—lay in the external interest taken in Africa as one African nation after another won independence. But it is one of the stubborn quirks of decolonization that as Europe decamped from African soil, the literary scramble for Africa began—with Western publishing houses vying for black writers. Inside South Africa, some white liberals, increasingly inched into inconsequence, also saw fit to throw in their lot with black protest.

selectively ushered into the canon, it was only if it could be shown to exhibit at the door certain requisite values which, in turn, had to be vociferously announced without betraying the selective and interested nature of these values. The first phase of reforming the canon thus began with its circumspect expansion to include some black texts previously ignored but now revealed to exhibit certain features shared with the already existing white tradition.

Mtshali's seminal *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, for example, was met with a hearty round of applause for his deployment of some of the familiar favorites of the Leavisite tradition. Mtshali was commended for his ironic and individual voice in lines such as:

Glorious is this world,
the world that sustains man
like a maggot in a carcass.

He was praised for his strength of feeling, moral energy, liberation of imagination, and the originality of his concrete images in a poem such as "Sunset":

The sun spun like
a tossed coin.
It whirled on the azure sky,
it clattered into the horizon,
it clicked in the slot,
and neon-lights popped
and blinked "Time expired",
as on a parking meter

or in:

A newly-born calf
is like oven-baked bread
steaming under a cellophane cover.⁴⁸

Nadine Gordimer's rapturous preface to the first edition invoked Blake and Auden. When Mtshali was reproved for falling short, however, it was for his lack of formal and intellectual complexity, his failure to meld form and content, and for his paeans to the African past, which cost him "universality."

Mtshali stood at that contested moment when English hegemony was yielding reluctantly to Nationalist coercion. His parents were teachers at a Catholic mission school where he had received a thoroughly English

48. Oswald Mtshali, "High and Low," "Sunset," "A Newly-Born Calf," *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (New York, 1972), pp. 28, 24, 13.

schooling. But the Bantu Education Act denied him entry to a white university, and, refusing to go to the black one allocated him, he was working as a scooter-messenger when *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* was published. Lodged in this way between the intellectual elite and the community, Mtshali shared as a result many of the ambiguities of the black intermediate class and the Black Consciousness milieu in general. He has, for example, been taken to task by more radical black poets of the later Soweto generation for bathing in romantic reverence for the “timeless relics” of his past, as in the titular poem of his collection:

I am the drum on your dormant soul,
cut from the black hide of a sacrificial cow.

I am the spirit of your ancestors . . .

[S, p. 78]

For Mtshali the task of the poet was to immortalize the “debris of my shattered culture” and to reclaim the “timeless existence and civilization” of precolonial South Africa, a timeless idyll which others have argued never existed.⁴⁹ At the same time, his outraged images of the bloodied baby torn by township curs, the calloused washerwoman, the drunk with mouth dripping vomit, were tempered with a rural yearning and—as critics noted with some relief—with a critical but essentially Christian message. Mtshali’s liberal audience was well disposed to criticism of the Nationalist state onto which it displaced its own impotency and doubts, but, firmly situated within the state’s institutions and lacking any authentic hope for the future, it was not ready to overthrow it.

In a period of record unemployment and a steady barrage of work stoppages, there began a spate of cultural forums and conferences—the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), the SASO conference on Creativity and Black Development (1972), the Black Renaissance Convention at Hammanskraal (1974). A flurry of black poetry collections appeared, and most were summarily banned: Kunene’s *Zulu Poems* (1970), Keorapetse Kgositsile’s *My Name Is Afrika* (1971), *Seven South African Poets* (1971), James Matthews’ and Gladys Thomas’ *Cry Rage* (1972), Mongane Serote’s *Yakhal’inkomo* (1972), and *To Whom It May Concern: An Anthology of Black South African Poetry* (1973). Hostile, impassioned, and well beyond the pale of accepted aesthetic standards, the new Soweto poetry was an in-temperate, jangling, often hallucinatory depiction of “the terrible canopy of nightmares” that shadowed ghetto life:

THEY stole the baritone
Wifey eats her own head-bone

49. Mtshali, “Black Poetry in Southern Africa: What It Means,” *Issue: A Quarterly Journal of Africanist Opinion* 6 (Spring 1976); reprinted in *SP*, p. 107.

She squeezes a stony brow into the spoon
Children may nibble the pap-like moon . . .⁵⁰

Most significantly, as the new poetry poached liberally on jazz and jive rhythms, black Americanisms, township vernacular, and the gestural, musical, and performative aspects of oral traditions, notions such as the integrity of the text and the test of time came to be rendered increasingly irrelevant. Much of this transitional poetry was still written for print but was beginning to evince signs of an imminent abandonment and destruction of the text:

I leave in stealth
and return in Black anger
O--m! Ohhhhhmmm! O-hhhhhhhmmmmmm!!!⁵¹

and:

You've trapped me whitey! Meem wanna ge aot Fuc
Pschwee e ep boobooduboooodu blllll
Black books,
Flesh blood words shitr rr Haai,
Amen.⁵²

The Soweto poets' refusal to see poetry in the Coleridgean sense as that which contains "within itself" the reason why it is so and not otherwise was, moreover, resonant with the powerful, if embattled, traditions of oral poetry within black culture.⁵³ In African oral poetry the

focus is on the performance in its social context, on the function of the performance in society, almost to the exclusion of transmission of the text over time.

The poet serves as a mediator between the ruler and the ruled, as an inciter, a molder of opinion, a social critic. He is not only concerned to chronicle the deeds and qualities of the ancestors of his contemporaries, he also responds poetically to the social and political circumstances confronting him at the time of his performance.⁵⁴

50. Anonymous, "They Took Him Away," *Staffrider* (Mar. 1978).

51. Gwala, *Jol'iinkomo* (Johannesburg, 1977), p. 68.

52. Mongane Serote, "Black Bells," *Yakhal'inkomo* (Johannesburg, 1972), p. 52.

53. See S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York, 1834), chap. 14.

54. Jeff Opland, "The Isolation of the Xhosa Oral Poet," in *Literature and Society in South Africa*, ed. Landeg White and Couzens (New York, 1984), pp. 175, 176-77.

Not only did the yardsticks of imminent value brandished by white critics bear scant resemblance to the traditions of the Xhosa *izibongo* and *Ntsomi*, the Sotho *lithoko*, and *sefela*, but white critics' failure to recognize the presence within contemporary poetry of such oral infusions left them ill-equipped to pass judgment either on the poems themselves or on their social roles and contexts.⁵⁵ Ignorant of the intricate traditions of repetition and parallelism that hold in oral poetry, white critics disparaged black poetry on more than one occasion for falling into cliché and repetitious image. Moreover, as Ursula Barnett and others have shown, "often we find in the imagery of black poetry a complicated system of symbols which works on several levels and requires a knowledge of history, myth and legend."⁵⁶ Drawing on powerful oral traditions of communality of theme and performance, energetic audience participation, conceptions of the poet as lyric historian and political commentator, black poetry was making the case, as Tony Emmett has put it, for its study "on its own terms, and it is in the light of the oral, political and communal facets of black poetry that the most penetrating criticism is likely to be made."⁵⁷

Serote's "Hell, well, Heaven," for example, resembles the pulse of *marabi* music's segmental repetition of basic riffs, sharing its "predisposition for the merciless two or three cord vamp":

I do not know where I have been,
But Brother,
I know I'm coming.
I do not know where I have been,
But Brother,
I know I heard the call.⁵⁸

The lines reveal as well the influence of gospel and *makwaya*, choral music developed by mission-educated Africans from American popular song and European and traditional African elements.⁵⁹ The musical influence

55. See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford, 1970); Harold Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (Oxford, 1975); Elizabeth Gunner, "Songs of Innocence and Experience: Women as Composers and Performers of *Izibongo*, Zulu Praise Poetry," *Research in African Literatures* 10 (Fall 1979): 239–67; Mbulelo Mzamane, "The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature," in *Literature and Society in South Africa*, pp. 147–60; Coplan, *In Township Tonight* and "Interpretive Consciousness."

56. Barnett, *A Vision of Order*, p. 43.

57. Tony Emmett, "Oral, Political and Communal Aspects of Township Poetry in the Mid-Seventies," *English in Africa* 6 (Mar. 1979); reprinted in *SP*, p. 183.

58. Serote, "Hell, well, Heaven," *Yakhal'inkomo*, p. 16.

59. D. K. Rycroft, "Melodic Imports and Exports: A Byproduct of Recording in South Africa," *Bulletin of the British Institute of Recorded Sound* (1956); quoted in Coplan, *In Township Tonight*, p. 106.

of township jazz is both thematically and rhythmically fundamental to a great deal of Soweto poetry:

Mother,
my listening to jazz isn't leisure
It's a soul operation⁶⁰

These musical traces evoked the defiant and restorative worlds of the *marabi* dances, jazz clubs, *shebeens*, and music halls, and heralded the increasingly performative and communal nature of black poetry:

Up and up
on a wild horse of jazz
we galloped on a network
of blue notes
delivering the message:
Men, Brothers, Giants!⁶¹

A defiant celebration of the bitter bane of color, Soweto poetry awoke in the state an exact revenge. If the English poet Douglas Livingstone was confident that poetry is "certainly not going to change the world," the state was not about to take chances.⁶² The Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger, spoke ominously of poems "that kill" and responded in turn.⁶³ Many of the collections were suppressed, and not a few of the poets were detained. Mthuli Shezi, playwright and vice chairman of the Black People's Convention in 1972, died after being pushed under a train in a trumped-up dispute with a railway official.

In 1974 Portuguese colonial rule in Africa collapsed. In South Africa a rally in support of Mozambique's victorious Frelimo was banned and nine leaders were given long sentences. Gwala recalls that in the same year the University of Cape Town hosted a conference on the New Black Poetry, inviting him and some other black poets to take "black poetry to Whitey's territory" ("CW," p. 43). Debating on the phone with Onkgopotse Tiro whether or not to accept the invitation, Gwala had joked that all of southern Africa was now "terry country." That same day Tiro was blown up in Botswana by a parcel bomb sent by the South Africans, and when Gwala heard the news he decided not to attend. This personal gesture

60. Gwala, "Words to a Mother," *Staffrider* (May/June 1978).

61. Mtshali, "Riding on the Rainbow," *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, p. 26.

62. Douglas Livingstone, "The Poetry of Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla and Others in English: Notes Towards a Critical Evaluation," *New Classic* 3 (1976); reprinted in *SP*, p. 160. All further references to this essay, abbreviated "PM," will be included in the text.

63. Jimmy Kruger, *The Star*, 14 Sept. 1977; quoted in Emmett, "Aspects of Township Poetry," p. 176.

expressed a general direction being taken, as Black Consciousness turned a cold shoulder on white liberalism. The frayed threads in South African culture began to give, as black poetry and Black Consciousness tugged far more insistently than before. As Mtshali voiced this change of heart: "I once thought I could evangelise and convert whites. . . . But . . . I have now turned to inspire my fellow blacks . . . to seek their true identity as a single solid group."⁶⁴

The search for identity as a solid group faced black intellectuals with a choice akin to that sketched out by Antonio Gramsci: at critical moments the traditional intellectuals, indirectly tied to the establishment yet considering themselves independent, have to choose whether to cast in their lot with the ascendant revolutionary class, as organic intellectuals. In Gwala's words,

The purpose here today is to see to it that the intellectual decides whether to uphold superior status or is ready to phase himself out of the role of being carrier of a white official culture. It is here that we have to accept and promote the truth that we cannot talk of Black Solidarity outside of class identity. Because as our black brother has put it, it is only the elite that are plagued by the problem of identity. Not the mass of the black people. The common black people have had no reason to worry about blackness. They never in the first place found themselves outside or above their context of being black. But the student, the intellectual, the theologian, are the ones who have to go through foreign education and assimilate foreign ethical values. Later when weighed against the reality of the black situation, this alienates them from their people.⁶⁵

At the same time, the question of group identity is bedeviled by more than the problem of class relations between the educated writer and the "mass of the black people," for it is already apparent that the overwhelming underrepresentation of women (as Gwala's drift of pronoun betrays) in the poetry and debates raises serious questions about education, community attitudes, access to publishing channels, public status and mobility in the communities, gendered conflicts of interests and power, and so on, as issues that have as crucial a bearing on the question of value as might any "aesthetic" question alone.⁶⁶

64. Barnett, "Interview with Oswald Mtshali," *World Literature Written in English* 12 (1973); reprinted in *SP*, p. 100.

65. Gwala, "Towards the Practical Manifestation of Black Consciousness," in *Black Renaissance: Papers from the Black Renaissance Convention*, ed. T. Thoahlane (Johannesburg, 1975), p. 31.

66. There is little work on the specific position of black female poets. See Gunner, "Songs of Innocence and Experience," and Coplan, *In Township Tonight*.

Let them cough their dry little academic coughs.

—RICHARD RIVE

When James Matthews and Gladys Thomas brought out *Cry Rage*, “critics hyena-howled. It was not poetry, they exclaimed.”⁶⁷ The profusion of black poetry could not, however, be ignored; neither could it any longer be pinched and squeezed to meet canonical requirements. It began to pose a discomfiting threat not only to some of the most cherished values of the established aesthetic but also to the very idea of the canon itself. Critics became more vocal in their complaints: black poets were trampling on every propriety of the English language, sacrificing formal decorum for the “red haze of revenge lust”⁶⁸ and the “‘rat-tat-tat’ of machine guns” of protest (“PM,” p. 160). As Alan Paton would have it, “a writer is, more often than not, a private creature,”⁶⁹ whereas black writers, seduced by “the portentously-conceived category ‘Black,’” tended chronically to “group-thinking.”⁷⁰ Livingstone felt that blacks would face considerable difficulty surviving “the harsh glacier of time” and would have trouble qualifying for “the toughest definition of a poet . . . a man who has been dead for 100 years, and one of his works is still read” (“PM,” p. 157), a tough definition indeed for black female poets. These were the four general charges leveled against black writing in the seventies: sacrifice of the intrinsic rules of the craft for political ends, formal ineptitude, loss of individual expression and originality, and hence sacrifice of longevity.

In return Gwala asked, “Questions crop up. Questions such as: what moral right does the academic have to judge my style of writing? What guidelines outside the culture of domination has he applied?” (“CW,” p. 48). Unwilling to give ground in the struggle for “command” over the English language, white critics peppered their reviews of black poetry with quibbles over formal lapses, “bad” grammar, and decline of standards. Black poets rejoined that “there has never been such a thing as pure language” (“CW,” p. 43), and Sepamla urged, “If the situation requires broken or ‘murdered’ English, then for God’s sake one must do just that.”⁷¹ The critical skirmishes over grammatical niceties concealed in this way the much more serious question of who had the right to police township culture. Black poetry was in fact a very conscious flouting of received notions of formal elegance: poets were forging their own precepts out of forms of township speech unfamiliar, and therefore unnerving,

67. James Matthews, in *Momentum*, p. 73.

68. Lionel Abrahams, “Political Vision of a Poet,” *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 June 1974; reprinted in *SP*, p. 74.

69. Alan Paton, in *Momentum*, p. 90.

70. Abrahams, “Black Experience into English Verse: A Survey of Local African Poetry, 1960–70,” *New Nation* 3 (Feb. 1970); reprinted in *SP*, pp. 138–39.

71. Sepamla, “The Black Writer,” p. 117.

to white critics. Black poetry was often a hybrid medley of English, *tsotsitaal*,⁷² and black Americanisms, with blends of black South African languages:

Once upon a bundu-era
 there was *mlungu* discrimination
 as a result of separate *masemba* . . .⁷³

The language of white officialdom was mocked, insulted, and inverted: "Your dompas is dom to pass you / Your X-mas gift: 72 hours . . ." ⁷⁴

Black poets were equally suspicious of Paton's claim that politics destroyed the sovereignty of the intrinsic "rules of the craft."⁷⁵ Frankie Ntsu kaDitshego/Dube's poem "The Ghettoes" argues figuratively that the apolitical stance is itself a political act:

Those who claim to be non-smokers are wrong
 The place is polluted with smoke from
 Chimneys
 Trucks
 Hippos
 Gun-excited camouflage
 dagga-smokers
 and burning tyres
 Non-smokers are smokers too!⁷⁶

In more ways than one, black poetry posed a serious challenge to notions of the poem as a freestanding creation, judged excellent if obedient to immanent rules radiating from within the craft. For black poets, the canon as the patrimony of excellence, bequeathed from generation to generation by the finest of minds and borne unscathed through history, was rendered indefensible by the very circumstances in which they were living. In his poem "The Marble Eye" Mtshali parodied the formal completion of the work of art housed in tradition's mausoleum:

The marble eye
 is an ornament
 coldly carved by a craftsman

72. *Tsotsitaal* is an urban African dialect spoken by all African proletarians, especially by young members of street gangs or possible criminals. Coplan argues that *tsotsi* is a corruption of the American term "zoot suit" (see *In Township Tonight*, p. 271).

73. Mthobi Mutloate, "Bundu Bulldozers," quoted in *SP*, p. 170. *Mlungu* means "white man"; *masemba* means "shit."

74. Anonymous, "It's Paati to Be Black," *Staffrider* (Mar. 1978). *Dompas* refers to the hated passes; *dom* is Afrikaans for "stupid."

75. Paton, in *Momentum*, p. 89.

76. Frankie Ntsu kaDitshego/Dube, "The Ghettoes," *Staffrider* (July/Aug. 1979).

to fill an empty socket
 as a corpse fills a coffin.
 [S, p. 71]

Given the conditions of township life, the poem could no longer pretend to mimic the burnished completion of a well-wrought urn or the jeweled finish of an icon. Gwala for one called for “an art of the unattractive,”⁷⁷ and N. Chabani Manganyi argued that the “unified image” sanctioned by literary tradition was an unforgivable indulgence.⁷⁸ Against Paton’s commonplace claim that protest would damage the fine formal filigree of the artwork, these poets charged that the paramount value of their poetry was neither ontological nor formal but strategic. Strategic change rather than the test of time became the reiterated principle. “In our ghetto language there can be no fixity. The words we use belong to certain periods of our history. They come, they assume new meanings, they step aside” (“CW,” p. 48). Gwala was equally unimpressed by the lure of immortality. Publication was not the sole aim: “What mattered would be the spoken word. Whether it lay hidden under mats or got eaten by the rats would be a different story” (“CW,” p. 37).

Most significantly, the performative, gestural, and dramatic traces in much of the poetry evinced its gradual transformation from a printed “literary” phenomenon to a social performance, from text to event, replete with theatrical, gestural, and oral traces:

Soon they are back again
 Arriving as bigger black battalions
 with brows biceps brains
 trudging the ‘white’ soil: phara-phara-phara!
 And the kwela-kwela cop:
 ‘These Bantus are like cheeky flies:
 You ffr-ffr-ffrrr with Doom!’
 And see them again!⁷⁹

In this way, much of the new Soweto poetry bore witness to what Raymond Williams has described as “the true crisis in cultural theory” in our time, that is, the conflict “between [the] view of the work of art as object and the alternative view of art as a practice.”⁸⁰ For most black

77. Gwala, “Towards a National Theatre,” *South African Outlook* (Aug. 1973); quoted in Chapman, intro., *SP*, p. 21.

78. See Chapman, intro., *SP*, p. 21.

79. Anonymous, “It’s Paati to Be Black.” *Kwela-kwela* is the township name for the large police pickup vans. See Coplan, *In Township Tonight*, pp. 157–60, for the origins of the term. *Doom* is a spray insecticide.

80. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980), pp. 47–48.

poets, and there *are* exceptions, aesthetic value is neither immanent nor genetic but rather what Terry Eagleton has called “transitive,” that is, “value for somebody in a particular situation. . . . It is always culturally and historically specific.”⁸¹ Supporting, albeit independently, many of the theoretical arguments on value in the work of Western critics such as Eagleton, Catherine Belsey, Tony Bennett, Stuart Hall, Paul Lauter, Francis Mulhern, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Jane Tompkins,⁸² the Soweto poets claimed that the literary canon is less a mausoleum of enduring truths, less a *thing*, than it is an uneven, somersaulting social practice scored by contestation, dissension, and the interests of power.

Beset by censorship, by strictly curtailed access to commercial publishing channels, by the dangers of identification and subsequent harassment, and inheriting to boot powerful traditions of communal performance, black Soweto poetry began to evince the calculated destruction of the text.⁸³ More and more, black poetry is composed for a black listening audience rather than an overseas readership in ways that

81. Terry Eagleton and Peter Fuller, “The Question of Value: A Discussion,” *New Left Review* 142 (Nov./Dec. 1983): 77.

82. See, for instance, Eagleton, “Aesthetics and Politics,” *New Left Review* 107 (Jan./Feb. 1978): 21–34; *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1978); and “Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams,” *New Left Review* 95 (Jan./Feb. 1976): 3–23; Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980); Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London, 1979), and “Marxism and Popular Fiction,” *Literature and Popular History* 7 (Fall 1981): 138–65; Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, ed. Bennett et al. (London, 1981), pp. 19–37; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Sept. 1983): 1–36, and “Fixed Marks and Variable Constancies: A Parable of Literary Value,” *Poetics Today* 1 (Autumn 1979): 7–31; Paul Lauter, “History and the Canon,” *Social Text* 12 (Fall 1985): 94–101; Francis Mulhern, “Marxism in Literary Criticism,” *New Left Review* 108 (Mar./Apr. 1979): 77–87; Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York, 1985); Peter Widdowson, “‘Literary Value’ and the Reconstruction of Criticism,” *Literature and History* 6 (Fall 1980): 139–50.

82. See, for instance, Eagleton, “Aesthetics and Politics,” *New Left Review* 107 (Jan./Feb. 1978): 21–34; *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1978); and “Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams,” *New Left Review* 95 (Jan./Feb. 1976): 3–23; Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980); Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London, 1979), and “Marxism and Popular Fiction,” *Literature and Popular History* 7 (Fall 1981): 138–65; Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, ed. Bennett et al. (London, 1981), pp. 19–37; Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Sept. 1983): 1–36, and “Fixed Marks and Variable Constancies: A Parable of Literary Value,” *Poetics Today* 1 (Autumn 1979): 7–31; Paul Lauter, “History and the Canon,” *Social Text* 12 (Fall 1985): 94–101; Francis Mulhern, “Marxism in Literary Criticism,” *New Left Review* 108 (Mar./Apr. 1979): 77–87; Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York, 1985); Peter Widdowson, “‘Literary Value’ and the Reconstruction of Criticism,” *Literature and History* 6 (Fall 1980): 139–50.

83. The performative and popular aspects of this poetry mark it off from the Western modernist destruction of the text.

create poetic forms less vulnerable to censorship and easier to memorize, the spoken word spreading more quickly, more widely, and more elusively than printed texts. Poetry has taken flight from the literary magazines and has been performed increasingly at mass readings, United Democratic Front rallies, funerals, memorial services, garage parties, community meetings, and musical concerts, sometimes to the accompaniment of flutes and drums, drawing on oral traditions and miming customs.

Mbulelo Mzamane points out that many black poets, while quite unknown to white South Africans, have vast followings in Soweto, Tembisa, Kwa-Thema.⁸⁴ Flouting the prestige of the "literary," this "poetry turned theater," transient, immediate, and strategic, beloved and popular, overturns the essentialist question of "what constitutes good literature" and insists that it be recast in terms of what is good for whom, and when it is good, and why. Tenacious in the face of great distress, wary of some of the more moderate demands of early Black Consciousness, politically more radical in its demands yet relentlessly plagued by problems of gender, engaging at every moment the difficulties and bounty of its multiple traditions, this transitional black South African poetry faces considerable formal and social challenges. Black poets are no longer solely intent on desecrating those Western norms they feel to be invalid, vomiting them up and insulting them; they are now also engaged in the necessarily more difficult yet more positive endeavor of fashioning poetic values defensible in terms *other* than those simply of opposition and resistance to white values. Forcing poetry and criticism to step outside the magic circle of immanent value, into history and politics where criteria of judgment remain perpetually to be resolved, black poets are no longer content to snatch impudent rides on the dangerous trains of white tradition. Instead they are expressing increasingly a collective refusal to ride at all until the trains are theirs: "azikwelwa," we will not ride.

84. See Mbulelo Mzamane, "Literature and Politics among Blacks in South Africa," *New Classic* 5 (1978); reprinted in *SP*, p. 156.